TORAH EDUCATION

by Rabbi Berel Wein

Rashi points out for us in the beginning of this week's parsha (really at the conclusion of last week's parsha) that Yaakov stopped at the study house of Shem and Ever for fourteen years on his flight from Eisav to his uncle's house in Aram. This seems to be a strange stopover at first glance.

How will the instruction that he received in the school established by Shem and Ever contribute to his survival and success at the house of Lavan, the master conniver and duplicitous character? The question is phrased in a more current if blunter fashion in the Talmud itself - of what value are the Torah students to society at large?

To meet Lavan, Yaakov apparently needs to train in different forms of legal, commercial and worldly pursuits. Studying Torah is all well and fine, but how does it prepare one for the real world? This question is heard today in thousands of Jewish households and is a most vexing one. Our world today is one of Lavan compounded.

Where does Torah study and Torah knowledge fit into our milieu, into solving our problems and difficulties, in facing down our enemies? Yet, we find that on the whole Yaakov was quite successful in the house of Lavan. He acquires his wives there and his children are born and raised there. He waxes wealthy in spite of all of Lavan's efforts to cheat him out of his just payments and wages. What courses of study did he take and master in the school of Shem and Ever that enabled him to so succeed?

I have always felt that the answer lies in understanding the place and goals of a Torah education in one's life. Most people, especially those who view it from the outside looking in, think that Torah education is purely a matter of material covered, of knowledge of facts, of understanding complex and difficult Talmudical concepts and statements. In truth it is all that but it is much more.

A proper Torah education, a study course at the school of Shem and Ever, is meant to impart life-long values and a world view in which to fit the events of one's life in a proper and moral fashion. One has to learn how to deal effectively with Lavan but one has to be very cautious not to become Lavan in the process.

Self-defense and protection of one's own interests is part of the Torah value system. But pleasantness, sensitivity, faith in God's justice and promises, and a willingness to tolerate and accommodate others (even unpleasant others) are also a part of the value system of the Torah.

Yaakov enters the school of Shem and Ever to absorb the Torah value system that will allow him to survive Lavan and not to fall spiritually and become Lavan in the form of Yaakov. One of the most difficult tasks that faces Jewish society today is to remain a kingdom of priests and a holy people even when struggling with Lavan, Yishmael and Eisav for our very existence. Our schools have to teach Torah values and not be satisfied merely with knowledge, grades and test scores.

Shabat shalom.

Rabbi Berel Wein Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com