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Parshat Vayetzei
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SMOKESCREEN

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

It just doesn't make sense. After more than twenty years of toiling in the house of Lavan, Yaakov wants out. He should have been entitled to. After all, he married Lavan's daughters in exchange for years of tending the sheep, He increased Lavan's livestock population many fold, and he was a faithful son-in-law despite a conniving huckster of a father-in-law. Yet when Yaakov leaves Lavan's home with his wives, children, and flocks, he sneaks out, fearing that Lavan would never let him leave. He is pursued by Lavan who chases him with a vengeance. But Yaakov is lucky. Hashem appears to Lavan in a dream and warns him not to harm Yaakov. Eventually, Lavan overtakes Yaakov and accosts him. "Why have you led my daughters away like captives of the sword? Why have you fled, secretly, without notifying me? Had you told me you wanted to leave I would have sent you off with song and music!" ([Genesis 31:26-27](#))

Yaakov answers his father-in-law by declaring his fear. "You would have stolen your daughters from me." Lavan then searched all of Yaakov's belongings looking for idols missing from his collection. Yaakov was outraged. He simply did not understand what Lavan wanted. Yaakov responds to the attack by detailing the tremendous amount of selfless work, through scorching heat and freezing nights, that he toiled in order to make Lavan a wealthy man. Reviewing the care and concern that he had for his wives and children, Yaakov declares that he is not worthy of the mean-spirited attacks made by his father-in-law, Lavan. And," Yaakov adds, "If not for the protection of Hashem, Lavan would have sent me away empty handed." ([Genesis 31:38-42](#)) Yet Lavan is unmoved. Like a stoic, unyielding dictator, Lavan responds. "The daughters are my daughters, the children are my children, the flock is my flock and all that you see is mine." ([Genesis 31:43](#)) What can be going on in Lavan's mind? What motivates a man to be so selfish and unreasonable?

My friend Reb Yossel Czopnik told me the following true story about Yankel, a heavy smoker who went to see a certain hypnotist who had cured a large number of people. In a method that combined hypnosis, electrodes, and a little cajoling while placing little metal balls behind the ears, patients swore that the urge to smoke had been totally eradicated from their minds. Yankel went to the doctor and underwent the entire ritual. The balls went behind his ears, the electrodes were attached to his temples, and the doctor began to talk. "Let me ask you, Yankel," questioned the doctor of the well wired patient, "every time you inhale a cigarette do you know what is happening? Close your eyes and imagine your lips puckered around the tail pipe of a New York City bus! Now, take a deep breath. Imagine all those noxious fumes filling your lungs! That is what the cigarettes are doing to you!" Yankel went home that night still wanting a smoke but decided to hold off. "Maybe it takes one night," he thought. The next morning nothing seemed to change. In fact, on his way to work, he had queasy feelings. As soon as he entered his office Yankel picked up the telephone and called the doctor. "So," asked the doctor, "How do you feel? I'm sure you didn't have a cigarette yet! I bet you have no desire for them anymore!" Yankel was hesitant. "Honestly, Doc. I'm not sure. One thing I can tell you, however. All morning long, on my way to work I was chasing city buses!"

Lavan just wouldn't get it. No matter how clearly Yaakov explained his case, twenty years of work, the devoted labor under scorching heat and freezing cold, Lavan just stood unmoved. "The daughters are my daughters, the children are my children, and whatever you have is mine."

When the sickness of egocentrism overtakes the emotional stability of a human soul; one can talk, cajole, or persuade. The Almighty can even appear in a dream and do his part. It is helpless. Unless one actually takes the initiative to realize his or her shortcomings, anything that anyone may tell them is only a blast of noxious air.

Nurture the Yaakov Avinu Within Ourselves

By Rabbi Berel Wein z'tl

Our father Yaakov leaves his home, he who is accustomed to study, tranquility, and to “dwelling in tents,” and immediately finds himself alone and endangered in a hostile world. A rock is his pillow and he must erect barriers at night to protect himself from wild animals (both four and two footed) as he sleeps on the ground. Though he is reassured by Heaven and by his grand dream and vision it is clear to him that his future is still uncertain and fraught with dangers, peril and challenges.

When he finally arrives close to his destination he encounters the neighbors and daughters of Lavan who are unable to water their flocks because of the great rock that seals the opening to the well of water. The Torah then describes for us in great detail how Yaakov greets the people and the family of Lavan and in a selfless gesture of help and compassion to others – who he has just met – singlehandedly removes the rock from the mouth of the well.

It is interesting to note that the Torah lavishes a great deal of space and detail to this incident at the well while the Torah tells us nothing about the fourteen years of Yaakov’s life that passed between his leaving home and arriving at the house of Lavan. Rashi, quoting Midrash, tells us that Yaakov spent these fourteen years in spiritual study and personal growth at the yeshiva academy of Shem and Ever. So, if this is in fact the case, why does the Torah not tell us of this great feat of spiritual challenge and self-improvement – fourteen years of sleepless study – while it does seem to go into mystifying detail regarding the incident at the well of water? Certainly, it would seem that the years of study would have a greater impact on the life and persona of Yaakov than rolling a rock off of the mouth of a well would have had.

As we see throughout the book of Bereshith, if not indeed regarding all of the Torah generally, the Torah places utmost emphasis on the behavior that one exhibits towards other human beings. Not everyone can study for fourteen years in a yeshiva day and night. Yet everyone has the ability to care about others, to demand justice for the defenseless and to provide to the best of one’s abilities help to those who so obviously need it.

Though Yaakov, like all of the great figures and founders of our people that appear here in Bereshith, is unique in spiritual stature and blessed with Divine visions and revelation, he is also essentially everyman. His actions are meant to be a template of attitude and behavior for his descendants and the people who bear his name.

The Torah, while making it clear that we can never personally be the equal of our ancestors in their exalted spiritual state and accomplishments, we can and should attempt to emulate their values and behavior. We can all help those in need to roll the rock off of their wells and thereby to nurture an environment where the Yaakov within all of us can grow and expand.

Friend or Foe

by [Rabbi Eli Scheller](#)

And it was, when Lavan heard the news of Yaakov his sister's son, he ran toward him, embraced him, kissed him, and took him to his house. ([Gen. 29:13](#))

Rashi writes that Lavan *ran* toward Yaakov since he was certain that Yaakov had come laden with wealth and precious gifts. Seeing that he was empty-handed, Lavan thought that Yaakov had probably brought diamonds concealed under his clothes. He *embraced* Yaakov and slid his fingers over Yaakov's garments, but felt nothing. He then thought that perhaps Yaakov was afraid of being robbed, and had hidden his valuables in his mouth. Lavan *kissed* him lovingly, but again came up with nothing. Why does Rashi interpret Lavan's actions in a negative light; maybe he was hugging and kissing him because he was his nephew?

People can be very friendly and act like you're a close acquaintance, but in truth they just want to borrow your car or garner another favor from you. As soon as they get what they need they disappear. It's as if they never knew you. At the end of the parsha, when Yaakov and his family were departing from Lavan's house, the verse says that Lavan kissed his daughters and grandsons but not Yaakov. Why didn't he kiss Yaakov? Lavan already knew that he was empty-handed, so there was no longer any reason to kiss him!

A true friend is not someone that hugs and kisses you for your money. A true friend is someone who cares about you - despite what he gets in return. The way for one to obtain such friends is to be that type of friend yourself! Genuinely care for others and do things that are in *their* best interest.

Why Didn't Yaakov Stand Up For His Rights?

By Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Yaakov's labored for Rochel for seven years, only to have his father-in-law switch daughters and give him Leah. When Yaakov complained about this outrageous deceit, Lavan proposed that Yaakov agree to work for him for an additional seven years and then he would give him Rochel.

Yaakov should have told Lavan, "I already worked for Rochel for seven years. I will agree to stay married to Leah whom I never asked for, but it is only decent that you fulfill your end of the previously agreed upon bargain and give me Rochel, with no further stipulations." Why did he so meekly agree to work seven more years for Rochel?

I saw an insight on this point by Rav Dovid Feinstein. The reason Yaakov agreed to this "new deal" was to preserve Leah's sense of self-respect. How would Leah have felt if Yaakov expressed willingness to work for seven years for Rochel, but would only take Leah "gratis" — as if she were "good for nothing"?

Yaakov's willingness to accept Lavan's terms was not because he did not know how to cut a good business deal. He knew how to negotiate and he knew that if he pressed his case, he could have gotten his way. The reason why he worked seven more years was in order to not devastate Leah. Had he stood up for his rights, he would have received "two wives for the price of one" and one of the wives would have felt that "he got her for nothing."

Concerning potato chip bags, there is no concern over hurt feelings when they are "buy one get one free." Neither potato chip bag thinks: "Am I the one he paid for, or am I the one he got for free?" However, it would have been cruel to put Leah in the position of being the "get one free" wife. Yaakov refused to do that.

Rav Dovid Feinstein emphasized that we see from here that it is worth giving up seven years of one's life so that another person not feel humiliated. It is for this reason Yaakov willingly agreed to work for seven more years.

Convince, Cajole, And Persuade Your Family, But Do Not Impose

Towards the end of the parsha, the Torah tells us that "Yaakov saw the face of Lavan, and it was not like it was yesterday and the day before" [31:2]. Yaakov saw the way in which Lavan was treating him and recognized that things were not the same. G-d appeared to Yaakov and told him that it is time to pick up his family and return to the land of his fathers [31:3].

Yaakov then called his family out into the field and began an extensive monologue with his wives explaining why it was important for them to leave. After the long list of explanations of why they should go, the wives agreed that they should leave. But the question must be asked: If G-d appeared to any one of us and told us "It is time to leave your city," "it is time to change your job," or whatever -- we would gather our families, tell them of our message from G-d, and act upon it. We would not start a whole series of rationalizations: "Things are not the way they used to be, times are tough, we have to think about making changes." G-d gave us an order; that settles it.

The Shaloh HaKodesh provides an interesting insight regarding this question. "When a person wants something from his family -- spouse or children -- it is not proper to compel them to do it, even if he has the ability to force them." In other words, even if one has the means to dictate in absolute terms "This is the way it is going to be," the Shaloh says this is not the way to run one's household.

"Rather, a person should try to convince them of the logic of what he wants in order that they be motivated to come to the same conclusion themselves. This is far better than compelling them to do something against their will." This means that a person can feel very strongly about a certain household decision. He may have no doubt in his mind at all. And, he can be capable of enforcing that decision. "This is the way it's going to be." The Shaloh teaches us: Do not do it that way. Convince, cajole, persuade, but do not impose. The proof, says the Shaloh, is Yaakov's lengthy discussion with his wives. Yaakov justified the need to leave Lavan (despite the fact that this was also G-d's command) -- in order that they agree willingly with this plan of action.

If there was ever a justifiable case to compel one's family to do something, it would be right here in this situation. G-d said that it was time to leave. Did anything more need to be said? Is there any room for discussion? Why does Yaakov need to give a whole speech? If in this situation Yaakov felt compelled to gently persuade his wives, what can we say? Is there ever a situation where we can feel as certain as Yaakov must have felt? If it is good enough for our patriarch, Yaakov, it is good enough for us.

“Your offspring shall be as the dust of the earth, and you shall spread out powerfully westward, eastward, northward and southward; and all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you and your offspring” (28:14)

Hashem promised Yaakov that his descendants would be like the dust of the earth. The simple understanding of this blessing is that the Jewish people will become as numerous and the specks of dust, which cannot be counted. Another idea is that the lowly dust on the ground is a symbol of humility, just like we say at the end of Shemone Esrei that “my soul should be like dust to all.” We also find that Avraham called himself dirt as an expression of humility. Hashem blessed Yaakov that humility would be one of the hallmarks of a Jew because, as Ramban writes in his famous letter, this is one of the best character traits that a person can develop.

“He looked, and behold – a well in the field, and behold – three flocks of sheep lay there beside it, for from that well they would water the flocks, and the stone over the mouth of the well was large” (29:2)

The Torah describes how the shepherds gathered around the well in the field and waited for everyone to arrive before they could remove the heavy stone which covered the well. Why does the Torah need to give us a lengthy description of this well and how it worked? The Malbim writes that this description can be explained as an allegory. The well represents Hashem’s influence and presence in this world. When the Shechina has a resting place in Eretz Yisrael, the well is said to be in the city, whereas when the Jewish people are in exile, the well is said to be in the field, outside the city, as in the posuk here. The three flocks of sheep represent the three exiles from Eretz Yisrael: to Egypt, Babylon and Rome. Even when in exile, the Jewish people remain around this well, because it is Hashem’s presence and protection that keeps them going in exile. The only thing blocking the return to their land is the large stone covering the well, their sins which block the connection with Hashem. When will they be able to overcome this large stone? When they all gather together. With unity, the people will be able to use their combined strength to overcome the sins that interfere between themselves and Hashem. We should all ask ourselves if we are contributing to the problem which keeps this well closed or if we are a partner in the attempts to remove the impediment. We should try to take the extra step to bring unity among people and help bring about the redemption. Our destiny is in our own hands.

“She conceived again and bore a son and declared: This time let me gratefully praise Hashem; therefore she called his name Yehuda; then she stopped giving birth” (29:35)

It is fitting that Yehuda, the progenitor of the Jewish monarchy, was named for an expression of gratitude to Hashem. Such acknowledgment of Hashem's guidance of the world is a very important quality for a king. The only way for the king descended from Yehuda to be successful is if he thanks Hashem and recognizes that it is Hashem who makes him victorious, rather than his own cunning and physical prowess. That is why there is a special law that a king has to carry a Sefer Torah and read it constantly so that he not become too proud and neglect Hashem. It is therefore especially appropriate that Yehuda received this name. In fact, this is why the Jewish people as a whole are referred to as Yehudim. Gratitude and recognition of Hashem's hand in every facet of life is one of the defining characteristics of the Jew.

“And he heard the words of Lavan's sons, saying: Yaakov has taken all that belonged to our father, and from what belonged to our father, he has amassed this entire fortune” (31:1)

Yaakov became very wealthy because Hashem protected him against Lavan’s schemes. Lavan kept changing the terms of Yaakov’s earnings, but Hashem always ensured that events worked out in Yaakov’s favor. Thus, Yaakov was able to legitimately earn a great deal of money. However, the sons of Lavan decided in their minds that this was not fair and that Yaakov had taken everything that belonged to their father rather than earning it. Of course, this was patently false, but they convinced themselves otherwise and accused him of stealing. This false claim has been repeated by anti-Semites throughout history all the way down to modern times, but its origins come from the time of Yaakov Avinu. Their hatred of the Jewish people leads to irrational accusations.

“Yaakov also noticed Lavan's disposition that, behold, it was not toward him as in earlier days” (31:2)

The Chofetz Chaim writes that the deterioration of the relationship between Yaakov and Lavan serves as a lesson for all time in how to know when our relationship with the gentiles around us is deteriorating beyond repair. When Lavan's sons spoke badly of Yaakov, he ignored it and moved on. Similarly, when the nations talk badly about us and complain, the best thing to do is remain silent and allow them to say what they want, as long as they still leave us alone. However, when Yaakov saw that Lavan's visage and attitude toward him had turned sour, quite unlike it had been before, he was troubled. It was then that Hashem commanded him to leave and return to Eretz Canaan. Similarly, when the talk of the gentiles becomes more than just words but is translated into violent actions and a change in attitude, it is time to move elsewhere to a safe haven. The most reliable place of refuge for Jews is Eretz Yisroel, the same place where Yaakov sought refuge when Lavan turned against him. This is yet another example of how the stories of Sefer Bereishis are "ma'aseh avos siman levanim," a guide for our nation to follow the example of our forefathers and to see how they dealt with situations similar to those in our own lives.

By Rabbi Mayer Friedman

Nobody's Fault But Mine

By Sheldon Stern

Many years ago I read the following in some Parsha sheet (I don't recall the author or if the story is true or apocryphal), "Two groups approached a renowned Rabbi. The first contingent was Yeshivish-Chassidish, "You know, those Modern Orthodox Jews are very lax in their performance of Mitzvahs. Most of their wives don't cover their heads. As the spokesman was about to make his second point the Rabbi stopped him, and the other party's representative offered, " The Ultraorthodox are often jailed for various white collar crimes." The eminent Rabbi caught their drift and after stroking his impressive long, white beard he "paskened," "To tell me that the modern aren't as Makpid in their Mitzvah performance as they should be is one thing, and for the other side to say that the Chareidim aren't honest in business is another thing. But if the Chareidim would tell me that they have to work on their Yashrus, and the modern on their Kashrus, now that would be something." Many a true word is spoken in jest, but to quote a line from my father's radio days, "Tain't funny McGee." as we'll see by perusing through the Parsha.

The Gemara in Avodah Zara 25a calls Breishis the "Book of the Upright" because it chronicles the lives of the Patriarchs. However, there are many other icons who fit that bill and, Leidach Gisa, quite a number, who are deserving of dishonorable mention. As my favorite American band the Beach Boys put it, Breishis has "Heroes and Villains." So in the first category, we must include the Matriarchs along with Yaakov's 12 sons (and no disrespect intended for any worthy individuals who were omitted.) And on the negative side of the ledger we immediately think of Lavan and Eisav. In Parshas Vayeshev, Yosef takes center stage. Verse 37:4 relates that Yosef's brothers couldn't (wouldn't?) speak peaceably with him because they saw that their father favored him. Rashi sees this in a favorable light noting that they weren't two faced. This leads to a difficulty. At all times, when Eisav is cited, Rashi gives him two thumbs down, so why the double standard? When the brothers came to Egypt and faced this "despicable despot" they immediately turned introspective and attributed their plight to the indifference and worse that they exhibited to their brother. In contrast, when Eisav's world came crashing down in Parshas Toldos he took comfort in his plan to kill his brother. There was no "Come to @#\$\$%^ Moment." But oh was that ever called for. Rachel's handing over the signs to her sister is arguably the most altruistic act in the annals of man, and it sealed her legacy in the pantheon, but there's something else she did which shouldn't be overlooked. When she saw that Leah was fruitful, and she was barren, she blamed herself for not meeting Hashem's expectations. This then, is the hallmark of the righteous. He never blames others, and certainly not Hashem for his denouement. Rather he turns inward and sincerely looks to improve on his already sterling Middos. As Robert Plant sang for Zep, "Nobody's Fault But Mine." Pardon my indulgence but just a moment for an aside. I'm pretty certain that Zep is not taught in most mussar shmuzes, but that's the beauty of Mussaar. It can come from the classic Seforim, but it can also come from TV, movies rock what have you. Hashem has no shortage of vehicles to get His message across.

Now let's look at Lavan. In verse 31:26, the scoundrel confronts Yaakov, who had left with his family like "thieves in the night" or if you prefer, like Meatloaf's "Bat Out of Hell," and snarls, "Why did you resort to this trickery?" That conniver was in full righteous indignation, as he continued by saying that he was deprived of the opportunity to send off his daughters and grandchildren with pomp and circumstance, or as per ELP, "Fanfare for the Common Man." What a Chutzpah? Did he not know what he put Yaakov through for 20 years? In verse 30:27 Lavan acknowledged that he became wealthy thanks to Yaakov. Talk about an "attitude of ingratitude." And his own children were totally on board with the deception, because they were made to feel like nonentities. The Midrash relates that after Yaakov arrived, Lavan was blessed with sons. Rachel and Leah knew that their father would shut them out of any inheritance, now that he had male offspring. If we change the vowelization of the verse in question it can be read as follows, "Now I see that Eisav was right about you." This says it all. The Midrash tells us how tirelessly Yaakov worked for his father-in-law. How he took responsibility if any of the flock was captured and killed. Finally, Yaakov decided that it was time as Billy Joel sang, "I'm Moving Out." So now they face off. For Lavan, the gloves came off. As Alice Cooper put it, "No More Mr. Nice Guy.". Or as Howard Cosell said, "I'm gonna tell it like it is." Actually he told it with a very jaundiced eye. "For twenty years you took advantage of my hospitality. You know you got rich from me. When you came here you didn't have a penny. What a difference from Eliezer. When he came looking for my sister's hand for his master Yitzchak, he showered us with gifts. Sure you gave me that blarney about Eisav's son holding you up, but I didn't believe it for a minute." Once the floodgates opened up you can be sure that Lavan didn't hold anything back. Let's add to this point. As Gladys Knight and the Pips sang, "Eisav likely "Heard it Through the Grapevine," that Yaakov and Eisav weren't bosom buddies. He was aware that Yaakov got the Brochos from Yitzchak and, of course, he accepted Eisav's slant that he was cheated. So this reprobate ignored all the good that Yaakov did, waiting for his opportunity to pounce. Basically he told the person whose face is on the Kisei Hakovod, "You put on this goody two-shoes act, but I saw through you the minute you showed up. And now you proved me right"

The Chafetz Chaim is associated with the bane of speaking Loshon Hora. We should ask why the Godol Hacentury put such a premium on that Issur. We have the famous Chazal that slander kills three people, the speaker, the listener and the subject. While this can be true, in most cases Loshon Hora is relatively innocuous, "I didn't care for the Rabbi's speech today, did you see how much chulent that guy took?" So what is the problem? Invariably it's always, "Did you see what that guy did, or said or took?" Returning to the introduction let's quote from Joni Mitchell's epic "Woodstock" "Life is for Learning." We have to learn about ourselves. Learn to see and correct our flaws. But it's so much easier to criticize others, especially when we're being directed by the Yetzer hora. Many incorrectly think that at the outset the Beatles were little more than a boy-band say NSYNC, Heaven forbid, because of songs like "She Loves You," but nothing could be further from the truth. Occasionally, we were privy to a gem with depth like John's beautiful "This Boy." We can spend our lives pointing fingers at "that" guy, but we should only be looking at "this boy" that is ourselves.

The Thanksgiving Jew

By Rabbi Menachem Feldman

You may be surprised to hear that the word "Jew" does not appear in the Five Books of Moses. The Torah refers to our people as the Children of Israel, for we are the children of our patriarch Jacob, who was given the additional name "Israel." Israel fathered twelve children, who became the twelve tribes of Israel.

The name "Jew" comes from the name "Judah," which means "thanksgiving." Judah was the fourth son of Jacob and his wife Leah. As we read in this week's Parshah, "And she conceived again and bore a son, and she said, 'This time, I will thank [odeh] the L-rd!' Therefore, she named him Judah [Yehuda]."

Why, then, are all Jews called by the name of just one of the tribes, Judah? What is it about thanksgiving that captures the essence of the Children of Israel?

Thanksgiving is easier said than done.

We often look around and wonder why some of the people around us are so ungrateful. Why don't our children appreciate all that we do for them? Why does our spouse not show gratitude? Why do our co-workers take us for granted?

To understand why the feeling of gratitude is so elusive, we must examine the Hebrew word for "gratitude," *hodaah*, the root of the name Judah. *Hodaah* also means "to acknowledge," as in acknowledging that another's opinion is correct.

Why do these two seemingly distinct ideas, thanksgiving and acknowledgement, share the same word? What possible connection do they share?

The answer is that the key to being thankful is acknowledging the other's perspective. To illustrate: a mother does so much for her child, yet does the child really appreciate it? The child may take the mother for granted, thinking that she is just doing what she is supposed to do as a mother. After all, argues the child, isn't this her job? The only way the child can genuinely feel grateful is if he adopts her perspective, if he appreciates all her sacrifices and all the time she lovingly dedicates to him.

The same is true of a spouse. We can say thank you for an act of kindness. But to truly feel grateful, we need to see the picture from the perspective of our spouse. We need to appreciate all the thought, feeling and energy that was invested in this one act. Only when we acknowledge and appreciate the other's point of view—*hodaah*—can we say *todah*, "thank you."

To be a Jew, then, is to possess the ability to see beyond the obvious, to acknowledge the other's perspective. To be a Jew is to experience the pain of others, as well as rejoice in their happiness as if it were our own. To be a Jew is to acknowledge and accept the perspective of hope and joy even in the midst of great hardship.

There is an ongoing and long-standing dispute between the creation and the Creator. Our perspective is that our life, health and success is due to our independent efforts, and that the only one we need to thank is ourselves. From G-d's perspective, however, the entire Universe is being brought into existence every moment by the word of G-d. From His perspective, the only true reality is the G-dly vitality within every created being.

The Jew has the responsibility to see the world from G-d's perspective, to cultivate the point of view that focuses on the spiritual rather than on the physical. The Jew possesses the gift of acknowledgement—and can therefore experience genuine thanksgiving.