

PARSHAS VAYEITZEI: SLOW AND STEADY

by Rabbi Yaakov Horowitz

The sequence of events that resulted in the return of Yaakov and his family members to Eretz Canaan after twenty years in the house of Lavan requires careful analysis - and contains powerful lessons.

The Torah relates (Bereishis 31:1-2) how Yaakov developed a growing sense of unease as Lavan and his family members began resenting Yaakov's increasing material success. First he overheard the sons of Lavan complaining that Yaakov had accumulated all of his wealth by taking the resources of their father. Then Yaakov carefully watched the facial expressions of Lavan when in his presence - which only confirmed his fears that Lavan was acting unusually hostile to him. In the following pasuk (31:3), Hashem informed Yaakov that it was time for him to leave the house of Lavan and return home to Eretz Cannan.

The Ohr Hachayim points out that the Torah relates these facts in three successive pesukim to explain the sudden exit of Yaakov - who did not give Lavan notification of his departure. Were Yaakov commanded by Hashem to leave without having seen the signs of hostility, he would have informed Lavan that he was about to leave. If he would only have noticed these signs and not been notified by Hashem that it was time to go, he would have reflected as to the array of his options. Both together, comments the Ohr Hachayim, suggested that it was time for him to leave immediately.

Bringing His Wives Along ... Slowly

I would like to suggest an additional explanation to the entire sequence of events, one whose logical underpinnings are supported by the thought-provoking discussions that took place between Yaakov and his wives immediately following these pesukim.

Yaakov responded to the crisis of the distressing news regarding his eroding relationship with Lavan by calling his wives out to the fields where he worked. Once there, Yaakov informed them in great detail (Bereishis 31:5-10) of their father's duplicity and how Lavan had continuously attempted to deprive Yaakov of his wages with a variety of nefarious measures. (It is interesting to note that this seems to be the first time that Yaakov discussed the character flaws of his father-in-law with his wives.) Only after these pragmatic reasons for leaving were discussed did Yaakov mention (31:11) that Hashem had commanded him to return home.

This seems quite puzzling. Why didn't Yaakov simply announce that he would be following

Hashem's direct order to return home? The answer would appear to be that Yaakov was looking to lower the level of difficulty for his wives to follow Hashem's command by shedding light on Lavan's hostile actions. But this raises an additional question: How did Yaakov come to the conclusion that this was the right course of action? What led him to take the longer, more patient route to his objective of getting the support of his wives for the word of Hashem?

A Personal Example ... and a Lesson for Life

I would like to suggest that Yaakov reflected upon how Hashem had acted with him and then charted a similar course for his interactions with his wives. Perhaps Yaakov noticed that Hashem did not speak to him about leaving the house of Lavan until Yaakov became painfully aware of Lavan's darker side - giving Yaakov a pragmatic reason for leaving as well as the need to follow the word of Hashem. (It is interesting to note that Hashem took a similar approach when telling Avraham to move to Eretz Cannan at the beginning of Parshas Lech Lecha, promising him material as well as spiritual benefits as a reward for making the move.) Once Yaakov understood Hashem's lesson that the longer path is often the shorter and more effective one, he used a similar strategy when speaking to his wives.

As we grow older and wiser, we tend to look to expand our sphere of influence. In our excitement, we are often tempted to rush others (and sometimes even ourselves) along inappropriately before they are ready for the next step. But that approach is almost certainly doomed to failure. Skipping many steps while climbing a ladder (which interestingly was the theme of Yaakov's dream in this week's parsha) often results in a crash that erases all progress that was already made.

Following the slow, sustained path to growth as prescribed by the Rambam (Hilchos Teshuva 10:1 and 10:5) results in the realization of our goals - for ourselves and for those we wish to influence.

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