

A MATTER OF HONOUR

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

After having worked faithfully for his father-in-law Lavan for twenty-odd years, Yaakov decides the time has come to pack his bags and take his leave. The immediate reason for his departure seems to have been his concern for the "grumbling" of his brothers-in-law, Lavan's sons, who were unhappy at Yaakov's successful business venture with their father. "Then [Yaakov] heard the words of Lavan's sons, saying, 'Yaakov has taken all that belonged to our father, and from that which belongs to our father he has amassed all this honour...' (31:1)"

While the discontent of Lavan's sons seems to be with the wealth that Yaakov has amassed, the word they use, kavod, is actually an expression of honour and not wealth. "And from that which belongs to our father he has amassed all this honour..." Furthermore, Chazal, our Sages, say (Avos 6:3), "There is no honour (kavod) but for the honour of the Torah," i.e. wherever the expression 'honour' is found in Scripture, it refers to the honour that the Torah affords man, not to honour procured by wealth or protektzia. Why then does the Torah here use kavod in connection with the material wealth of Yaakov?

The Gaon of Vilna zt"l explains that throughout the Torah, the word kavod is always spelled malei - fully - using the four letters chaf, beis, vav, dalet. There are only two places in scripture where kavod is spelled chaseir - deficiently - chaf, beis, dalet: Here, in Lavan's sons' description of Yaakov's wealth, and in Nachum (2:10), where the prophet describes the wealth of the city of Ninveh.

In reality, says the Gaon, there is no contradiction: True honour, spelled fully, can only refer to the honour of the Torah. Where the Torah wishes to note that the honour referred to is no more than the illusory honour of man - the transient glory momentarily afforded to those with gold and silver - it does so by writing the word deficiently, as if to say - for some, this too is honour; in truth, it is deficient.

Harav Shimshon Pincus zt"l told the following story, which so beautifully defines the difference between true honour (Torah), and what passes for honour in the illusory smoke and mirrors culture we call "society." Fifteen years ago, he had the opportunity to meet a granddaughter of the holy and revered Chafetz Chaim zt"l. She had recently left Russia, and was staying in an absorption centre in the city of Be'ersheva. Unfortunately, she was completely irreligious.

When she was 18 years old she ran away from home and went to university. "Some time later," she told, "I went to my zeide, the Chafetz Chaim, and I said to him: 'Zeide, why do you sit all day in the

dark? There is a beautiful, radiant world waiting out there beyond the confines of your small shtetel. Powerful airplanes gracefully soar through the skies. How long must you sit in the darkness?' This was at the beginning of the technological revolution that started during World War 1. Airplanes were becoming commonplace, and the influence of the media was more powerful than it had ever been before."

"My grandfather, peering out the window, answered me patiently: 'You see those airplanes of which you speak so lovingly? One day, those airplanes will drop bombs that can destroy the entire world. That is what they make with their technology. This is their enlightenment!'"

"We make people. Do you hear? Mir machen menschen - the Torah makes menschen; that is our technology."

In truth, it should come as no surprise to us that the Bnei-Lavans of the world equate material wealth with honour. The Torah, after all, is merely quoting their words. Perhaps therein lies a warning to us: Do not be guiled by the likes of such superficial men, to whom honour can be summed up by the size of one's bankroll.

It is not difficult, living as we do in a society that places such a premium on amassing wealth, that one become caught up in the thick of it all, until the lines that separate true honour from its illusory imposter become blurred, and we Bnei Torah too find ourselves very much a part of the culture we so eschew. We all applaud the recent efforts of Rabbanim to address the problem of overly extravagant weddings and the price tags they carry. Yet what has our society - a community whose kavod is supposedly based on Torah and not material wealth - come to that such takanos are necessary at all? Have we become so honour-centric that we fear the repercussions of making a simcha somewhat less balebatish than the Rosenberg's across the street? (Is it an accident that American English dropped the letter u [u = vav ?] from the word once spelled honour, as if to underline its obsession with material wealth to the exception of all else?)

We've all heard the ridiculous, laughable stories of the types of questions people have been asked when being quizzed about a potential shidduch: Do they use a plastic on their Shabbos table? (Correct answer: No - only freshly laundered linens.) Do they wash clothing on Chol Ha-moed? (Correct answer: No - they have enough clothing to get them through Yom Tov easily without having to wash.) And the clincher: Does the mother wear a tichel or a sheitel when she takes out the garbage? (Trick answer: She doesn't take it out herself - of course - she has the help take it out!) It's good for a laugh, but all kidding aside, people really do ask these questions, and other questions equally superficial and shallow. At what point do we start asking ourselves which honour really matters to us - with or without the "vav?"

My wife recently asked me if perhaps I had a suggestion for a fine young Torah scholar. I came up with what I thought was a very reasonable suggestion - a fine young girl from a Torah family. The father had learned many years in Kolel, and today teaches Torah in a Yeshiva.

"It'll never go," my wife tells me forebodingly.

"Why not?"

"His family is more balebatish than hers. His father makes a decent living; her father earns a Yeshiva salary. It would never 'pass' for them." (The word 'pass,' used in this context, is to me second only to the hateful 'balebatish' in its extreme snobbery.)

I was sceptical. Figuring there was nothing to lose, I asked my wife to ask a relative of the boy if they thought the shidduch had potential. "No way," came back the answer. "She's a wonderful girl, but the family's just not balebatish enough."

Will a time come when our epitaphs will read... "Here lies R' Yaakov and his wife Gittel. They were true balebatim. They never used plastic cutlery, and their floors were always scrubbed daily. They never made a simcha without centrepieces on each table, and their rugs always matched their furniture..."

While by no means does the Torah demand that we live a life of asceticism and puritanism, it does make a point of being sure we keep focused on what true kavod is. It's not a matter of eschewing all things physical, but merely of keeping our priorities straight - straight as the "vav" of kavod, one might say.

Have a good Shabbos.

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