

## Letting Yaakov be Yisrael

The Haggadah enjoins us צא ולמד “go forth and learn what Lavan the Aramean sought to do to our ancestor Yaakov. Whereas Pharaoh only made decrees against the males, Lavan sought to uproot everything.”



We are bound to ask, by what metric is Lavan worse than Pharaoh. There is no doubt at all that the Torah portrays Lavan as an unscrupulous trickster, who took advantage of Jacob. However, in the text of the Torah, and without the embellishments of midrash and commentary, Lavan is not a murderer. Pharaoh, by contrast, directly ordered the harsh oppression of an entire people and mandated infanticide. Moreover, if the Haggadah is right, and if our survival from the hands of the Egyptians merits seven days of Paschal celebration, should we not have at least a week of festivities to mark our deliverance from Lavan?

We encounter Lavan in three episodes. The first is when Avraham's servant, Eliezer travels to Haran order to find a wife for Yitzhak. After Rifka has passed the “camel test”, she takes Eliezer to her home, where he meets her father, Bethuel and brother, Lavan. The commentaries to Genesis 24 portray Lavan as greedy and disrespectful, his eyes drawn immediately to the gifts (24:28). When he speaks ahead of his father (24:50), who then remains silent, the Midrash (Yalkut Shimoni 102) explains that Lavan sought to poison Eliezer in order to steal the valuables. Unfortunately, says the Midrash, the plates of poisoned food were switched, and it was Bethuel who perished.



Without invention, we see that <sup>a)</sup> Lavan rushes outside to greet the foreign servant (24:28) he shows the manners of Avraham not Lot; <sup>b)</sup> Lavan is concerned that his sister not be distracted by presents. He wants to know more about the donor and his intentions (24:29); <sup>c)</sup> blessing Hashem, Lavan invites him in with his camels (24:31); <sup>d)</sup> Lavan is hospitable to Eliezer's entire entourage (24:32); <sup>e)</sup> Lavan is quick to recognise that these circumstances were all at Hashem's behest (24:50) and as such must be embraced without question; <sup>f)</sup> Lavan does not want Rifka to rush away without taking time to consider a long journey from home (24:55); <sup>g)</sup> Lavan checks with Rifka that she really wants to go (24:58). Lavan is the first man to ask a woman for consent in her destiny! <sup>h)</sup> escorting her on her journey, he blesses his sister with words that we still use at a bedekken before a chuppa (24:59).

Our second Lavan episode is as he welcomes Yaakov into his home, after Yaakov has deceived his father and procure the blessing due to Eisav. Rashi understands that Lavan gives Yaakov a close body search as he looks for concealed jewellery (29:13). The commentaries see Lavan as an ungracious host, who takes advantage of his nephew, even substituting one daughter for the other as Yaakov's bride after seven years of hard work. Lavan epitomises the idea that the ends justify the means.

Following the verses carefully, we see <sup>i)</sup> Lavan embracing a homeless family member and immediately offering open-ended hospitality (29:14). <sup>j)</sup> it is Lavan who insists that Yaakov receive remuneration for his work (29:15). <sup>k)</sup> marrying Leah first, Lavan is respectful of local minhag and sensitive to his eldest daughter's dignity (29:23); <sup>l)</sup> Lavan insists that Leah enjoy a celebratory week with Yaakov before he can marry Rachel (29:26). As such, we can see Lavan as the instigator of Sheva Brachot.

Lavan seems to be at his most menacing when Yaakov steals away from him in Chapter 31. Yaakov has sensed a change of mood amongst Lavan's sons and after 20 years of hard work with ever-changing conditions of employment, Hashem tells him that it is time to go home. When Lavan takes pursuit, from Hashem's warning that he not even speak ill to Yaakov (31:24), the commentaries determine that Lavan sought to kill him and kidnap back the children. Lavan certainly has cause to be angry as his teraphim (household idols) had been stolen by Rachel and could not be found.

The pessukim continue to draw lessons from Lavan. Lavan teaches us <sup>m)</sup> that it is a blessing to be hospitable to a Sage (30:30) and explains that this reason he was keen to keep Yaakov with him. <sup>n)</sup> Lavan explains his grief (31:36) at the sudden disappearance of his family with no time to bid his daughters farewell. We know from before that he extends courtesy welcoming people in and escorting them out. He has been deprived a mitzvah (31:28). <sup>o)</sup> once again, championing the interests of women and the fear that his daughters may be discarded, Lavan admonishes Yaakov that however his family extends, he must always look after Leah and Rachel.

To the casual reader, Lavan seems like such a caring fellow. He is passionate about his family. He has strong principles. He is ahead of his time when it comes to gender fairness. One might even be tempted to overlook or forgive the indiscretions committed in the name of the causes in which Lavan believed. However, when it comes down to it, those indiscretions and oversights "just happen" to occur when Lavan's point of principle runs counter to justice or fairness for Yaakov. Lavan would be aghast that anyone should doubt his impassioned expressions of rectitude and championing of rights. There was so much good in him... But

when it came to Yaakov he was blind to the rights of another.

Pharaoh's war on Israel was in the open. Although he started with stealth and cunning (see the Ramban on Shemot 1:10) he declared his hand and made no pretence that the immigrant population were equals in Egypt. Lavan made a big show of caring. It was all in the name of one family. However, when put to the test, he would stop at nothing to get his way, nor to further his values. Yaakov could be accommodated as Yaakov the son-in-law. But under no circumstances would Lavan let him be Israel.

"Go forth and learn" says the Haggadah. We need to look beyond the text and see the pattern which is formed when we join all the dots. It is possible for the most militant champions of equality to be bigots of the worst order. And herein lies the explanation to our earlier question. We celebrate Pesach because the war against Pharaoh was won almost three and a half thousand years ago.

The battle against Lavan continues.

Thanks to all members of the community who joined in the rally at the houses of Parliament on Monday evening in which many of our community leaders and many respected members of the Labour Party and Labour MPs called upon the Leader of the Opposition to address the anti-Semitism within Labour. It is gratifying to know that we are not alone and that we have true friends, who stand by us. I would like to commend an excellent article on "Corbyn's lack of action" by our congregant, Daniel Harris in the New Statesman (26 March 2018).

Wishing everyone a Chag Kasher veSameach. Next year in Jerusalem, in unity and in peace!



Rabbi Jeremy Lawrence

