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PARASHAT HASHAVUA

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**PARASHAT VAYETZE**

**Yaakov – The Exiled Man**

**By Dr. Brachi Elitzur**

In our *shiur* on *Parashat Chaye Sara*, we discussed the message conveyed by Yitzchak, who is depicted in the narratives in *Sefer Bereishit* as following in the shadow of his father Avraham and whose experiences share a strong connection with and resemblance to those of his father. We saw that it is specifically these elements of continuity and similarity that mold the great message of this successor-son, the second generation of pioneering immigrants to *Eretz Yisrael*, who works to make God's promise a reality.

A review of the series of stories about Yaakov's life gives rise to a similar question, but from a different direction. Here what strikes the reader is not the limited scope of the narratives, the similarity to past events, or the passivity of the central character, but rather the great detail with which the Torah describes all the personal and family difficulties that he encounters. From the moment he flees his parents' home until his death, Yaakov's life is conveyed mainly through family stories, with barely a hint of activity reflecting broader aims, like Avraham's calling in God's Name or Yitzchak's digging of wells to create facts on the ground in *Eretz Yisrael*. What, then, is the message conveyed by Yaakov?

Yaakov's request of God as he is about to leave *Eretz Yisrael* may point to the main challenge that he faces, and his success will serve as a model for later generations.

God promises Yaakov in his dream:

"Behold, I am with you, and I shall watch over you wherever you go, and **I will restore you to this land**, for I shall not leave you until I have done that of which I have spoken to you." (28:15)

Yaakov responds to this vision with a conditional vow:

Yaakov made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me and watch over me on this path which I take, and give me bread to eat and a garment to wear; **and I return safely (*be-shalom*) to my father's house**, and [or "then"] the Lord will be my God. And this stone which I have placed as a moment will be a house of God, and all that You give me I shall surely tithe for You." (28:20-22)

Many of the commentators are puzzled by the content of this vow, which seems to express doubt as to the realization of God's promise to Yaakov in his dream. They propose drawing a distinction between God's promise regarding Yaakov's physical welfare and his request that God ensure his spiritual and moral wellbeing, nurtured in his father's house:

Rashi: "*Be-shalom*" – meaning, unblemished by sin, that I should not learn from the ways of Lavan.

Kli Yakar: Heaven forefend that one should say that Yaakov doubted God's promise, for God had already told him, "Behold, I am with you, and will watch over you wherever you go." Rather, what this means is that Yaakov did not ask for any bodily protection, for this had already been promised to him; instead, he now asked for protection of his soul from sin... Concerning protection from sin, [he asked] not to learn from the ways of Lavan. And not necessarily [just] Lavan, for even the Canaanites, living in the land, did not act properly, and he also had reason to fear being influenced by the ways of the Emorites. Therefore, he says, "To my father's house," for this indicates deliverance from this danger – that he would not learn from the ways of the wicked.

Over the course of history, Jewish life has moved between Jewish independence in the land and exile in foreign countries. The 65 years that have passed since we merited the establishment of the State of Israel are a short time in comparison with the 2,000 years of subservience and exile during which the Jewish people had to deal with foreign neighbors and could only dream and pine for the realization of the prayer, "Let your eyes behold Your return to Tzion."

Avraham and Yitzchak established the model for how the land is to be inherited and maintained. Yaakov, who is forced into exile by his brother's death threats, unwillingly becomes our role model for periods of persecution and prolonged sojourning in foreign countries, in cultural surroundings that have not yet assimilated the moral values and the "light unto the nations" upheld by Avraham.

Yaakov's stories become a tool for survival and a weapon in the struggle for moral and cultural segregation in a foreign environment. His personal and family stories serve as a warning against the dangers of assimilation and

demonstrate the resistance needed for the eventual realization of Yaakov's prayer, "... and I return safely to my father's house" (28:21).

Let us examine some elements of the challenge of exile and ways of dealing with them, documentation of all this representing a "survival guide in exile" for future generations.

## 1. The attitude towards property

Judaism, in contrast to other religions and to cults that broke away from normative Jewish tradition, does not frown on the personal ownership of assets. However, property is viewed as an expression of Divine blessing, and not a value that determines a person's status. Many of the *mitzvot* that apply specifically in the Land of Israel direct a person away from viewing the enlarging of his personal fortune as his exclusive aim; rather, it should be channeled into recognition of God's blessings to him.<sup>1</sup> In *Parashat Vayetze*, we witness the "culture shock" produced by the contrast between the values of *Eretz Yisrael*, where Yaakov grew up, and the potential for assimilation and obsession with money that awaits him in Lavan's house.

In one of his *shiurim* on *Parashat Vayetze*, R. Samet notes the inversion of values that takes place within Yaakov's own thinking over the course of the 20 years that he is away.<sup>2</sup> There is room to expand on his discussion and elaborate on some additional indicators of the impact that outside influences that have even on someone of Yaakov's stature.

Let us contrast the verses describing Yaakov and his aspirations when he first arrives in Charan with those that expose the cracks in this wholehearted ideology and the adoption of the surrounding cultural norms as time goes on:

	First 14 years	Latter 6 years
<b>Aim of stay with Lavan</b>	And he said, "I will work for you for seven years, for	"You shall give me nothing, but do for me this thing, and will again feed

<sup>1</sup> An example is the *mitzva* of the waving of the *omer*; see the Akedat Yitzchak's comment on *Parashat Emor*: "The aim of all of this is to declare that the land is given to provide for our vital necessities, along with aiding in our true prosperity – which is the acquisition of Torah. The Torah says here that in order to signify this, when the time of the barley harvest comes, we are forbidden to benefit from it until its first offering is brought before God, for this is the beginning of our produce, and the *kohen* waves the *omer* before God to find favor for them, in order that they will behold it and understand that everything that God provides is placed before us for the sake of His service, and not for its own sake, as the foolish believe." Other examples include the eating of the fruits of *ma'aser sheni* in Jerusalem, *bikkurim*, and others.

<sup>2</sup> *Iyunim Be-Parashat Ha-Shavua*, first series, p. 86.

	Rachel, your younger daughter.” (29:18)	and tend your flock: I will pass through all of your flock today, removing every animal that is speckled and spotted, and every animal that is brown of the flock, and the speckled and spotted of the goats, and they shall be my hire.” (30:31-32)
<b>Results of the stay</b>	The birth of 12 sons	And the man increased exceedingly, and he had much cattle and maidservants and manservants and camels and donkeys. (30:43)
<b>Yaakov's complaints over Lavan's deceit</b>	And he said to Lavan, “What is this that you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why, then, have you deceived me?” (29:25)	And he said to them: “I see your father's face, that it is not towards me as before, but the God of my father has been with me. And you know that I have served your father with all my strength. And your father has tricked me and changed my wages ten times, but God did not allow him to harm me.” (31:5-7)
<b>Reason for wanting to leave</b>	And it was, when Rachel had borne Yosef, that Yaakov said to Lavan: “Send me away that I may go to my place and to my land. Give me my wives and my children, for whom I have served you, and let me go, for you know the service that I have performed for you.” (30:25-26)	And God said to Yaakov, “Return to the land of your forefathers and to your birthplace, and I shall be with you.”
<b>Rachel's complaint</b>	And Rachel saw that she had borne Yaakov no children, and Rachel was jealous of her sister, and she said to Yaakov, “Give me children, or else I die.” (30:1)	And Rachel answered, and Leah, and they said to him, “Do we yet have any portion or inheritance in our father's house? Are we not considered by him as strangers? For he has sold us, and has consumed all our money. For all the riches which God has taken from our father – it belongs to us, and to our children; now, then, whatever God tells you – do.” (31:14-16)
<b>Yaakov's</b>	And he dreamed, and	“And it was, at the time when the

<p><b>dream</b></p>	<p>behold – a ladder standing on the ground with the top reaching the heaven. And behold, <b>angels of God were ascending and descending upon it.</b> And behold, God posed above it, and He said, “I am the Lord God of Avraham, your father, and the God of Yitzchak. The land upon which you lie – I have given it to you and to your progeny. And your progeny will be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread westward and eastward, and northward and southward, and all the families of the earth shall be blessed through you, and through your progeny. And behold, I am with you, and I shall watch over you wherever you go, and restore you to this land, for I shall not leave you until I have done that of which I spoke to you.” (28:12-15)</p>	<p>flock conceived, that I lifted my eyes and saw in a dream, And behold, <b>the rams that ascended upon the sheep</b> were streaked, speckled, and grizzled. And an angel of God said to me in the dream, ‘Yaakov,’ and I said, ‘Here I am.’ <u>And he said, ‘Lift your eyes and see,</u> all the rams that ascend upon the sheep are streaked, speckled and grizzled – for I have seen all that Lavan does to you.</p> <p>I am the God of Beit El, where you anointed a monument and where you made a vow to Me.</p> <p>Arise, now; get out of this land and return to the land of your birth.” (30:10-13)</p>
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The first fourteen years of Yaakov's stay with Lavan are defined by marriage and childbirth. In documenting this period, the text selects only those stories and dialogues among family members that relate to these areas:

- a. Upon arrival, Yaakov declares his intention to marry Rachel.
- b. The text reveals Yaakov's feelings for her: "And they seemed in his eyes as [just] a few days, for his love for her" (29:20).
- c. Yaakov expresses openly his intimate desire for Rachel: "And Yaakov said to Lavan, ‘Give me my wife, for my days are fulfilled, that I might come to her.’" (29:21)
- d. Yaakov protests Lavan's violation of his promise of Rachel.
- e. The only conversation recorded between Yaakov and Rachel concerns the suffering of her infertility.
- f. The story of the mandrakes is an eloquent expression of the influence of Yaakov's value system on the family. The longing for children is his wives' main concern.

Contrasting with this ideological purity, we find that the latter 6 years in Lavan's house are characterized by Yaakov's aspiration to "establish himself" and build up personal wealth. This period is portrayed in terms of the realization of this goal and its effects on both the nuclear and broader family framework.

"And **the man** increased exceedingly" – the reference to Yaakov as "the man" hints to his integration into the prevalent cultural norms, to the point where he loses the essential self that he brought to Charan.

The text describes how the desire of Yaakov's wives to bear children comes to be replaced with a sense of being exploited economically. The discourse between Yaakov and his wives does not focus on family matters and needs, but rather centers around their common resentment of the monetary injustices that Lavan perpetrates against them. The climax of this moral and cultural turnaround is found in the description of Yaakov's dream. A dream is an elaborate, imagined expression of a person's waking thoughts. The earlier dream of the angels ascending and descending is replaced with a dream of mating sheep, indicating Yaakov's present concerns during his waking hours. God's revelation to him in the dream of the streaked the speckled sheep and the echo of God's revelation to Avraham with the promise of the land – "Lift now your eyes and see" (*Bereishit* 13:14) – is meant to drive home to Yaakov the profound chasm separating these two visions and to save him from his immersion in his material environment by reminding him of his dream in Beit El and his vow to return to *Eretz Yisrael*.

What a difference there is between the description of Yaakov's departure from Lavan's house – "And he drove **all his cattle** and **all the goods that he possessed, the cattle that he had acquired, which he had come to possess** in Padan Aram, to go to Yitzchak, his father, in the land of Canaan" (31:18) – and the description of his original modest request upon leaving his parents' home – "... and gives me bread to eat and a garment to wear..." (28:20).

## 2. Ethnical norms and speech

The elements of cultural assimilation in exile may be deduced from the *midrash* describing the reason for the Israelite redemption from Egypt:

R. Huna said in the name of Bar Kapra: By virtue of four things Israel was redeemed from Egypt: They did not change their names, nor their language, nor did they speak badly of one another, nor was there a single one among them who conducted himself with licentiousness. (*Vayikra Rabba* 32)

Of these four reasons, the praise of *Am Yisrael* for "not changing their language" seems questionable. Is it possible that throughout two hundred and

ten years of servitude, *Bnei Yisrael* ignored the language spoken by the Egyptians, continuing to communicate with one another in the language of their forefathers? Does survival in a foreign land not automatically entail verbal communication conducted in the local spoken dialect?

It seems that *Chazal* were not referring here to "language" in the linguistic sense, but rather sought to present language register as a test of cultural assimilation. Israel is to be praised for maintaining an enlightened, cultural vernacular that was not influenced or corrupted by the Egyptian manner of speaking.

In the series of narratives recording Yaakov's stay with Lavan, we find a key word that is integrated in the actions and speech of Lavan's family, and this word eventually manages to find its way into Yaakov's sphere as well:

All that is not speckled and spotted among the goats, and brown among the sheep, is [considered] **stolen** (*ganuv*) with me. (30:33)

And Lavan went to shear his sheep; and Rachel had **stolen** (*va-tignov*) her father's *terafim*. And Yaakov **cheated** (*va-yignov... et lev*) Lavan the Aramean, in that he did not tell him that he was fleeing. (31:19-21)

And Lavan said to Yaakov, "What have you done, that you have **cheated** me (*va-tignov et levavi*) and carried off my daughters like captives taken by the sword? Why did you flee in secret, **robbing me** (*va-tignov oti*), and not telling me, that I might send you away with joy and with songs, with timbrel and with lyre?... And now, although you must surely go, for you long greatly for your father's house – why have you **stolen** (*ganavta*) my gods?" And Yaakov replied and said to Lavan, "Because I was afraid, for I said, perhaps you would take by force (*tigzol*) your daughters from me. Anyone with whom you find your gods shall not live; before our brethren discern for yourself what of yours is with me, and take it for yourself." For Yaakov did not know that Rachel had **stolen** them (*genavatam*). (31:26-32)

"That which was torn by beasts I did not bring to you, I bore the loss of it; of my hand you required it – whether stolen from me (*genuvti*) by day or stolen (*genuvti*) by night." (39)

None of these appearances of the word connects Yaakov to a single actual act of theft, but the hypothetical possibility that he raises of some of Lavan's sheep being "stolen" with him, along with the expression that the text uses for Yaakov leaving without notice (*genevat lev*) and Yaakov's expression of frustration, "*genuvati yom u-genuvati layla*," indicate the extent to which he has absorbed the warped thinking of Charan society.

### **3. The Jewish mind and its ramifications**

In 1905, a book entitled "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion" was published in Russia. The appearance of the book heralded waves of brutal anti-Semitic attacks. The Protocols is a forgery, purporting to be a plan drawn up by a group of Jews to seize control of the world's economy, as well as the political, educational, legal and communications systems of their countries of exile. The innovative thinking and economic success of Jews in the Diaspora invited the envy of their neighbors, and they were accused of plotting to seize non-Jewish assets and positions of power.

The earliest example of hatred in the wake of Israelite success in foreign areas is voiced by Lavan. The text goes into great detail in its description of the scientific results of Yaakov's many hours of shepherding and the Divine guidance that he receives in a dream: Yaakov is described as discovering genetics and heterozygosity, allowing him to separate the different groups of sheep and to manipulate dominant and recessive characteristics in their mating.<sup>3</sup> Lavan, who believes that Yaakov's suggestion to take only the streaked and speckled sheep as payment will leave the great majority of the animals in his own possession, expresses anger and hurls accusations at Yaakov when he discovers the "miraculous" proliferation of sheep that now belong to Yaakov.

And [Yaakov] heard the words of Lavan's sons, saying, "Yaakov has taken all that was our father's, and it is from what was our father's that he has made all this fortune." And Yaakov saw Lavan's face, and behold, it was not towards him as before. (31:1-2)

The detailed description of the techniques used to obtain sheep with certain appearances teaches an important lesson about the ramifications of success in a foreign environment, which can come to be viewed by others as an existential threat. Yaakov's story also warns of the consequent demonstrations of hatred.

### **4. The need for ingratiation?**

An exegetical debate continuing over many generations concerns the nature of Yaakov's behavior in his encounter with Esav. Some commentators are sharply critical of his obsequiousness, accusing Yaakov of establishing a problematic model of power relations between the future descendants of Esav and of Yaakov:

At that time, when Yaakov called Esav "my master," the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: Since you have humiliated yourself by calling

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<sup>3</sup> See Y. Felix, "*Kelalei Ha-Torasha Be-Ma'aseh Yaakov Be-Tzon Lavan*," *Teva Ve-Eretz Be-Tanakh*, pp. 28-41.

Esav “my master” eight times, I will establish eight kings from among his descendants who will rule before any of your own descendants, as it is written: “And these are the kings who reigned in the land of Edom [before any king reigned over Israel]” (*Bereishit* 36:31). (*Bereishit Rabba* 75)

The criticism is expressed even more vehemently in the following source:

Yaakov should not have made himself subservient to that wicked one, for Esav was simply going on his way, and Yaakov became embroiled in a confrontation that he had no business with. He “seized the dog's ears,” sending [Esav] gifts and calling himself his “servant.” He thereby caused his descendants to do the same. From here we see that there is no assurance concerning the righteous in this world. (*Midrash Sekhel Tov, Bereishit* 32)

Taking the opposite view, the Ramban upholds Yaakov's behavior as a practical model for handling the enemy:

There is another lesson for future generations – for all that happened to our forefather [Yaakov] with Esav his brother will always be occurring between us and the children of Esav. And it is proper that we adopt the path of this righteous one, preparing ourselves in the same three ways that he did: prayer, gifts, and anticipating the eventuality of war, escaping and being saved. *Chazal* have already noted this allusion in this *parasha*. (Ramban, Introduction to *Parashat Vayishlach*)

The Ramban also addresses the Talmudic story about R. Yannai:

When our master would go to the [Roman] authorities, he would consult this *parasha*, and would not take an Aramean with him. On one occasion, he failed to review [the *parasha*], and he took an Aramean with him. He did not get even as far as Akko before he had sold off his horse. (*Bereishit Rabba* 78)

Ramban (33:15): Because they had a tradition that this is the *parasha* that teaches about exile. When he used to go to Rome, to the court of the kings of Edom, on community business, he would read this *parasha*, so as to follow the guidance of our wise ancestor, for future generations should observe and follow his example. And he would not accept the company of Romans to escort him, for they would join only for their own benefit, while taking all of a person's money.

It would seem that the choice of Yaakov as a positive or negative role model for dealing with a foe is a function of the historical period, as well as the national views and personality of the leader in question. In any event, both schools of thought agree that the elaboration in the description of Yaakov's

preparations for the meeting, the careful recording of the appellations for Esav and Yaakov during the meeting, and the content of their conversation is all meant to present options for future dealings with national adversaries.

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When bringing his first fruits to Jerusalem, the farmer is required to recall verbally the process of *Am Yisrael's* development and the recognition of Divine Providence as a factor in the survival of the Jewish People as well as his own personal prosperity. The "*mikra bikkurim*," the recitation, reminds a person of the ultimate purpose of his creation specifically when he reaches the pinnacle of economic success, and it uses his agricultural produce as the channel for reminding him of his origins.

The Jewish People's point of departure, according to the recitation over the *bikkurim* (the first part of which is also recited at the beginning of the Pesach Seder), is the declaration, "*Arami oved avi*" ("A wandering Aramean was my father" or "An Aramean sought to destroy my father"). The commentators are divided as to the identity of the father referred to here (*avi*), and also as to the meaning of the verb or appellation "*oved*." The author of the Pesach Haggada, apparently basing his understanding on the *Sifri* (*Devarim* 301), identifies the "father" with Yaakov and the "Aramean" with Lavan:

Come and learn what Lavan the Aramean sought to do to Yaakov, our forefather. For Pharaoh decreed only with regard to the males, while Lavan sought to uproot everything.

The recitation over the *bikkurim* is the antithesis of Lavan's efforts at uprooting; it is the response to his attempt to nullify Yaakov's Israelite identity and to assimilate him within Aramean culture, which took the route of exploitation and deceit to achieve the ultimate aim of the Aramean value system: money and property. The comparison to Pharaoh indicates the extent of the spiritual danger that the Jewish People faces in the Diaspora, surpassing even the physical danger. Here there is a threat of the pure values of Jewish ideology crumbling, weakening the nation's ability to serve as a "light unto the nations."

*Parashat Vayetze* records three encounters between Yaakov and angels, indicating the need for a person to take his spiritual goals with him when he is forced to leave *Eretz Yisrael*. They will remind him of his destiny, protect him from the dangers of assimilation in the foreign environment, and welcome him upon his return.

Translated by Kaeren Fish