

TO BEAT 'EM - YOU CAN'T JOIN 'EM

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

For some twenty years Yaakov found himself in the city of Charan under the "care" of his infamous uncle and father-in-law Lavan. This self-imposed yet unavoidable exile was necessitated by the fear of Yaakov's brother Eisav, who was incensed at having had his blessings stolen, and was planning to kill Yaakov at the first opportunity. After twenty long years, Hashem appears to Yaakov and bids him to return home, to Canaan.

And Hashem said to Yaakov: "Return to the land of your fathers, and to your native land; I will be with you." (31:3)

One might have hoped that after these years of turmoil, Yaakov would have been destined to live out the remaining years of his life (he was almost 100) in the peaceful surroundings of his homeland. Indeed, Yaakov himself desired nothing more (see Rashi 37:2). Alas, the Master Planner had other things in mind. First there was the loss of Yosef, his most beloved son, whom he assumed dead. Ultimately, Yosef's exile to Egypt becomes the precursor to Yaakov's joining him, bringing along his entire and extended family. Yaakov would eventually die, still in Egyptian exile.

What was the point of bringing Yaakov out of the Lavanian exile, if Hashem knew that his "redemption" was not to be a lasting one. True, there was the issue of the "outstanding debt" - Hashem foretold Avraham that his offspring were destined to suffer 400 years of exile before they would become free in the true sense of the word through receiving the Torah (see Bereishis 15:13) - but who's to say that the exile had to be in Egypt? The prophesy merely foretold, "Know with certainty that your offspring shall be aliens in a land not their own, they will serve them, and they will oppress them four hundred years." Why not leave Yaakov in Charan, "serving" under the "oppression" of Lavan, instead of promising him peace, only to eventually send him off to Egypt - ostensibly a harsher and more brutal exile than that of Lavan?!

In the Pesach Hagadah we say, "The Aramean (Lavan) [sought to] destroy my forefather [Yaakov] - so he descended to Egypt. For Pharaoh's decree was only [to kill] the male [Jewish children], while Lavan wanted to uproot everything!" Clearly the author of the Hagadah seems to be telling us that Yaakov's exile to Egypt, via Canaan, was indeed preferential to and a direct result of his need to get away from Lavan. The in-between years in Canaan seem no more than incidental (indeed they are counted as part of the 400 years of exile). While Egypt was in truth fairly good in the beginning years of our stay there, things went downhill very fast once Yaakov and his sons had passed on. What was

so great about leaving the auspices of the fiendish and undeniably sly Lavan, only to end up in work-to-the-death slavery in Egypt? And while Pharaoh's designs to kill the Jewish males are well documented, where do we find that Lavan "wanted to uproot everything?"

In our history as a nation and as a religion, seldom have our enemies succeeded in coercing us to abandon our religion by means of force and persecution. Jewish blood runs far too thick to be weakened by the sticks, stones, or even guillotines that have been drawn against us throughout the course of our history. Time and time again, even the simplest of Jews has given his life rather than to denounce his G-d and his religion. No religion has suffered such prolonged persecution. And no nation has so staunchly sustained its unique identity in the face of the exile of millennia, through all the continents and countries of the world.

Were one to study in detail the peaks and troughs of religious enthusiasm, dedication, and loyalty, one would likely find that the periods of greatest persecution were also the periods which experienced the lowest level of people abandoning their religion in order to pursue "worldly" fortunes and culture. Conversely, the periods during which we've experienced the greatest levels of comfort and acceptance in secular society have been the times during which the ranks of our religion have been most decimated, and forsakers have been most widespread.

There's an old saying: If you can't beat 'em, join 'em. History has shown that, as a religion, we've had far more to fear when we've found ourselves among "brethren" such as Lavan, who ostensibly have our best interests in mind, that under the wicked rule of tyrannical leaders such as Pharaoh.

When Yaakov escapes from Lavan, Lavan pursues him and eventually catches up. After a heated discussion, Lavan gives this heart-warming speech, which perhaps gives us a clue as to his methods and technique: "The daughters are my daughters; the children are my children; and the flock is my flock - all that you see is mine. What [evil] could I possibly do to them today, or to the children they have borne? [I'll tell you what evil I can do...] Come, let us make a covenant, I and you..." He prefaces his goodbye speech by reminding Yaakov how "good" he's been to him. "Everything you have is by the grace of my hand." In recognition of the ensuing covenant, Lavan erects a pile of stones, about which the Torah describes, "Lavan called [the pile of stones] yegar sahadusa (a witness-bearing pile); Yaakov called it gal eid (same, but in Hebrew)." Seforno explains that Yaakov refused to abandon the sacred tongue, insisting on naming the pile in his native language. Lavan was just as adamant about naming it in Aramaic. It is the insidious and covert efforts of Lavan and his like - our brothers - rather than the explicit attempts of Pharaoh, that present our biggest threat. "Lavan [and his ilk] wished to uproot everything, while Pharaoh only wanted to kill us." It is for this reason that Hashem removed Yaakov and his family from the familiar and familial surroundings of Lavan, choosing rather the less-cozy exile of Egypt, for pain and persecution are the pungent salt that preserves the meat.

Living as we do in a land of kindness and relative equality presents its own not-insignificant

challenges to our faith and our religion. To imagine the outstretched hand of Lavan/Eisav/Edom holds no appeal is to delude oneself into wishful immunity. It's not there. While we are and must be most thankful for the opportunity galus Edom offers us to practice our Yiddishkeit freely, we must constantly be wary of the dangers assimilation and integration present to the purity and authenticity of our values and viewpoints.

Have a good Shabbos.

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