

LEARNING FROM LAVAN, SUCCOS, & MAN IS LIKE STONE

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: ##1010 - Davening at Kever Rachel: Is it Permissible? Good Shabbos!

Putting a Different Spin On "I Did Not Learn from His Evil Ways"

I recently saw a teaching of the Chofetz Chaim on a Rashi in Parshas Vayishlach. In truth, this teaching does not really fit in well with the first part of Rashi on the same *pasuk*, but we will place it in the category of "*Ayn Meshivin al ha'Drush*" (one cannot be too pedantic in questioning homiletic expositions). The idea is that if the thought is true, we accept it for its *mussar* value even if the underlying source may not really be saying what the teaching claims it is saying.

Rashi gives a couple of interpretations of the expression Yaakov sent to his brother Eisav: "I have sojourned with Lavan (*im Lavan garati*)" [Bereishis 32:4]. First Rashi says, "I did not become a dignitary or a notable, but remained a mere sojourner (*ger*). It does not befit you to hate me over the blessing of your father who blessed me, 'Be a lord to your brothers,' for it has not been fulfilled in me."

Then, Rashi quotes a famous Medrash that the numerical value of *garti* (*gimel-reish-tof-yud*) is 613, as if to say, 'I sojourned with Lavan, the evil one, yet I kept the six hundred and thirteen commandments and did not learn from his evil ways.'

Someone asked the Chofetz Chaim, "How could Yaakov Avinu make such a bold statement which literally borders on haughtiness. Here he is meeting his brother after all these years and is saying, "You should know I am a *Tzadik*. I kept all 613 mitzvos." Does this not smack of *gayvah* [haughtiness]?"

The Chofetz Chaim addressed the question by focusing on the last words of Yaakov (as quoted in the Medrash), "and I did not learn from his (Lavan's) ways." For the purpose of this drasha, let us concentrate on those words: How did Yaakov have the *gayvah* to say categorically, "I did not learn any bad habits from Lavan?"

The Chofetz Chaim responds that on the contrary, this is not a reflection of haughtiness. It is a

reflection of tremendous humility. The point Yaakov is making is the following: I saw what it means to have *mesiras nefesh*. I saw what it means to have devotion to a cause. I saw how Lavan worked and how he acted. He did not rest until he completed his task. Of course, Lavan's activities were evil -- but his devotion and dedication to these evil actions was uncompromising. *Halevie* (if only), I would have learned from him how to be devoted to my lifestyle and value system the way he was devoted to his value system. Unfortunately, "I did not learn from his evil actions." Namely, I failed to be inspired to adopt his dedication, and apply that dedication to my own lifestyle.

Recently I had two "aha" moments that struck me in this vein.

Last Friday, I went to pick up my dry cleaning at my Korean-owned dry cleaners. The fellow is an immigrant who barely speaks English. Sometimes there is a communication gap when talking with him. I said to him, "Nu, did you enjoy your Thanksgiving?" He said, "Yeah, I watched football." Ten years ago, he did not know what a football looked like. Now he spends Thanksgiving watching football games. I said, "Which game did you watch?" He said, "I watched all three." A football game lasts approximately three hours. This means he spent nine straight hours of his "vacation" on Thanksgiving watching football. *Halevie*, I should be able to sit by a Gemara for nine straight hours. However, (unfortunately), "I did not learn from his evil ways."

Then, Friday morning, I was in the car listening to the radio. NPR had a reporter reporting live from a Target store in Rockville, MD. Everybody knows that last Friday was "Black Friday" (the Friday after Thanksgiving when major sales take place to launch the "Xmas shopping season.") The Target store opened at 5:00 am, and they were offering 31-inch flat screen television sets at a great price. Of course, they only had a limited supply, and there were no rain checks for this item. First come, first served.

A fellow waited in line from 9:00 pm the previous night. This means, after eating his turkey, he waited in line from 9:00 pm Thursday night to 5:00 am Friday morning. I just cannot think of anything in this world for which I would "camp out overnight" for eight hours straight. "And I did not learn from his evil ways" (how I should be acting with enthusiasm and *mesiras nefesh* for those things that I believe in)!

The final thing that hit me in this vein is something I once heard from Rav Gifter.

Rav Gifter once travelled to Mexico to collect money on behalf of the Telshe Yeshiva. Rav Gifter wanted to see a certain individual who was apparently a very wealthy man, in order to ask him for a donation for the Yeshiva. Try as he might, whenever Rav Gifter would come to the man's house, the man was never home. Whenever Rav Gifter appeared -- morning, afternoon, evening, or weekends -- Rav Gifter was told the fellow was not home -- he was "in the office".

Finally, Rav Gifter went to the man's factory. He camped out there early in the morning, and was finally able to catch the man. Rav Gifter told him, "I do not understand you. Morning, evening, night -- you are never home! What is going to be? What is going to be with your family?"

The person responded to Rav Gifter (in Yiddish): "Men darff liggen in gesheft," loosely translated as, "in order to be successful in business, 'one must live in his business!'"

I do not know if Rav Gifter collected anything in Mexico City during that trip, but when he came back to the Telshe Yeshiva, he gave a *mussar schmooze* to the students and kept repeating this phrase "you need to be totally consumed by your business."

Rav Gifter used this sentence repeatedly as a metaphor for his own students, and for many other Torah students from other yeshivas: "If a person wants to be successful in Torah learning, he must LIVE in Torah 24/7." Becoming an accomplished scholar in Torah learning requires total devotion. This was the biggest treasure Rav Gifter found in Mexico City -- the lesson that when one is devoted to an enterprise -- be it business or (*l'havdil*) learning Torah -- it must totally consume him.

This is what Rashi means when he explains Yaakov's message to Eisav "I did not learn from Lavan's evil ways." He was not bragging. It was not a statement he was proud to make. It was a confession. *Nebach*, I had a great teacher. He was a tremendous mentor in the attribute of devotion; and nevertheless I failed to learn from his actions. *V'Lo Lamaditi m'ma'asav ha'raim*.

As I mentioned at the outset, this does not necessary flow from the statement in the pasuk, which implies "I kept the 613 mitzvos" as a statement of accomplishment, but *ayn meshivin al ha'drush*.

Succos is a State of Mind

After Yaakov met Eisav, they (at least partially) reconciled, and then they decided to go their separate ways. The *pasuk* says, "So Esav went back that day on his way toward Seir. Then Yaakov journeyed to Succos and built himself a house, and for his livestock he made shelters (Succos); therefore he called the name of the place Succos." [Bereishis 33:16-17].

There are two problems with this pasuk. The first is that Yaakov only called the name of the place Succos after he got there (after he erected the shelters (Succos) for the livestock). Nevertheless, the *pasuk* says "he journeyed to Succos" as if that was the pre-existing name of the town. Of course, we can say that the *pasuk* is speaking in "prophetic future tense" -- i.e., Yaakov journeyed to the place that in the future he would name Succos. However, it is strange to find it written that way.

The other question is that it seems that Yaakov named the town for a very insignificant fact -- namely the structures he built for his cattle. Why is the town (apparently) named for the huts he made for his livestock?

The author of the *sefer Milchemes Yehuda* discusses these questions. He says that the pasuk is teaching that Succos is not merely a place on the map -- it is a state of mind. The Torah is teaching that Yaakov *Avinu* is now entering the final stage of his life. Yaakov lived in his parents' house for

many years, during which time he sat and learned. Then he went to Yeshivas Shem V'Ever for another fourteen-year period where, again, he sat and learned. Then, as a fugitive running for his life, he left *Eretz Yisrael* -- the Promised Land -- and worked by Lavan for twenty years. He worked for one wife, then he worked for another wife, and then he needed to earn a bit of a livelihood for himself. This was all a prelude for the final stage of his life. Now, Yaakov is coming back to *Eretz Yisrael*. In today's terminology, he is finally "settling down."

Yaakov makes a decision. He said to himself, when I was by Lavan, I saw what is involved in earning a living. I saw how Lavan acts. I am now beginning "the rest of my life." I have seen enough of life to know that materialism (*gashmiyus*) and the struggle to make a living and all other mundane pursuits in this world can become a person's *raison d'etre* -- they can become the reason for a person's existence. I do not want this to happen to me because I know that the only thing that counts in this world is spirituality (*ruchniyus*) and service of Hashem. All the rest is just peripheral. It may be necessary, but it is only a means to an end.

So therefore, when the *pasuk* says that Yaakov traveled to Succos, it is not referring to the name of that town. It is referring to this concept that a person must look at his pursuit of *gashmiyus* -- the material things in life -- houses, livelihood, cattle -- as merely just travelling "to Succos." It is all temporary. A person cannot take it with him. All these acquisitions are not going to make a bit of difference after 120 years. They are all transitory.

They are like a Succah. When someone is out camping, he does not put up a house for his ten-day camping trip. People put up tents, because it is just a temporary situation. Yaakov traveled to Succos: "Now I am starting my life -- I have finished with Lavan, I have finished with Eisav -- so now I am beginning. My mindset is to Succos." I called the name of the city I would live in "Temporary Huts" [Succos] because I am making a statement for myself and for my children that this entire world must be viewed in the context of a temporary dwelling -- "Succos."

With this idea, the Milchemes Yehuda interprets a puzzling Gemara [Shabbos 33a]. After mentioning that Yaakov named the city Succos, the next *pasuk* says, "Yaakov came intact to the city of Shechem which is in the land of Canaan, upon his coming from Paddan-aram, and he encamped before the city (*va'yichan es pnai ha'ir*)" [Bereishis 33:18]. The Gemara asks, what does "he encamped before the city" mean? The Gemara gives three interpretations: Rav answers, "He minted a coin for them" (*matbeah tiken lahem*). Shmuel answers, "He founded market places for them (*shevakim tiken lahem*)."
Rav Yochanon says, "He founded for them bath houses (*merchatzaos tiken lahem*)."

This is strange. Yaakov arrives in Shechem and he suddenly decides to invent a monetary system? He invents shopping malls? He brings in spas? What does this mean?

The Milchemes Yehuda says that Yaakov came into this city after he established this principle that the whole world has to be looked at as "Succos." He asked himself -- what consumes these people? Number 1 -- coinage; Number 2 -- shopping; Number 3 -- spas -- the good life. He told

them, "My friends, you have it all wrong. This is not the way to live. You must view your major activities in life from a different perspective."

According to the Milchemes Yehuda's reading of the Gemara, the words *tiken lahem* in each of the three opinions does not mean "he founded" or "he established," as the simple reading of the Talmudic text might lead us to believe. He interprets the verb *tiken* to mean, "he fixed or improved" (from the infinitive *l'saken* -- to fix). Rav interprets that Yaakov tried to teach them the proper perspective they should have about money. It is not everything in life! Shmuel says that he did not establish market places. On the contrary, he tried to convince them that shopping is not the be-all and end-all of existence. There is no mitzvah to stand nine hours in line at night to buy a 31-inch television set at a discounted price. Finally, Rabbi Yochanan said he tried to "fix" their attitude towards bath houses -- just to live an epicurean existence, luxuriating for hours on end in warm soapy water is not what this world is all about.

Tiken does not mean he invented. He tried to be "*mesaken*" -- to correct their perspective in each of the three areas of life cited by these three Rabbinic opinions.

Man is Like Stone

Finally, I wish to share one last observation from the aforementioned sefer, relating to the concept of a tombstone (*matzeivah*), which we find in this week's parsha. Yaakov took a stone and made it into a *matzeivah* for his beloved wife, Rochel [Bereishis 35:20].

This is something we do until this very day. We erect monuments to departed loved ones out of stone. The sefer Milchemes Yehuda provides an interesting insight to explain why we make *matzeivos* out of stone.

We all know that the world consists of four categories of entities: Those who speak (*medaber*) e.g., humans; those who are alive (*chai*) e.g., all other creatures; those that grow (*tzomeach*) e.g., vegetation; and inanimate objects (*domem*). The category of inanimate objects (of which rocks are a classic example) is at the bottom of the totem pole. Above that is plant life -- trees, and so forth. Above that are animals, fish, fowl, and insects. At the top of the pyramid is the human being, who has the capacity of speech.

At first glance, it seems that the distance between the top (*medaber*) and the bottom (*domem*) of the totem pole is vast, equal to "the distance between east and west." There is nothing lowlier than a stone. It is something we step on. On the other hand, man stands at the pinnacle of existence. The Milchemes Yehudah says: Yes and no. Stones can be the lowest of the low, something we merely trod upon. And yet stones -- if they are used properly -- can last for thousands of years.

America is a relatively young country. How old is the "New World?" -- It is four hundred, maybe five hundred years old at most. However, in Europe, you can see stone buildings that are 1,000 years old. In Eretz Yisrael, the *Kosel Ha'Ma'aravi* is made out of stones from the period of the Second *Beis HaMikdash* -- well over 2,000 years old!

If you want a memorial to last for literally thousands of years, you use stone. The lowly stone that is a mere "*domem*," which is stepped on -- if used properly -- can have an almost everlasting impression. Human beings can be similar. They can come into this world, not do what they are supposed to do, live and die, decompose and typify the statement, "From dust you were taken, and to dust you will return" [see Bereishis 3:19]. On the other hand, if human beings reach their potential, they can have lasting effects for thousands of years.

We are still reading about Rav Yochanan and Rav and Shmuel. They lived in the fifth and sixth century. We are still reading the words of the prophet Yeshayahu. We are still reading the words of Moshe Rabbeinu, which are thousands of years old. Jews all over the world spend countless hours a week analyzing the words of Rashi (on Bible and Talmud). Rashi lived almost a thousand years ago, and still has a powerful effect on all of us.

In a sense, men are like stones. They can have a tremendous effect, but if they do not use their lives correctly, they can leave the world without making any impact whatsoever. That is why the appropriate memorial for a human being is a *matzeivah* made out of stone. The stone teaches us a lesson. It teaches us that everything depends with what one does with an item. A stone can remain on the ground and be trodden upon or it can be erected into a structure that can last for a thousand years. The same applies to man. If we fulfill our mission in life, we can have influence for generations upon generations. If not "we came from dust, and we will return to dust."

Transcribed by David Twersky; Jerusalem DavidATwersky@gmail.com

Technical Assistance by Dovid Hoffman; Baltimore, MD dhoffman@torah.org

This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissochar Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly Torah portion. A listing of the halachic portions for Parshas Vayishlach is provided below:

- # 033 - Nitel Nacht
- # 075 - Tombstones
- # 124 - The Seven Noachide Laws
- # 171 - The Prohibition Against Flattery
- # 217 - Terrorism: How May an Individual Respond?
- # 261 - Elective Surgery and Milah on Thursdays

- # 307 - The Difficult Childbirth
- # 351 - Tefilas Haderech
- # 395 - Free Will vs. Hashgocha Pratis
- # 439 - Executing a Ben Noach based On His Admission
- # 483 - Celebrating Thanksgiving
- # 527 - Matzeivah Questions
- # 571 - Bowing to a person
- # 615 - The Prohibition of Gid Hanasheh
- # 659 - The Father of the Bride: His Responsibilities
- # 703 - The Bracha on a Mitzva: When?
- # 747 - Is Self Defense a Defense?
- # 791 - Flattery Revisited
- # 835 - 'You Look Great' - Permitted Flattery?
- # 879 - Relying on Nissim
- # 923 - The Name of Binyamin
- # 966 - Matzeva and Other Cemetery Issues
- #1010 - Davening at Kever Rachel: Is it Permissible?
- #1054 - Ein Somchin al ha'Nes -- Relying on Miracles
- #1097 - Tefilas Haderech: How Long Of A Trip?
- #1140 - Twins: Must The Younger One Be Me'chabaid The Older One?
- #1183 - Nichum Aveilim On Shabbos and Yom Tov
- #1227 - The Aufruf in Halacha and Minhag
- #1271 - The Postponed Bris: Never On A Thursday?

A complete catalogue can be ordered from the Yad Yechiel Institute, PO Box 511, Owings Mills MD 21117-0511. Call (410) 358-0416 or e-mail tapes@yadyechiel.org or visit <http://www.yadyechiel.org/> for further information.