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PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT VAYETZE

In Loving Memory of Shmuel Binyamin (Samuel) and
Esther Rivka (Elizabeth) Lowinger z"l

Dedicated in memory of Szore Rivka (Agnes) Reiter-Kitay z"l,
whose *yahrzeit* will be on the 6th of Kislev.

And God came to Lavan the Aramean in a dream of the night, and said to him, "Take heed to yourself that you speak not to Yaakov either good or bad." (31:24)

Lavan and Yaakov meet, and Lavan complains about the manner in which Yaakov left his home and about the disappearance of his *terafim*. An argument develops between them, which heats up further when Lavan fails to find his *terafim* among the belongings of Yaakov's families. In the end, the two sides reach an agreement and part company. At the end of the story, the reader is left with the impression that here is but another outbreak of a family quarrel, which reflects the tense relations between Yaakov and Lavan that existed under the surface throughout the period. In what follows, we will develop a different perspective on the focus of tension between them.

"And Yaakov stole the heart of Lavan the Aramaen"

Let us reexamine the entire story in order to reveal the guide word that will guide us to its proper understanding:

Then Yaakov rose up, and set his sons and his wives upon the camels... Now Lavan was gone to shear his sheep. **And Rachel stole the *terafim*** that were her father's. **And Yaakov stole the heart of Lavan the Aramean**, in that he told him not that he fled. So he fled with all that he had; and he rose up, and passed over the river, and set his face toward the mountain of Gil'ad. And it was told to Lavan on the third day that Yaakov had fled. And he took his brothers with him and pursued after him seven days' journey; and he overtook him in the mountain of Gil'ad. And God came to Lavan the Aramean in a dream of the night, and said to him, "Take heed to yourself that you speak not to Yaakov either good or bad." And Lavan came up with Yaakov... And Lavan said to Yaakov, "What have you done, **that you have stolen my heart**, and carried away my daughters as though captives of the sword? Why did you flee secretly **and steal my heart**, and did not tell me, that I might have sent you away with mirth and with songs, with tabret and with harp; and did not suffer me to kiss my sons and my daughters? Now have you done foolishly. It is in the power of my hand to do you hurt; but the God of your father spoke to me last night, saying, 'Take heed to yourself that you speak not to Yaakov either good or bad.' And now that you are surely gone, because you sore long after your father's house, **why have you stolen my gods?**" And Yaakov answered and said to Lavan, "Because I was afraid; for I said, Lest you should take your daughters from me by force. With whomsoever you find your gods, he shall not live; before our brothers discern you what is yours with me, and take it to you." **For Yaakov knew not that Rachel had stolen them.** And Lavan went into Yaakov's tent, and into Leah's tent, and into the tent of the two maid-servants... And he searched, but found not the *terafim*. And Yaakov was angry, and strove with Lavan. And Yaakov answered and said to Lavan, "What is my trespass? What is my sin, that you have hotly pursued after me? Whereas you have felt about all my stuff, what have you found of all your household stuff?... These twenty years have I been with you; your ewes and your she-goats have not cast their young, and the rams of your flocks have I not eaten. That which was torn of

"The God of Abraham, and the God of Nachor, the God of
their Father, Judge Between Us"
The Hidden Struggle
Between Yaakov and
Lavan¹

Rav Gad Eldad

The period during which Yaakov lived in Lavan's house was fraught with friction. Although it begins with a welcoming reception, soon after a contract is established between them concerning Yaakov's marriage, Yaakov finds himself deceived. This phenomenon repeats itself later. When Yaakov wishes to return to the land of Canaan, Lavan persuades him to agree to another contract regarding the division of property between them. Over time, implementation of the contract leads to further tension between them, and each party feels that he has been hurt by the agreement:

And he heard the words of Lavan's sons, saying, "Yaakov has taken away all that was our father's; and of that which was our father's has he gotten all this wealth." And Yaakov beheld the countenance of Lavan, and, behold, it was not toward him as before. And the Lord said to Yaakov, "Return to the land of your fathers and to your kindred, and I will be with you." And Yaakov sent and called Rachel and Leah to the field to his flock and said to them, "I see your father's countenance, that it is not toward me as before; but the God of my father has been with me. And you know that with all my power I have served your father. And your father has mocked me, and changed my wages ten times; but God suffered him not to hurt me. If he said thus: 'The speckled shall be your wages,' then all the flock bore speckled; and if he said thus: 'The streaked shall be your wages,' then bore all the flock streaked. Thus God has taken away the cattle of your father and given them to me." (31:1-9)

In light of God's command to return to the land of his forefathers, Yaakov takes action, and with the backing of his wives, he flees from his father-in-law without his knowledge. Scripture adds that Rachel saw fit on this occasion to take her father's *terafim* with her. Lavan quickly learns of Yaakov's scheme and sets out after him. On the eve of the confrontation between them, God reveals Himself to Lavan and warns him not to harm his son-in-law in any way:

¹ Unless indicated otherwise, all biblical references are to the book of *Bereishit*.

beasts I brought not to you; I bore the loss of it; of my hand did you require it, **whether stolen by day or stolen by night...** These twenty years have I been in your house: I served you fourteen years for your two daughters and six years for your flock, and you have changed my wages ten times. Except the God of my father, the God of Avraham and the Fear of Yitzchak, had been on my side, surely now had you sent me away empty. God has seen my affliction and the labor of my hands and gave judgment last night.”

We see that the root *g-n-v*, "steal," appears seven times in our story.² This, indeed, seems to be the heart of the matter. Scripture describes a series of thefts on the part of Yaakov and his family, with the intention of raising a question before the alert reader who has been following the plot so far. In light of the crooked development of the plot so far, are we indeed dealing with theft? Or is Yaakov fighting for his right to liberty? Is Yaakov the thief, or is he actually the victim of theft, who is finally trying to achieve justice?

"But the God of your father spoke to me last night, saying"

In the course of Lavan's speech, to prove his claim that Yaakov had fled from him in vain, Lavan relates to Yaakov that God had revealed Himself to him in the vision of the night:

"It is in the power of my hand to do you hurt; but the God of your father spoke to me last night, saying, 'Take heed to yourself that you speak not to Yaakov either good or bad.'" (31:29)

Upon an initial reading of this verse, one might get the impression that Lavan is trying to reinforce his argument concerning the unnecessary fear that led Yaakov to flee without his knowledge. The gist of Lavan's words is that not only is he not interested in harming Yaakov, but he is also incapable of doing that, seeing that God had warned him about it the night before. But this interpretation is problematic in light of the Abravanel's question:

The eighth question is: Regarding his words, "it is in the power of my hand to do you hurt," why did Lavan inform [Yaakov] of God's warning, which would only heighten Yaakov's concern? It would have been better for him to think that it was because of piety that he has not hurt him in any way.

The Abravanel therefore suggests the opposite reading. This approach is even more blatant in the words of other commentators³ (Ri Bekhor Shor, and in this style the *Chizkuni*):

"It is in the power of my hand to do you hurt." And therefore, "now have you done foolishly." For how do you know that I will not take revenge from you? Even your God knows that, **and He feared lest I take**

revenge from you, and therefore He came to me to warn me about you.

A totally different picture arises from this formulation. When he speaks these words, Lavan does not use the soft language as he had used at first, but rather gets into the very thick of things. The struggle here is not between Yaakov and Lavan; the confrontation is much deeper. Yaakov thought to exploit Lavan's absence in order to gain the upper hand and escape Lavan's hold. But in the end, Lavan catches up to him, and now Yaakov is about to receive his painful punishment. Yaakov's situation is so bad that Yaakov's God must intervene in the conflict, **for Yaakov's God is afraid of Lavan's revenge**, and as a last attempt to prevent it, He threatens him with His intervention. Lavan brings this argument at the end, as something that is not necessary, since from the beginning he had no intention to harm Yaakov, but his manner of formulation leads to a completely different perspective on all the tension between Lavan and his son-in-law.

"Why Have You Stolen My Gods?"

It should be noted that this discussion takes place while Lavan accuses Yaakov of stealing his gods. Now we can understand Lavan's view of the confrontation. Yaakov held Lavan's gods in contempt and stole them, but did not properly plan out his moves, and he was caught in the act. Now, the intervention on the part of Yaakov's God is very understandable. It seems that Lavan did not know of God's command to Yaakov to return to the land of Canaan, but he can certainly imagine that Yaakov's God would take pleasure in his fleeing to his land, perpetuating the defeat of Lavan's god, who is captured in his hand. We are no longer talking about a struggle between two people. Now the root of the conflict rises to the surface – a conflict between two gods, that of Lavan and that of Yaakov. Lavan never concedes the truth of Yaakov's God, and he is even careful not to say that he refrained from harming Yaakov because of God's threat. He makes do by noting the dimensions of the struggle that intensified to the point that Yaakov's God was forced to come to his rescue when the tables were turned.

"God has seen my affliction and the labor of my hands, and gave judgment last night"

Yaakov understands the meaning that Lavan attaches to his flight and to the confrontation that came in its wake. In light of the negative findings regarding the presence of Lavan's *terafim* in his camp, he explains God's appearance to Lavan in a different manner:

And Yaakov was angry, and strove with Lavan. And Yaakov answered and said to Lavan, "What is my trespass? What is my sin, that you have hotly pursued after me? Whereas you have felt about all my stuff, what have you found of all your household stuff? Set it here before my brothers and your brothers, that they may judge between us two. These twenty years have I been with you; your ewes and your she-goats have not cast their young, and the rams of your flocks have I not eaten. That which was torn of beasts I brought not to you; I bore the loss of it; of my hand did you require it, whether stolen by day or stolen by night. Thus I was: in the day the drought consumed me, and the frost by night; and my sleep fled from my eyes. These twenty years have I been in your house: I served you fourteen years for your two daughters and six years for your flock; and you have changed my wages ten times. **Except the God of my father, the God of Avraham, and the Fear of Yitzchak, had been on my side, surely now had**

² The two instances of "stolen" in the phrase "whether stolen by day or stolen by night" count as one for this purpose.

³ The Abravanel also understood the matter in this direction, though his wording is much more moderate: "His words, 'It is in the power of my hand to do you hurt,' mean: I have the ability and the law in my hand - for this reason it says 'el' and 'elohim,' like: 'And his master will bring him before the judge' (*ha-elohim*) – to do you evil. 'But the God of your father spoke to me last night, saying: Take heed to yourself that you speak not to Yaakov either good or bad.' This indicates that God knows that you committed some offense against me, and that it would be fitting for me to do some evil to you because of it. Therefore, He had to warn me not to do it. If you were not liable for something, He would not have had to command me about it."

you sent me away empty. God has seen my affliction and the labor of my hands, and gave judgment last night.” (31:36-42)

According to Yaakov's version, God did not appear last night as a defendant, but as an accuser. Yaakov was not the thief, but rather the victim of the theft, the one who was deceived and exploited.

Lavan rejects the denial of his claim, and turns to making a covenant with religious significance, which leaves their religious conflict unresolved:

And Lavan answered and said to Yaakov, “The daughters are my daughters, and the children are my children, and the flocks are my flocks, and all that you see is mine; and what can I do this day for these my daughters, or for their children whom they have borne? And now come, let us make a covenant, I and you; and let it be for a witness between me and you...” And Lavan said to Yaakov, “Behold this heap and behold the pillar, which I have set up between me and you. This heap be witness, and the pillar be witness, that I will not pass over this heap to you, and that you shall not pass over this heap and this pillar to me, for harm. **The God of Abraham, and the God of Nachor, the God of their father, judge between us.**” And Yaakov swore by the Fear of his father Yitzchak.⁴

“And God came to Lavan the Aramean in a dream of the night”

To complete this discussion, let us turn our attention to another aspect. During the wanderings of the patriarchs, they were often in conflict with others, but only twice did God reveal Himself to people of other nations. It is interesting that the two occasions were in a dream, and their content is the same – namely, a warning not to harm the patriarchs, despite the fact that according to them, the patriarchs had sinned against them.

The first time was in the story of Avimelekh and Sara:

And Avraham said of Sara his wife, “She is my sister.” And Avimelekh king of Gerar sent and took Sara. **But**

God came to Avimelekh in a dream of the night and said to him, “Behold, you shall die, because of the woman whom you have taken; for she is a man's wife.” (20:2-3)

The second time is in our story:

And God came to Lavan the Aramean in a dream of the night and said to him, “Take heed to yourself that you speak not to Yaakov either good or bad.” (31:24)

The reaction of these two figures who “merited” a warning from heaven was also the same. They both claimed that it was the patriarch concerning whom they had been warned who was responsible for the unfortunate situation that had been created, and therefore the threat in the dream was essentially unnecessary. This is what Avimelekh said:

Then Avimelekh called Avraham, and said to him, “**What have you done to us?** And wherein have I sinned against you, **that you have brought on me and on my kingdom a great sin?** You have done deeds to me that ought not to be done.” (20:)

Lavan reacted similarly, with precisely the same language:

And Lavan said to Yaakov, “**What have you done, that you have stolen my heart,** and carried away my daughters as though captives of the sword?” (31:26)

What is the explanation of this phenomenon?

Perhaps we can suggest the following: Avraham introduced a new idea into the world, about a new God, one who is different from all the gods that had been known so far. This was a very significant challenge to all conventions, and it would be expected that people would try to limit his influence with deliberate attacks based on his faith. Scripture indeed describes friction, but it seems to be based on his social alienation, and not because of his faith. This pastoral painting is puzzling. Were the people of the world so tolerant that they allowed Avraham to challenge everything they believed in, without this affecting their attitude toward him?

It is possible that in this context we can understand another layer in the struggles experienced by Avraham and his descendants after him. It seems that it would not be accurate to hang the acts of harassment against him only on his social background; rather a religious element emerges from them. It may be assumed that the fact that the “Avrahamite family” were foreigners in the country made them an easy prey for the locals, but it is not unreasonable that when friction arose, these same locals knew how to defy Avraham and his descendants in the religious realm as well.

It seems that this is the way to understand the dialogue between Avimelekh and Avraham, as well as the dialogue between Lavan and Yaakov. Superficially, the confrontations between them centered on the circumstances of life, but once the conflicts broke out, both of them took the opportunity to paint a negative picture of the moral conduct of those heralding the new religion, and thus to blacken their character.

Thus Avimelekh says, “You have done deeds to me that ought not to be done.” Similarly, Lavan says, “What have you done, that you have stolen my heart.” In their complaints, they describe the heralds of the new religion as those who speak highly of God, but in practice, act unjustly. Both complaints focus

⁴ While in this section of the plot, Lavan and Yaakov are careful about their references to their respective gods (“the God of your father,” “the God of my father,” “you stole my gods”), we find in two other places Lavan using the Tetragrammaton:

1) And it came to pass, when Rachel had borne Yosef, that Yaakov said to Lavan, “Send me away, that I may go to my own place, and to my country...” And Lavan said to him, “If now I have found favor in your eyes, **I have observed the signs, and the Lord has blessed me for your sake.**” And he said, “Appoint me your wages, and I will give it.” And he said to him, “You know how I have served you... For it was little which you had before I came, and it has increased abundantly; and **the Lord has blessed you wherever I turned.** And now when shall I provide for my own house also?” (30:25-30)

2. And Lavan said, “This heap is witness between me and you this day.” Therefore was the name of it called Gal'ed; and Mitzpa, for he said, “**The Lord watch between me and you,** when we are absent one from another.”

These mentions of God's name should, however, be examined in their context. For example, it should be noted that in the first example, Lavan emphasizes that the blessing came to him through his observance of certain signs (the Ibn Ezra and Chizkuni associate these signs with Lavan's *terafim*), and apparently he means that he understood through the signs of his *terafim* that the God of Yaakov blessed him for the hospitality that he had shown him, or it might be that he wished to appease Yaakov. In the second example, this may be a quote from Yaakov, and there is room for other interpretations, but we will not expand upon this in this forum.

on the moral dimension, but they are sounded by people who have a religious connection and in a religious context. Lavan's comments were discussed at length above. Avimelekh was similarly a figure with religious affiliations. This is proven by his insistence on his moral conduct in the face of God's rebuke, in the wake of which he reproaches Avraham for the "great sin" that he had brought upon him. Later as well, he goes to Avraham, in order to insure himself on the religious plane:

And it came to pass at that time, that Avimelekh and Fikhol the captain of his host spoke to Avraham, saying, "God is with you in all that you do. Now therefore swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me, nor with my son, nor with my son's son; but according to the kindness that I have done to you, you shall do to me, and to the land wherein you have sojourned." (21:22-23)

Avimelekh's rebuke of Abraham is thus not only on the criminal plane, and the best proof of this is that Avraham understood exactly what he meant, and therefore answers him in the same way:

And Avraham said, "Because I thought, Surely the fear of God is not in this place; and they will slay me for my wife's sake." (20:11)

Therefore, it was precisely on these occasions that God saw fit to convey a clear message about the truth of His existence and the purity of the actions of His followers.⁵

Translated by David Strauss

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⁵ Two other complaints were leveled at the patriarchs without any Divine revelation to the complainant, but it seems that there is a different reason in each case:

1) And the Lord plagued Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Avram's wife. And Pharaoh called Avram, and said, "**What is this that you have done to me?** Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? Why did you say, 'She is my sister'? So that I took her to be my wife; now therefore behold your wife, take her, and go your way." (12:17-19)

Pharaoh is not portrayed as a religious figure; therefore, the nature of his complaint is criminal and practical, and not religious. Moreover, Avraham found himself in Egypt because of necessity and did not view the land as a place for his activity. He therefore did not constitute a real spiritual alternative to the local culture.

2. And Avimelekh called Yitzchak, and said, "Behold, surely she is your wife; and how did you say, 'She is my sister'?" And Yitzchak said to him, "Because I said, Lest I die because of her." And Avimelekh said, "**What is this you have done to us?** One of the people might easily have lain with your wife, **and you would have brought guiltiness upon us.**" And Avimelekh charged all the people, saying, "He that touches this man or his wife shall surely be put to death." (26:9-11)

In Yitzchak's case, the argument is indeed moral, and a Divine revelation might have been expected, but in the end nothing actually happened – it only almost happened – and therefore the revelation would have been redundant.