

LEAH'S EYES

by Shlomo Katz

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The story of Yaakov and Lavan alludes to the dual causes of anti-semitism, writes R' Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin z"l (19th century). First, Lavan and his sons, like our own opponents, were jealous of Yaakov's material success and were convinced that Yaakov had obtained his wealth by cheating them (Lavan and his sons) out of their own property. [See Bereishit 31:1]

In addition, Lavan resented the religious truth that Yaakov represented. Lavan said to Yaakov (31:29), "It is in my power to do you (plural) harm, and the G-d of your fathers addressed me last night . . ." To whom was Lavan referring when he used the plural pronoun? Certainly not to Yaakov's family -- Lavan's own daughters and grandchildren! Rather, hidden in Lavan's statement was his agenda: "To do you harm and the G-d of your fathers." This is what the Sages meant when they wrote in the Pesach Haggadah, "Lavan sought to uproot everything." "Everything," and not just Yaakov's material wealth!

The Torah states (Devarim 26:5), "An Aramean tried to destroy my father. He descended to Egypt . . ." What do the acts of the Aramean (Lavan) have to do with our father Yaakov's going down to Egypt? We may learn the answer from the gemara which states, "The Jews should have been exiled [after the destruction of the First Temple] to Aram, but because the Arameans are too cruel, G-d exiled the Jews to Bavel." Throughout the period before the Destruction, the Jews' primary nemesis was not Bavel, but Aram (as described in the Book of Melachim). When it came time to exile the Jews, however, Hashem chose to send them to Bavel; had the exile been to Aram, not one Jew would have survived.

Yaakov was exiled to Aram, and the Aramean (Lavan) tried to destroy him. That is why Yaakov descended to Egypt to complete his exile.

(She'er Yisrael, ch. 1, printed at the end of Chumash Ha'emek Davar, Vol III)

An Astonishing Midrash

"The eyes of Leah were tender" (29:17) therefore it says (Yirmiyah 31:15-16): "Restrain your voice from weeping . . . for there is hope for you ultimately . . . and the children will return to their borders."

The verse quoted from Yirmiyah speaks to Rachel. What connection does it have to Leah? R' Yehonatan Eyebchutz z"l (died 1764) explains:

The gemara asks: The Torah does not speak disparagingly of animals (see Bereishit 7:8); how, then, can it speak disparagingly of Leah's eyes? The gemara answers that the Torah is praising Leah. Her eyes were tender because she cried at the thought that, as the elder daughter, she might be expected to marry Esav, the elder son of her aunt Rivkah.

Chazal say that in the merit of these tears, Leah earned the right to be buried with Yaakov. This meant, however, that Rachel, Yaakov's favorite wife, could not be buried with him. The above verses from Yirmiyah are Hashem's consolation to Rachel: "I want you to lie by the side of the road so that you can pray for your children when they are taken into exile. Do not cry endlessly, however, for there is hope. The children shall return to their borders."

(Midrash Yehonatan)

The Character of Lavan

In an undated letter to his son, R' Simcha Zissel Ziv z"l (died 1898) pointed out how great Lavan's spiritual potential was and how low he stooped nevertheless.

Lavan must have been a great man, for the Torah mentions his blessings not once, but twice. Before his sister Rivkah left to marry Yitzchak, he blessed her (24:60), "May you be myriads of thousands." And, the Torah records that he blessed his daughters before parting from them (32:1).

Lavan said to Yaakov (31:29), "It is in my power to do you harm." And, since Hashem had to appear to Lavan in a dream and warn him not to harm Yaakov, we can assume that Lavan could have harmed our Patriarch. This also indicates Lavan's greatness. [Presumably, only a great person could harm Yaakov.]

Nevertheless, Lavan demeaned himself in ways that he never would have had he known that the Torah would record them. These statements reveal his true character. He said to Yaakov, for example (29:14), "Nevertheless, you are my flesh and blood!" At first glance, this is a praiseworthy sentiment, but what did Lavan mean by the word, "Nevertheless"? He meant, "I would have preferred that my relatives bring me gifts; nevertheless, you are my flesh and blood, so I will take you in." (Even so, Rashi notes, Lavan immediately put Yaakov to work as a shepherd.)

Lavan was great enough to acknowledge to Yaakov (30:27), "Hashem blessed me because of you." The same Lavan said (31:43), "The sheep are my sheep, and everything that you see is mine." Lavan observed the laws of family purity even more strictly than we do (see Ramban to 31:35), yet he frantically searched for his lost idols.

What is the lesson that we can learn from Lavan? It is: "One deficiency can ruin a great deal of good" (Kohelet 9:18). Lavan's greatness did not save him from falling to a very low level.

(Ohr Rashaz No. 143; also printed in Chochmah U'mussar No. 106)

The verse from Kohelet quoted above can also be translated, "One sinner can ruin a great deal of good." R' Simcha Zissel writes: This is why Chazal say, "Distance yourself from a bad neighbor."

To what may this be likened? To one person who carries a deadly illness. All alone, he can wipe out an entire city. The same is true of a person who is spiritually ill. (Chochmah U'mussar No. 231)

"He lay down in that place." (28:11)

Rashi writes: "In that place he lay down, but for the prior 14 years he did not lay down at night for he was studying Torah in the house of [his ancestor] Ever."

R' Michel Barenbaum shlita (mashgiach of Mesivta Tifereth Yerushalayim in New York) asks: How is it possible for the Torah to omit such a detail regarding Yaakov's life? He answers that the Torah is teaching us Yaakov's greatness. To him it was nothing to study Torah for 14 years without lying down in bed. To the contrary, it was obvious to Yaakov that one cannot go to the world of a Lavan without such preparation.

We are taught in Pirkei Avot: "If you have studied much Torah, do not be impressed with yourself; for that reason you were created!" A Jew must recognize that the goal of his existence is Torah study.

King David said (Tehilim 119:162), "I rejoice over Your word like one who finds a great treasure." The Chafetz Chaim explained: If one stood before a treasure of gems knowing that he had only a limited amount of time to gather the stones, would he waste a moment? This is how David felt, and everyone should feel, about Torah study.

(Sichot Mussar)

R' Nissim ben Yaakov z"l ("Rav Nissim Gaon") died approx. 1050

R' Nissim was born and lived in Kairouan, Tunisia. He was a disciple of his father, to whom the famous Iggeret R' Sherirah Gaon had been addressed, and also of R' Chushiel. (The Iggeret/Epistle was a letter from the Babylonian rosh yeshiva listing the chain of tradition of the Oral Law from the beginning of the sages of mishnah until his time.) R' Nissim himself maintained an active correspondence with R' Hai Gaon (939-1038), the son of R' Sherirah.

R' Nissim also corresponded with R' Shmuel Hanaggid in Spain, and transmitted R' Hai's teachings to him. (Later, R' Nissim's daughter married R' Shmuel's son, R' Yosef.) Some consider R' Nissim, R' Shmuel and R' Nissim's colleague in Kairouan, R' Chananel ben R' Chushiel, to constitute the first generation of the era known as the "Rishonim." (Meaning "Early Ones," this title denotes the 500-year period between the decline of the Babylonian academies and the expulsion of the Jews from Spain.)

R' Nissim is best known today for his work Hamaftai'ach/The Index, the surviving part of which is printed under the title "Rav Nissim Gaon" in the margin of the first three volumes of the standard Talmud edition. The purpose of this work, R' Nissim explains in the introduction, is to cross-reference Talmudic statements to elsewhere in the Talmud where they are explained more fully. In his introduction, printed at the front of Masechet Berachot, R' Nissim identifies 50 categories of out-of-context Talmudic statements (i.e., where a sage's statement is found in the Talmud in other than its logical place). Another part of the introduction explains why it was fair on G-d's part to give the Torah to one nation out of all of mankind. (Note that the title, "Rav Nissim Gaon," is a misnomer, because R' Nissim was not technically a gaon, i.e., a Babylonian sage. Only more recently has the term come to mean "genius," as in "Vilna Gaon.")

R' Nissim also wrote other works which have been lost, but which are quoted by later sages. According to some, R' Nissim was the teacher of the "Rif" -- R' Yitzchak Alfasi. R' Nissim should not be confused with his namesake who wrote a commentary on Rif's work. (Sources: The Artscroll Rishonim p.57; Hakdamat R' Nissim Gaon; Shem Hagedolim)

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