

VAYETZE: YAAKOV AND LAVAN

- Archeological information demonstrating the real conflict between Yaakov and Lavan. How Yaakov responds. The second dream, in the fields of Lavan, with which Yaakov convinces his wives to leave right away, explained.

VAYETZE: YAAKOV AND LAVAN

(The archeological information is recorded in a similar thought from the pen of rabbi Louis Rabinowitz, z"l, of South Africa, in his book "Sparks From The Anvil". So the first part of this drasha is his inspiration. I added the second half of this drasha, dealing with the second dream of Yaakov [Ed])

There are many questions in this week's portion, which can only be explained by studying Yaakov's character and the changes that came over him. There are the two strange dreams, the one in Bethel of the ladder linking heaven and earth and angels ascending descending. And the other one in Lavan's fields, of sheep and rams and goats, ascending descending, dreams which seem linked and reflect one another, and yet are so different. There is the confrontation with Lavan after twenty years, and the method of payment, also strange, and Yaakov's tricks; are they moral? Are they right? Then there is the meeting with angels again, this time when he returns to the land of Canaan, leaving Lavan's house. These are some of the puzzles of the Torah portion. Are they linked? Do they speak to our time? Only by studying Yaakov's story and character changes can we know.

Yaakov, the "simple man dwelling in tents", takes the staff of wandering in his hand and proceeds to the doubtful refuge of his uncle, the crafty, cunning, Lavan.

If we accept the Torah's testimony that by nature Yaakov was an ISH TAM YOSHEV OHALIM, a simple pure man dwelling in the tent of Torah, then we can see a great change that comes over him.

First, his life had changed when he was forced to run away; then when he arrived at Lavan's house. Until then, his life was sheltered, simple, uncomplicated. He studied. He remained in the tent. He was at home, learning from Isaac, his father and teacher. He was surely far from the outside world and its influences. But now, suddenly, in Lavan's house, he is projected into the atmosphere of deceit, double-dealing and trickery.

Does Yaakov's character change because of it? At first he appears like an unsuspecting pigeon, ripe for plucking. He is the unresisting victim of his uncle's crafty plots.

He offers to serve for seven years without payment or reward in order to marry his beloved Rachel. He serves these seven years cheerfully and loyally. In the end, Lavan practices an outrageous fraud upon him, substituting Leah for his beloved. In answer to Yaakov's protest, Lavan calmly pleads the local custom, blandly overlooks the terms of the contract he had made seven years before, and succeeds in exploiting his nephew and son-in-law for another seven years. Fourteen years pass in this way. Yaakov is now the father of a considerable family, and is

still utterly penniless, dependent upon the nonexistent goodwill of his father-in-law.

Still, Lavan exploits him. Archaeological discoveries, which have unearthed tablets presenting the common law of Mesopotamia at the time of Lavan, have given us new insight into the extent of Lavan's deception. Later on Yaakov complains bitterly, "These 20 years I have been with you. Your ewes and your she-goats have not cast their young, and I have not eaten the rams of your flock. That which was torn of wild beasts did I not bring you. I bore the loss of it. From my hand did you require it, whatever may be stolen by day or by night (Genesis, 31:38-39). The tablets that were discovered reveal that according to the law of Mesopotamia, a shepherd was entitled to all surplus rams of the flock. He could not be held responsible for losses caused by the attack of wild beasts. And so, again, Lavan took advantage of Yaakov, and even deprived him of the rights protecting a common shepherd employee.

Years pass. Yaakov is still dependent upon his crafty uncle. His family is growing. He urgently needs to provide for them. "When shall I provide for my own house too?" he asks (30:30). He has enriched Lavan beyond reckoning. Now the time has come to help himself. He approaches Lavan and asks for wages. They make a proposition. Lavan thinks it is totally to his advantage.

The sheep in Syria are white and the goats are black. Yaakov asks for the sheep that are not white, and the goats that are not black. Lavan agrees, and immediately continues his twenty-year-old swindle by secretly removing all these animals. He thus, not only deprives Yaakov of them, but makes it impossible for any to be born. We can imagine Lavan's satisfaction at being able to take advantage, once again, of this simple son-in-law! "I have palmed off my two daughters on him. I had his services for twenty years, free. I cheated him of his legal rights, and now I am acting so that the agreement with him will be of no effect."

At this point the character of Yaakov seems to change. Up till now he has passively borne every deception practised upon him. Now he descends to the level of his uncle. One can hear him saying, "This is the last straw. From now on I will match craft with craft and guile with guile." The simple man finds a way to circumvent the designs of the uncle and play a trick that matches Lavan's. It doesn't matter whether the trick could stand up to scientific inquiry. Obviously the Lord's providence, the Lord's hand, was here. What matters is how the world regards Yaakov.

Jews and Christians differ greatly. Jewish commentators to the Bible try to completely vindicate the actions of Yaakov. They say it was absolutely necessary. You have to fight fire with fire. The Christian view is to vilify Yaakov, calling him dishonest and deceitful. It is interesting that when they vilify Yaakov, they completely overlook Lavan. Apparently, even amongst Bible scholars there is a strong element of the double standard, of antagonism towards the Jew: even of anti-Semitism.

But I suggest that the real psychological and spiritual fascination of this entire incident lies in the fact that the story of the patriarchs reflects what will happen to their children.

The children of Yaakov have been able to survive in exile only by their wits. It was a case of the survival of the fittest. One cannot touch pitch and not be defiled. When the law of the jungle prevails, the man who tries to live in accordance with the highest and noblest ethical principles is

inviting exploitation. The time comes when one is tempted to say, "If I continue thus, my children will suffer. I will succumb. It will be the end of me. LAVAN BIKESH LAAKOR ET HAKOL.

It is remarkable how we Jews succeeded in fighting such influences. Survivors, who fought to stay alive under Hitler with every possible weapon and means, and learned to survive the worst degradation in human history, remained remarkably free of taint after the liberation when they finally made new lives.

The real miracle of Yaakov is that he could survive Lavan, and ultimately escapes his influence and return to his land. The real wonder is that he story of Yaakov does not end in Lavan's house! Shall he indeed succumb? As soon give way to intermarriage! As soon say assimilation is inevitable. As soon surrender to the immense pressure that always is put on the State of Israel from all sides! As soon give in to immorality and indecency that eats into the flesh of the culture around us.

The miracle is that Yaakov leaves; that he has the second dream before it is too late. Not the dream of a ladder to heaven and angels going up and down, but of sheep and goats, going up on each other, up and down, so that the angel cries out to Yaakov: "Is that what you see, you dreamer of dreams of God, sheep and goats? If that is what you see you aren't Yaakov anymore, so get out of here, go back to your land, the land where you dream great dreams, the land untainted by exile, with all its difficulties, the land where you will be a man of God again. KI RAITI ET KOL ASHER LAVAN OSE LECHA, Because I see what Lavan has done to your personality."

So they leave. And the passage tells us that after Yaakov was finally free of Lavan, he went back to his own way, VAYELECH YAAKOV LEDARKO, And Yaakov walked in his original path, became an ISH TAM, YOSHEV OHALIM again, pure and incorrupt. Then the angels meet him. These are the same angels of Bethel, for again Yaakov is the same idealist of Beth El, the same man of God, the same dreamer of dreams of ladders connecting the things of this earth with the things of heaven.

We seek the same for Yaakov's children. We recognize the falsity of the words and promises of our enemies. The time will come in Yaakov's land when he will be free of the struggle against deceit and dishonesty, against immorality and baseness of character, against a surrounding people that seek LAAKOR ET HAKOL, to destroy Yaakov completely. Yaakov's struggle is the same struggle in which we are engaged today. Yaakov of old used his wits to triumph. We pray for the same wisdom, insight and understanding, as well as courage and bravery in the face of implacable hate. Like Yaakov, we cannot allow the struggle to change our souls. Yaakov's children must be worthy of Yaakov himself, free of Lavan, walking in our own way, Yaakov's way, meeting the angels of our vision as God gives us to perceive them.

Submitted by Nisson E. Shulman