

IM LAVAN GARTI

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

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FRIDAY NIGHT:

Ya'akov sent messengers to his brother Eisav, to the land of Seir in the field of Edom. He instructed them, "Say to my master Eisav: Your servant Ya'akov said, 'I have lived with Lavan until now...' " (Bereishis 32:4-5)

Two parshios ago Ya'akov fled for his life. Now, after thirty-four years of exile, he is on his way home at last. Stealing the blessing right from under Eisav's nose angered Eisav to the point of murder, and now it is Ya'akov's hope that his brother's anger has dissipated, at least enough to make it safe for his return to Eretz Yisroel.

In anticipation of their confrontation, Ya'akov has sent messengers with gifts and a message: Im Lavan garti (I have lived with Lavan). And, as Chazal point out, the word garti - Gimmel-Raish-Tav-Yud, also spells "taryag," the written form of the number 613, as in Taryag Mitzvos (the 613 Mitzvos). Ya'akov's message: As much as Lavan's home was a haven for idol worship and G-dlessness, I maintained myself completely and lived by Torah.

So? To us that is impressive and a big deal, but to Eisav? What did he care about Ya'akov's piety in Lavan's house?

Let's answer, or at least begin to answer, that question with another one: Why did Yitzchak snitch on Ya'akov in the first place? Recall the scenario:

When Eisav heard the words of his father he screamed out a great and tremendously bitter scream. He said to his father, "Bless me too, my father!" He said, "Your brother acted shrewdly, and he took your blessing." (Bereishis 27:34-35)

True, it would not have been hard for Eisav to do a little investigative work to find out who had taken his blessings had his father not told him. But, according to the laws of loshon hara, when has that ever been a reason to implicate another Jew, especially to someone who may cause him harm? And, adding the words "Your brother acted shrewdly, and he took your blessing," could not have helped but fan the flames of an already existing hatred.

Furthermore, after all was said and done, and it was evident that Ya'akov had to leave home, why

send him to the evil Lavan's house, even to save him from Eisav's murderous hands? Better Ya'akov should die a quick physical death, G-d forbid, while remaining spiritually intact, rather than to die a slow spiritual death by remaining physically unharmed. What were Yitzchak and Rivkah thinking?

Let's not forget Rachel and Leah. As the Talmud says, ever since Rachel and Leah were born (also twins), people used to say, "the older for the older - Leah for Eisav, and the younger for the younger - Rachel for Ya'akov." Thus, it was known for some time, that Ya'akov was destined to head off for Padan Aram to marry his cousin Rachel, and therefore the question was never "if" but "when." Thus, when taking the blessings forced Ya'akov to flee for his life at the age of 63, the question was answered.

Thus, when Yitzchak reported to Eisav who had taken his blessing, he wasn't snitching on his son, he was warning Eisav. He was telling him that something much bigger than all of them together was at work, and that it would be useless to harbor a grudge against his younger brother. Indeed, doing so would only backfire on him at some point in the future, so why bother to take revenge. Thus, Yitzchak added:

Then Yitzchak ... said, "Who then is the one who hunted the game and brought it to me? I ate all of it before you came in and I blessed him. He will indeed be blessed." (Bereishis 27:33)

But, as to be expected, Eisav did not get the message.

SHABBOS DAY:

A man wrestled with him until dawn; when he wasn't able overcome him, he touched the hollow of his hip. Ya'akov's hip socket became dislocated as a result of wrestling. (Bereishis 32:25-26)

Now came the task of trying to get Eisav to hear the message and back off. "Im Lavan garti" was Ya'akov's way of telling his brother that he was not to be blamed for what was obviously meant from Heaven, as a way to build him into what he was destined to become: Yisroel. "When I should have been the weakest I was instead the strongest, evidence that G-d is with me in all that I do. If you take on me, you take on Him."

It would be nice if G-d would simply come down and make the point Himself, on our behalf. You know, send a few well-aimed and well-timed lightning bolts at the feet of Eisav, make him dance a bit, to prove that G-d is there protecting us from our enemies, furthering the goals of Torah. Then, maybe Eisav and Yishmael would back off and let us do our thing in peace.

Nice, but not likely. Instead, we have to be satisfied with, "Im Lavan garti," which is a miracle to be sure, but not the kind that impresses Eisav enough to say, "Hey, G-d is sure with you, so why fight?" Indeed, the famous Mark Twain wrote:

"The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then . . . passed away. The Greek and the Roman followed. The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now

what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts. All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?" (Mark Twain)

What is the secret of Jewish immortality? Why, G-d, of course. It is true that assimilation and intermarriage is abominable today, because it is unacceptable from a Torah perspective for a single Jew not to acknowledge G-d as King and live by mitzvos. But, given the currents and forces of history, to be fair, it is amazing that one single Jew still lives by Torah today, let alone millions. Im Lavan garti.

Ironically, as much as Jews have a flair for Hollywood-like drama, Jewish history over the last few millennia has been anything but that, at least positively-speaking. The pogroms of Europe were VERY dramatic, but it was a drama that we could have done without, and that which did little to convince the gentile populations that the Jewish people are still G-d's people.

And, if they weren't convinced, then the Holocaust was far worst, because it was the most "dramatic" destruction of Jews in the entire history of mankind.

Yet, we're still here, tired and battered perhaps, but we're here nevertheless. We have lived amongst the Lavans of history, still a people, still living by laws that trace their origin back to Mt. Sinai over 3300 years ago.

"Not impressed," says Eisav.

Thus, Ya'akov is forced to fight the ministering angel of Eisav, the Sitra Achra himself, and his descendants, all through the night throughout the millennia. And so, the victory is only in the morning, once the dawn arrives, and so it seems for the Jewish people as well. It is only at the end of the long and bitter fight that sent dust Heavenward that the angel finally admits to what he knew all along:

He told him, "No longer will you be called 'Ya'akov, but 'Yisroel,' because you have struggled with [an angel of] G-d and with men and have prevailed." (Bereishis 32:25-29)

Well, better late than never, I guess.

SEUDOS SHLISHIS:

Eisav ran toward him and hugged him. He fell on his neck and kissed him; they wept. (Bereishis 33:4)

In spite of the fact that Ya'akov had conquered the angel of Eisav the night before, the angel responsible for directing Eisav and his descendants, Eisav still tried to sink his teeth into Ya'akov, literally, while faking a loving embrace. He cried because his teeth fell out after trying to bite into Ya'akov's neck, which temporarily and quite miraculously, had become like marble, effectively putting an end to Eisav's onslaught-for now.

"Continue your journey," Eisav told his brother innocently, "and we will accompany you." It was an act of appeasement, after having found out just who was up and who was down, at least at that time. Nevertheless, Ya'akov, unlike his twin brother, didn't bite. He knew that, above all else, Eisav was first and foremost a businessman. Any deal he made with anyone was only to serve himself, which meant that when the opportunity presented itself, and Eisav felt it served him better to break that deal, he would, as history has born witness to, often in the worst way imaginable.

The last thing Ya'akov wanted to do was to become indebted to Eisav, and he certainly didn't want to be at arms length when Eisav was on the war path, which he very often was. So, the last "brotherly" contact between Ya'akov and Eisav ended, except for a few occasions in the future, and usually on an individual level.

However, whatever Eisav learned that day about the specialness of his brother, he did not pass on to his descendants, many of whom later went so far as to try and replace the Jewish people as the nation of G-d. And, as if to reverse the admission of the angel to Ya'akov that fateful night, those "other" religions have been struggling with Ya'akov's descendants for a millennia now, to force them to "admit" to the spiritual supremacy of their approaches to serving G-d.

Many have stood the test, and often met with horrible deaths. Some capitulated, while others pretended to do so, secretly practicing Judaism out of the eyeshot of Eisav. However, as brave and as bold as we have been, we have not been clever enough. For, had we taken a lesson from the Original Snake, to whom Eisav is often compared, we would have noticed that Eisav's best approach to conquering his brother is his most subtle of all, and therefore, his most successful approach to date.

MELAVE MALKAH:

The snake was the most cunning of all the animals of the field which G-d had made. He said to the woman, "Didn't G-d say not to eat from any of the trees of the Garden?" (Bereishis 3:1)

The term "Psychological Warfare" may be a term from the Twentieth Century, but it has been in use ever since man first walked the earth, and specifically, in the Garden of Eden. The Original Snake, into whom entered the Sitra Achra, approached Chava to do battle, not to make friends.

The goal was to get Chava, and then Adam, to eat from the Forbidden Fruit. When it comes to the Sitra Achra, the ends always justify the means. He will let Ya'akov use him as a bridge over a puddle of water if spiritual destruction waits on the other side for Ya'akov. Unlike Yishmael, who carries his deadly knife in full view, screaming out "Death to the Jews," Edom carries his deadly weapon behind his back, out of view of Ya'akov, around whose shoulder Edom has placed his other arm.

The Snake knew that Chava would not eat from the fruit if tempted out right. Psychologically-speaking, good people when tempted outright tend to become self-righteous, and feel indignation for having been suspected of contemplating a sin in the first place. "Me? Eat from the Tree of

Knowledge of Good and Evil against G-d's will? Never!"

No, the trick in getting a person to sin is to find some aspect of it that can be rationalized, which the yetzer hara calls being justified. They sound the same at first, until after the sin is committed, and the justification can be seen clearly as a rationalization since the consequences are clearly damaging.

Thus, the genius of the Snake, a.k.a. the Sitra Achra, a.k.a. the yetzer hara, is convincing us that somehow our lives will be enhanced by doing what is actually the wrong thing to do, at least according to G-d. Hey, His opinion has to count for something, no?

The snake told the woman, "You will not die! G-d knows that once you eat from it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like G-d, knowing good and evil."

Sounds like a good thing, does it not? Chava thought so, and feeling justified, she ate and gave to her husband as well:

The woman saw that the tree was good for food, appealing to the eyes, and an attractive means for gaining understanding. She took some of its fruit, and ate. She also gave some to her husband, and he ate.

It would seem that having ones eyes opened is a good thing, right? Understanding is crucial for living like G-d, is it not? Why would G-d prevent us from achieving such things? All good questions we'll have to ask Him after we finish eating from the Forbidden Fruit, because He's sure to come around to ask us why we ate against His expressed command.

The rest is history, and specifically, has been the history of modern Jewry. The assimilation rate is extremely frightening, especially when lumped together with the rate of intermarriage. However, most do not abandon their Jewish heritage completely or marry outside the faith as an act of rebellion against G-d. Rather, they do it in pursuit of what they understand from Edom to be a good life, a meaningful one.

But for the Jew, there is no place like home, and home is Torah, mitzvos, and Eretz Yisroel. And, if that is not where a Jew is, if not physically, then at least spiritually, (sometimes we are denied the opportunity to learn Torah, perform certain mitzvos, or live in Eretz Yisroel), then he has to look around and see who he is talking to, who is influencing him. The Snake sheds his skin, and is capable of wearing many types of clothing, sometimes even the same kind as our own.

What is the goal of every Jew? To be able to conclude his life with the words: Im Lavan garti. The words mean what they have always meant: I have survived the onslaughts, physical and spiritual, against my following in the footsteps of my Torah fathers, and I am now on my way home to Eretz Yisroel. For, it was on his way back to Eretz Yisroel that Ya'akov Avinu first said these words, right before he fought the angel and became Yisroel. By the looks of it, after thousands of years of living amongst Edom and the Lavans of history, we're walking the same path.

*Have a great Shabbos,
PW*

Text

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