

Vayeitzei and Our History

- Rabbi Berel Wein sees lessons of historical truths for our Jewish history, in the benefits Yaakov gave Lavan, in the oppression by Lavan, and in the need for Yaakov to steal away homeward, secretly.

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After twenty years in the house of Lavan, Yaakov prepares to leave for home. But he is afraid to do so openly, for Lavan will certainly object. Yaakov has been too valuable an asset in Lavan's house and commercial enterprises to be abandoned easily. And there is the fact that Yaakov's wives are Lavan's daughters and Yaakov's children are Lavan's grandchildren. The fact that Lavan has mistreated his children and grandchildren during Yaakov's stay in his home do not alter the fact that he views them as being his children and grandchildren. He will tell Yaakov that "the sons are my sons and the daughters are my daughters!" Yaakov also knows that Lavan resents that Yaakov, in spite of all the machinations and dishonesty of Lavan towards him, has become wealthy and powerful. Lavan is jealous of Yaakov's success and will do all in his power to prevent Yaakov from going home to the Land of Israel whole and be allowed to enjoy the fruits of his labor and marriages. Therefore, Yaakov feels compelled to leave Lavan unannounced, in the dead of the night, almost as a fugitive. Yaakov wishes desperately to avoid a painful and unnecessary confrontation with Lavan. But it is not to be. Lavan pursues Yaakov, overtakes him, berates him and threatens him, but finally Yaakov manages to enter into a covenant with Lavan that allows him to escape from Aram and continue on his journey back to the Land of Israel.

"The actions and incidents of the lives of the Fathers are the precursors of the history of their children." This story of Yaakov and Lavan has been played out so many times in Jewish history as to be repetitive, though never boring. The Jewish people in their long journey in many different exiles have always suffered discrimination, bigotry, oppression, and the constant threat of violent action against it. Yet, somehow, the Jewish people always were able to grow and many times even prosper in such a hostile environment. And the Jewish contribution to the development and prosperity of the general societies in which they lived was always major and continuing. The blessing given to our father, Avraham, that "through you shall all the families of the earth be blessed" was fulfilled with beneficence, if not even vengeance, throughout the long Jewish exile. There is no nation or society that has "hosted" the Jewish people that has not benefited enormously from the Jewish presence in its midst. Nevertheless, the Jews were always seen as being foreign, untrustworthy, exploitative, and dangerous. The Nazi slogan in Germany summed up the matter succinctly, albeit brutally: "The Jews are our misfortune!" And in our century, the attitude of the leaders of the Soviet Union towards its Jewish population was also one of pathological disdain and suspicion. Yet, the Jews were castigated for leaving (and in many instances prevented from leaving) their "homeland," for longing for Zion and Jerusalem. The countries of our exile always claimed that our children belonged to them and that everything that we possessed was in reality somehow taken from them. The sad events of this bloodiest of centuries testifies to Lavan's true intentions and the difficulties of living in Lavan's home and the difficulties of leaving Lavan's home.

But somehow Yaakov did leave Lavan and he did finally return home. There would be many difficult and sad stops on that way home, but Yaakov nevertheless persevered and came home.

And that pretty much is the story of this century of Jewish life. The great centers of the Jewish exile, except for North America, have all practically closed down. The Sefardic world of the Mediterranean and Near East countries, the heartland of Ashkenazic Jewry in Eastern and Central Europe, all are almost judenrein today. Most of the Jews (and many non Jews as well) have left Russia and settled in Israel. The Diaspora is slowly closing down. Yaakov is going home, no matter what. Lavan, may not be happy with Yaakov's decision, or that Yaakov has a home to go to, but Yaakov owes Lavan little, and therefore Lavan's objections are no longer too relevant to Yaakov's plans. The children of Yaakov live his odyssey in their lives in the present. So may we be able to follow in his footsteps in the future.
Shabbat Shalom. Rabbi Berel Wein

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