

Parashat Vayishlach, 5775, 2014:

How to Live with Lavan

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shmuel David ben Moshe Halevy, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, the refuah shlaimah of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel.

Jacob sent angels ahead of him to his brother Esau, to the land of Seir, the field of Edom. And he commanded them, saying, “So shall you say to my master to Esau, ‘Thus said your servant Jacob, I have sojourned with Lavan, and I have tarried until now.’” (*Sefer Bereishit* 32:4-5, this, and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Rashi (1040-1105) presents two interpretations of the phrase “I have sojourned with Lavan” (*im Lavan garti*). The second one is so famous that it has nearly become a part of the Torah’s text itself: “Another explanation: *garti* (sojourned) has the numerical value of 613. That is to say: I lived with the wicked Lavan, but I kept the 613 commandments, and I did not learn from his evil deeds.” As a result, the Hebrew phrase “*im Lavan garti v’taryag mitzvot shamarti*” (“I lived with the wicked Lavan, but I kept the 613 commandments”) has entered the lexicon of the Torah observant Jew no matter where he or she may live.

My rebbi and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), often noted that the aphorisms and popular phrases of everyday language that are found in the Talmud are highly significant. Therefore, the Rav saw them as worthy of analysis and often plumbed the depths of their meaning. In many instances, he maintained that *Chazal* (our Sages of blessed memory) utilized them because they communicated an idea or concept in a clear

and concise manner that otherwise would have required a great deal of explanation. If this is true regarding common expressions, it is all the more accurate in reference to our famous Torah-based phrase of “*im Lavan gati v'taryag mitzvot shamarti.*” It has captured our imagination and become an essential aspect of how we think, and consequently, relate to the world around us. In sum, it is a fundamental aspect of the religious Jewish mind-set.

In reality, our phrase emphasizes two polar opposite thoughts: “*im Lavan garti*” refers to Yaakov having lived with Lavan – the representative of consummate evil (*rishut*). Lavan was treacherous, greedy, and completely without morals or principles. He was an expert at deceit, having changed Yaakov’s wages innumerable times, and violated any and all standards of honesty. Thus, he had the temerity to look Yaakov in the eye and declare regarding all that Yaakov had achieved: “The daughters are my daughters, and the sons are my sons, and the animals are my animals, and all that you see is mine...” (*Sefer Bereishit* 31:43) Little wonder, then, that although he had been in Yaakov’s holy presence for 20 years, Lavan remained a nefarious idol worshipper: “May the G-d of Abraham and the god of Nahor judge between us, the god of their father.” (31:53, underlining my own) Lavan, in short, was the complete opposite of Yaakov, the ultimate “*ish tam yosheiv ohalim*” (pure being who lived in the tents of Torah). Moreover, Yaakov was the personification of *emet*, of truth. Thus, the prophet *Michah* declared: “You shall give the truth of Jacob, the loving-kindness of Abraham, which You swore to our forefathers from days of yore.” (*Sefer Michah* 7:20) Clearly, greater opposites could never be found. Yet, with the help of Hashem, Yaakov learned to not only survive, but to thrive amid Lavan’s duplicity and malevolence.

The second part of our phrase “*v'taryag mitzvot shamarti*,” is the key to Jewish survival. The expression teaches us that the *mitzvot* were Yaakov’s protection against Lavan. He certainly could not, and would not, have wanted to meet Lavan on the battlefield of duplicity. Yet, how did the *mitzvot* protect him and his family? How do *mitzvot* have the ability to protect us, even when facing the trials and falsehoods of present-day Lavans, and the ceaseless challenges inherent in modern society?

The above questions are particularly of the moment since, far too frequently, *mitzvot* are performed in a rote and almost robotic fashion. Many times the significance and purpose of a *mitzvah* are missed in our headlong rush to fulfill our obligation. As such, we fail to notice the meaning of the act and squander its potential beauty. Moreover, when performed in such a fashion, the *mitzvot* cannot protect us against the likes of Lavan. Regrettably, this problem has a long and deep history. The Eighth Century BCE prophet, Isaiah, proclaimed our errors in this regard: “And the L-rd said: ‘Because this people has come near; with their mouth and with their lips they honor Me, but their heart they draw far away from Me, and their fear of Me has become a command of people, which has been taught (*mitzvat anashim m'lumdah*).’” (29:13) Rabbi Meir Leibush ben Yechiel Michel (1809-1879), known as the Malbim, formulated these thoughts in the following manner:

There are those who perform the *mitzvot* solely because this is what they have become accustomed to do since their youth and they are used to performing them. They perform them without any cognitive gesture (*kavanah*) and without thought – even though they may know that they are commandments from G-d. They, however, do not perform them in any way, shape, or form because Hashem commanded them to do so. Instead, they perform them because this is what they were dictated to do by their teachers and parents. They [the *mitzvot*] are performed without any understanding and are mere mechanical actions reinforced by past rote behaviors... (Commentary to *Sefer Yeshiyahu* 29:13, translation my own).

We are *B'nai Yaakov*, the Children of Yaakov, and we rejoice in the notion that we are his spiritual heirs. In order to truly be Yaakov's children, however, we must emulate his love and devotion to the *mitzvot*, and, as the Malbim warned, never "perform them without any cognitive gesture (*kavanah*) and without thought – even though [we] may know that they are commandments from G-d." We must treat the 613 Commandments as precious jewels that we long to possess and cherish. Like Yaakov, we must become G-d intoxicated and perform the *mitzvot* with every ounce of our being and souls. If we can move closer to this goal, we will be better prepared to "live with Lavan," build spiritually thriving Jewish homes and institutions, and help bring *Mashiach Tzidkeinu* (the one and only Righteous Messiah) soon and in our days. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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