

LIFE OF THE 'GARTI'

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Parshas Vayishlach begins with Yaakov's preparations to meet his brother Eisav, whom he hadn't seen in 36 years (see Rashi end of parshas Toldos). Chief in Yaakov's mind was how to assuage Eisav's pent-up anger over his having usurped their father Yitzchak's blessings; or at the very least to discourage Eisav from following through with his apparent plan to cause Yaakov mortal harm. To this end, he sends "malachim", some say angels, others say messengers, and instructs them to say to Eisav the following:

So says your servant Yaakov: I have dwelled with Lavan ("Im Lavan Garti"), and was held up until now.

The angels/messengers are then to present Eisav with a gift, in the hope of arousing his brotherly love.

Rashi offers two explanations of the words, "Im Lavan Garti" - I have dwelled with Lavan." The first notes Yaakov's use of the word Garti, from the root G-R, literally to "dwell" or "sojourn," implying something temporary and foreign. What he was saying was as follows: I did not become a ruler while with Lavan; I remained a foreigner and a sojourner. Do not hate me over the blessings of our father, who blessed me to become "a ruler over your brothers (above 27:29)," for it has not been fulfilled. In his second explanation, Rashi notes that the word Garti contains the exact same (Hebrew) letters as Taryag, which, according to our Sages, corresponds to the number of mitzvos in the Torah. It is as if to say: I dwelled (Garti) with Lavan the wicked, yet I observed the 613 (Taryag) mitzvos; I did not learn from his wickedness.

Mefarshim point out that the two alternative explanations seem to be somewhat contradictory: In the first, Yaakov appeals to Eisav with humility, noting that he has lead a relatively unsuccessful life since they parted: Eisav has no reason to be jealous. In the second, Yaakov seems to be gloating over his unswerving mitzvah performance and Torah commitment. Furthermore, in what way would Eisav be dissuaded by the fact that Yaakov had not grown lax in his mitzvah performance? This doesn't seem like the type of thing one would mention when appealing to "Eisav the Wicked!"

Back in parshas Toldos, when Yaakov "steals" the berachos (blessings) from Eisav, we encounter the pathetic scene of Eisav, after discovering he had been had, appealing bitterly to Yitzchak for some type of blessing for him too:

"[Eisav] let out a great and bitter cry: 'Bless me too, O father!' Yitzchak answered and said to him:

'Behold, of the fat of the earth shall be your home, and the dew of the heavens above. By your sword shall you live, but your brother (Yaakov) you shall serve. However, if you will have reason be pained (Ka'asher Tarid), [then] you will be able to remove his yoke from upon your neck.' (above 27:34-40)"

Rashi explains that if Yaakov forsakes the Torah, this gives cause for Eisav to be pained over Yaakov's having received the blessings. (It is only the dedication of Yaakov to the Torah and its precepts that make him a more worthy recipient of the berachos.) When and if this were to occur, Eisav would then be empowered to "throw-off Yaakov's yoke" and presumably do him harm.

Others (see Ramban ibid., and especially Chizkuni) explain Ka'asher Tarid differently: However, if Yaakov abuses the blessings by becoming excessively dominating ("Ridui"), then you will be able to cast off his yoke.

It emerges that there are two scenarios by which Yaakov can forfeit his right to the blessings, thereby exposing himself to the wrath of Eisav: 1) If he doesn't keep "his end of the deal" by remaining steadfast to the Torah. 2) If he takes advantage of the power he's been granted over Eisav and becomes abusive and controlling.

Perhaps this was the hidden message of Yaakov to Eisav: You have come to attack me. Evidently, you feel that I am no longer shielded by the protective blessings of our father. Perhaps, seeing that I have left the house of Lavan with great wealth and manpower, you assume I have taken a role of leadership, power, and domination, thereby forfeiting the blessings. To this I respond: Im Lavan Garti - Although I am rich and potentially powerful, I have remained no more than a sojourner. I have refused to take advantage of the power my wealth affords me. On the other hand, if you assume that after having lived with the wicked Lavan for so many years, I must followed in his footsteps, and have weakened my commitment to the Torah, thereby relinquishing my right to the blessings, to that I respond: "Im Lavan Garti," - And yet I kept all the Taryag mitzvos; I did not sway at all in my love of the Torah!

Shem mi-Shmuel notes that ultimately, the two explanations of "Im Lavan Garti" are interdependent. In order to be truly committed to the Torah, it is imperative that we remember the dictum of the Sages (Avos 4:16): This World is like an antechamber before the World to Come; prepare yourself in the antechamber so you will be ready to enter the banquet hall! It is known that many great tzaddikim of earlier generations lived in the most simple of dwellings, lacking all conveniences, and possessing only the most basic furnishings. When questioned, they would invariably reply that, "When one is 'on the road,' one forgoes the luxuries of life, and makes do with the bare necessities." They lived their entire lives as if they were "just passing by." Every moment spent building palaces in this life, was one less moment left to invest in the palaces being built for them in the World of Eternal Life!

How is it that Yaakov was indeed able to resist Lavan's overtures to join him in a life of pleasure and indulgence, and maintain the commitment and self-sacrifice required to faithfully keep all of the

Taryag mitzvos? It was by realizing that ultimately, his journey through the physical sphere was no more than a road-trip, a training- camp in preparation for the World to Come. By always seeing himself as a Ger, he was able to remain steadfast to Taryag!

Have a good Shabbos.

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