

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Parshat Vayetzei

At the beginning of this week's parsha, Yaakov is on the run from his murderous brother Eisav. He is alone and destitute, sleeping in the wild and begging G-d for clothing and bread. By the end of our parsha, however, after twenty difficult years working for his father-in-law Lavan in Charan, Mesopotamia, Yaakov is a transformed man. Now a wealthy rancher, he is returning home to Israel with a large family in tow. Yaakov has come into his own, and he is prepared to face his destiny.

Although Yaakov is the star of our parsha, he doesn't get the Oscar. It is his father-in-law Lavan who is the most fascinating and enigmatic character of the story. Devious and cold-blooded, Lavan conceals his true self behind a sweet, caring exterior. He is a very dangerous man.

The Book of Bereishit communicates the lessons of our fathers through their life stories. Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov did not live in monasteries. They interacted with all kinds of people, and this reality serves the Torah's purpose well. It is the stark contrast with others that brings the extraordinary behavior of our forefathers into focus. And the odd couple of Yaakov and Lavan is a case in point.

From the time of Lavan's first and lowest act of deception, when he tricked Yaakov into marrying Leah instead of his fiancée Rachel, through his constant changing of Yaakov's terms of payment, Yaakov's frustration with Lavan was steadily rising. Finally, Yaakov had enough. While Lavan was out of town, Yaakov and his wives secretly packed up and left Charan, heading for Israel. But before they left, Rachel made a daring move. In a final, desperate attempt to cure her father's soul, Rachel stole his idolatrous *teraphim*. She acted alone, and told no one what she had done. Lavan arrived home to discover that not only had he been abandoned by his family, his precious idols were gone. Enraged, he gave chase with a fury, intent upon violent revenge.

Lavan caught up fast, but G-d did not allow him to do them any harm. Instead, Lavan had to limit himself to rummaging through Yaakov's belongings in search of his 'precious'. This was the last straw. Yaakov's long repressed anger burst forth in a powerful torrent. He could have killed Lavan on the spot, but 'the voice is the voice of Yaakov and the hands are the hands of Esav,' so he channeled his roiling emotions into a furious, but articulate outburst, unparalleled in all of scripture:

"What is my crime?! What terrible thing did I do that you came chasing me like this? You inspected all my things - what did you find from your house? Place it right here! In front of my relatives and yours! Let them determine which of us is right!"



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continued ...

“I have been with you for twenty years. All that time your sheep and goats never lost their young. Not once did I ever take a ram from your flocks as food. I never brought you an animal that had been attacked - I took the blame myself. You charged me for it whether it was carried off by day or by night.

“By day I was consumed by the scorching heat and at night by the frost, when sleep was snatched from my eyes. Twenty years now I have worked for you in your estate – fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for some of your flocks. And you changed my wages ten times! “If the G-d of my fathers, the G-d of Avraham and the Dread of Yitzchok, had not been with me, you would have sent me away empty-handed. But G-d saw my plight and the work of my hands...” (Bereishit 31:36-42)

Lavan is not the least bit moved by Yaakov’s impassioned plea for fairness. He has no feelings of appreciation for Yaakov’s many years of dedicated service. Lavan is unflappable and his response is nothing less than frightening:

“The women - they’re my daughters! The children - they’re my children! And the sheep - they’re my sheep! Everything you see - it’s all mine!” (31:43)

Here Lavan’s twisted mind is finally revealed in all of its madness. This is beyond chutzpah; this is psychosis.

Yaakov and Lavan may have dwelled together for twenty years, but they lived in two different worlds. Yaakov was a man whose focus was outside himself; his concern was for the well being of the animals under his care and his responsibilities to his employer. Lavan, on the other hand, was incapable of seeing anything beyond his ego. Other people existed only for him to use and manipulate.

In the end, Lavan is a tragic figure. His repulsive arrogance and treachery ultimately pushes away those who would love him. But compare that with the irresistible beauty of our father Yaakov. He shines with *emet*, truth, and integrity. It’s not easy to remain honest when you know you’re being cheated, but that was the character of our father Yaakov.

Shabbat Shalom

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