

WELCOME TO THE MIDDLE EAST

by Rabbi Label Lam

Even after Yaakov specified that his seven years of work were to be for "Rachel, your daughter, the younger one", Lavan, his too shrewd father in-law to be, had the nerve to substitute Leah in her stead. Lavan, we know is the doctor of deception but how does he justify his actions so he can "stay in business"?

The verse records that when Yaakov protested the day after the wedding, Lavan answered him, "We don't do that in our place to give the younger before the older." The Malbim (19th Century Germany) tells us that Lavan intended to appease Yaakov by telling him that the only way I could give you Rachel eventually was by handing over Leah first. This way he was able to squeeze another seven years of indentured servitude from Yaakov. Perhaps we can detect another technique that may be helpful to watch out for.

A fellow came to a tailor to have a suit made for a special occasion. When the suit was ready the man came to the tailor's shop to try it on. To his horror he discovered that one sleeve was significantly longer than the other sleeve and one pant leg was a full foot shorter than it need be. The fellow complained to the tailor. The event was that evening and he needed the suit.

The tailor advised the desperate fellow that he should pull his arm up in such a fashion that the short- sleeved arm sits right at the hand. He contorted himself as recommended. Then he suggested that he shift his weight in such a way that the cuff of the all too short pant leg comes right to the shoe.

He paid for the ill-fitted suit and went off limping down the street. Two gentlemen were walking behind him and observed how he was ambulating down the street. One man said to the other, "Look at that unfortunate fellow, how disfigured and misshapen he is!" To which his colleague replied on a positive note, "At least he has a good tailor!"

When people attempt to do business with each other there are also many hidden assumptions that are often not necessary to speak out when the culture, language, and goals are the same. However when the language of trust is missing, there is always room for a proliferation of differences of opinion and deception even when it seems all of the invisible assumptions are overtly specified.

One of Lavan's main tools of control was to constantly change the rules of the game. He made Yaakov wrong for assuming that one can take the younger before the older. He made a public feast and invited all the neighbors to be certain that local custom would prevail over any private

agreement between the two of them. In that context Yaakov is the offender, the insensitive one for having suggested or assumed it would be otherwise.

Lavan, with all his convoluted Middle Eastern "logic" made the victim into the perpetrator. Those observing superficially may perceive that it is Yaakov who is twisted. The truth is, though, that he has been made to seem crooked by the ever-changing rules of "the game".

There's an old fable about a frog that was approached by a scorpion looking for a ride across the river. The frog thought it was too risky because the scorpion might sting him and kill him. The scorpion convinced the frog that it was safe based on the logic that if the scorpion would sting him they would both die. So he agreed and off they went. Half way across the river the scorpion stung the frog. The frog asked the scorpion why he done such a foolish thing. Now both would surely die. The scorpion answered, "This is the Middle East!"

The tragic irony is that Lavan was trying to take advantage of and sabotage his own family. In the end he alienated himself from one of the greatest spiritual opportunities ever. Rather than being credited as the father of a great nation, he goes down in the books as one of history's supreme scoundrels.

It should not surprise us to see this perverse play acted again on the ever-expanding stage of history. Sitting in a straight jacket of ill-measured ultimatums we have all been given a scorpion's welcome to the Middle East.

Good Shabbos!

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