

**PARASHAT VAYETZE  
SICHA OF HARAV YAAKOV MEDAN**

**Did Yaakov Deal Justly With Lavan?**  
Translated by David Strauss

**I. THE AGREEMENT ABOUT THE DIVISION OF THE SHEEP**

Yaakov wanted to avoid a violent struggle with Lavan, and chose instead to use the weapon of cunning (we expanded on this issue in a previous *sicha*: <https://etzion.org.il/en/lavan%E2%80%99s-deceit>). Let us examine the agreement about the division of the sheep that followed the last six years of Yaakov's working for Lavan:

And he said: Appoint me your wages, and I will give it. And he said unto him: You know how I have served you, and how your cattle have fared with me. 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? And he said: What shall I give you? And Yaakov said: You shall not give me anything; if you will do this thing for me, I will again feed your flock and keep it. I will pass through all your flock to-day, removing from thence every speckled and spotted one, and every dark one among the sheep, and the spotted and speckled among the goats; and of such shall be my hire. So shall my righteousness witness against me hereafter, when you shall come to look over my hire that is before you: every one that is not speckled and spotted among the goats, and dark among the sheep, that if found with me shall be counted stolen.

And Lavan said: Behold, would it might be according to your word. And he removed that day the he-goats that were streaked and spotted, and all the she-goats that were speckled and spotted, every one that had white in it, and all the dark ones among the sheep, and gave them into the hand of his sons. And he set three days' journey between himself and Yaakov. And Yaakov fed the rest of Lavan's flocks.

And Yaakov took him rods of fresh poplar, and of the almond and of the plane-tree; and peeled white streaks in them, making the white appear which was in the rods. And he set the rods which he had peeled over against the flocks in the gutters in the watering-troughs where the flocks came to drink; and they conceived when they came to drink. And the flocks conceived at the sight of the rods, and the flocks brought forth streaked, speckled, and spotted.<sup>1</sup> And Yaakov separated

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<sup>1</sup> On an excursion in the Negev, I heard from Alon who worked for the Nature and Parks Authority, that the barks of the almond and plane tree contain a high concentration of that

the lambs – he also set the faces of the flocks toward the streaked and all the dark in the flock of Lavan – and put his own droves apart, and put them not unto Lavan's flock. And it came to pass, whenever the stronger of the flock did conceive, that Yaakov laid the rods before the eyes of the flock in the gutters, that they might conceive among the rods; but when the flock were feeble, he put them not in; so the feebler were Lavan's, and the stronger Yaakov's.

And the man increased exceedingly, and had large flocks, and maid-servants and men-servants, and camels and asses. (*Bereishit* 30:28-43)

According to the simple understanding, Yaakov handled the agreement with cunning that bordered on dishonesty. Was forcing the flock to give birth to young of Yaakov's chosen colors a just way to carry out the agreement between the two parties? It seems that the answer to this question depends on how we understand the agreement between Lavan and Yaakov:

I will pass through all your flock to-day, removing from thence every speckled and spotted one, and every dark one among the sheep, and the spotted and speckled among the goats; and of such shall be my hire.

Most of the commentators (Rashi, Rashbam, Ibn Ezra and others) understand that Yaakov proposed to Lavan to remove from the flock animals of agreed-upon colors and taken them elsewhere. Only those of the agreed-upon colors that would be born from that point on would be Yaakov's. If this was the agreement, then Lavan fulfilled his part when he removed the aforementioned animals and gave them into the hands of his sons.

But it seems that the story can be more easily understood according to the Ramban, who suggests that Yaakov did not propose to Lavan to remove for himself the speckled and spotted animals, but rather to remove them from his flock and give them to Yaakov as his pay. This is a fair and logical agreement: Yaakov clarifies to Lavan that he will no longer work for him as a hired hand, similar to a slave, but rather as a partner. He, therefore, demands ownership of a portion of the sheep already from that point forward. The flocks are divided between them according to the colors of the animals, based on the assumption that the animals that will be born in the future will resemble those who bore them. This will preserve the ratio between the various colors. In return for this agreement, Yaakov accepts upon himself to tend all of the sheep, his own as well as those of Lavan. Lavan accepts this arrangement, but on that very same day he secretly sends away in the hands of his sons

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which turns into reproductive hormones among female sheep. According to him, Yaakov may have obtained several males of the agreed-upon colors, and on those days on which he allowed the females to eat the bark of the aforementioned trees, he sent out to pasture only the males of the desired colors. The females conceived on those days because of the abundance of hormones in the bark of those trees, and their young were of the colors of the males who had fertilized the females. All this is unconnected to the colors of the trees and their similarity to the colors of the sheep, the critical factor according to the conventional explanation.

those animals that Yaakov was supposed to receive. Hence, when the two come to divide the flocks between them, Yaakov does not receive even a single animal. What is more, since the remaining animals are not of the colors that he chose, they will not bear young of those colors, and Yaakov will end up working for his father-in-law for free, as had been the case until now!

Yaakov fights for what is rightly his and refuses to give up. He cunningly restores to himself, by way of the rods, that which had been taken away from him through deceit, by way of the sons of Lavan. There is no greater lie than giving in to a wicked person, who tries to acquire through deceit that which others had toiled to achieve. Giving in to such a person perpetuates the evil and rewards the evil-doer. A person must fight with all his might for a better and more just world, even if he sometimes has to use the tools of those who try to deceive him.

This should not be construed as practical instruction to be applied in all cases. Without a doubt each case must be considered on its own merits. But it appears to me that in hindsight we can be proud of Yaakov.

## II. THE ESCAPE

Yaakov behaves inappropriately with Lavan when he flees without first taking leave and saying goodbye. Why does he run away? First and foremost, Yaakov fulfills the command that he received from the angel in his dream (1:13). But there seem to be other motives as well. First, Yaakov feared additional delays that would be cast upon him by Lavan, who from the very beginning did not agree to let his daughters leave his home, as became clear in previous chapters. Second, it seems that Yaakov was afraid of aggression on the part of Lavan's sons. The words of the sons became a prototype for all Jewish exiles, namely, the argument raised against the economic success of the Jews, which supposedly came at the expense of the impoverishment of the local Gentiles:

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. (*Bereishit* 31:1)

Yaakov sensed the approaching danger. Rachel was afraid to set out on a journey, because she hoped to become pregnant, but when together with her sister Leah she understood the danger posed to her family in the house of her father Lavan, she was ready to go.

It is possible that Yaakov fled also because of Lavan's constant deceit. In the initial agreement between Lavan and Jacob, three colors were mentioned: speckled, spotted and dark (*Bereishit* 30:32). But later in the passage another color is mentioned: "every one that had white in it" (*Bereishit* 30:35). When Yaakov spells out his doubts to Rachel and Leah, he mentions also animals that are streaked (*Bereishit* 31:8), and in his dream we hear also about those that are grizzled (*Bereishit* 31:10-12). All together there are six different colors. Were all six colors included in the original agreement with

Lavan? It seems not, for this is what Yaakov explains to his wives:

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. (*Bereishit* 31:7-8)

We see from Yaakov's words that there was more than one agreement. Every year, Lavan would cunningly change the agreement, and base it on a different color. Yaakov worked six years for the sheep (in addition to the first fourteen years that he worked for Leah and Rachel), and in those six years Lavan exhausted all six colors of the sheep that he kept changing for Yaakov and all of his deceptions: speckled, spotted, dark, every one that had white in it, streaked, and grizzled. The next deceit (*Bereishit* 31:8) would involve the violent theft of what was in Yaakov's possession, a plot that the sons of Lavan were scheming. It was at this time that Yaakov decided to take what was his and flee to the land of his fathers.

### **III. THE REVELATION OF THE ANGEL**

Yaakov toiled for twenty hard years without receiving proper compensation from his employer. Why did God bring such suffering upon Yaakov, and what should we learn from the mode of God's providence over our forefathers and over us?

And it came to pass at the time that the flock conceived, that I lifted up my eyes, and saw in a dream, and, behold, the he-goats which leaped upon the flock were streaked, speckled, and grizzled. And the angel of God said unto me in the dream: Yaakov; and I said: Here am I. And he said: Lift up now your eyes, and see, all the he-goats which leap upon the flock are streaked, speckled, and grizzled; for I have seen all that Lavan does to you. I am the God of Bet-El, where you did anoint a pillar, where you did vow a vow to Me. Now arise, get you out from this land, and return unto the land of your nativity. (*Bereishit* 31:10-13)

The angel lumps together two different things: Lavan's abuse of Yaakov, and the vow that Yaakov had made at the pillar that he erected in Bet-El before setting out for Charan. The connection between the two might be one of crime and punishment, for Yaakov vowed at the pillar in Bet-El as follows:

And Yaakov vowed a vow, saying: If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on, so that I come back to my father's house in peace, then shall the Lord be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house; and of all that You shall give me I will surely give the tenth to You. (*Bereishit* 28:20-22)

In other words, if God watches over Yaakov, Yaakov will "reward" Him

for His protection and fulfill his vow. Until now God protected Yaakov from all evil, but Yaakov put off his return for twenty years. Justified as his reasons may have been, Yaakov delays giving God His reward and fulfilling his vow. Yaakov in relation to God can be likened to Lavan in relation to Yaakov: Lavan does not reward Yaakov for taking care of his flocks, and Yaakov does not reward God with the fulfillment of his vow for His having taken care of him. What complaint then does he have against Lavan?

Yaakov understands the words of the angel. He takes his wives, his children and his flocks, and heads off to the land of his forefathers to fulfill His vow to God.

#### **IV. AN EMPLOYEE'S INTEGRITY**

We have devoted two sections to the various aspects of deceit in Yaakov and Lavan's actions. In conclusion, I wish to comment on the opposite phenomenon, the noble honesty with which an employee is supposed to conduct himself in relation to his employer. Yaakov describes his behavior in the house of Lavan as follows:

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. (*Bereishit* 31:38-40)

The Sages and the Rambam in their wake cite these verses as an example of honest and upright work. For future generations there is no mention of deceit, but only of honesty. Thus writes the Rambam:

Just as the employer is warned not to steal the wage of the poor person or to withhold it from him, the poor person is forewarned not to steal from the work due his employer and neglect his work slightly here and there, spending the entire day in deceit...

Similarly, a worker is obligated to work with all his strength, for Yaakov the righteous man said (*Bereishit* 31:5): "With all my power I have served your father." Therefore, he will be granted a reward even in this world, as indicated by (*Bereishit* 30:43): "And the man increased exceedingly." (Rambam, *Hilkhot Sekhirut* 13:7)