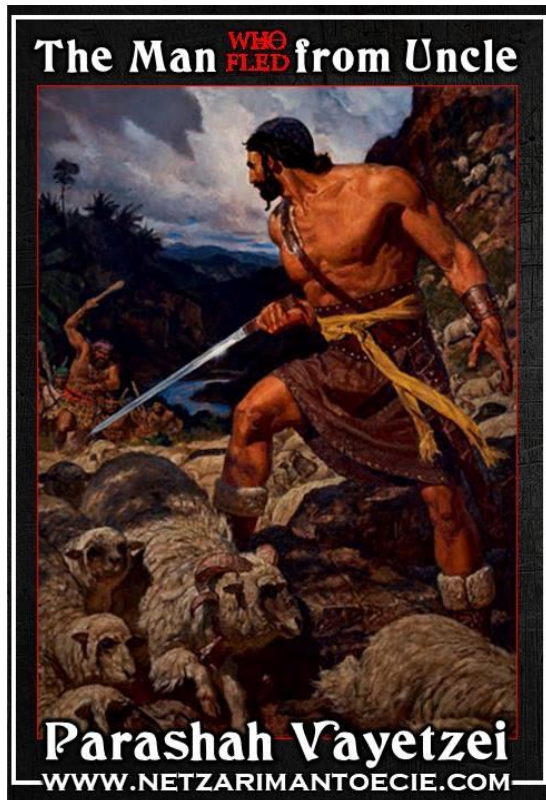


The Man Who Fled from his Uncle

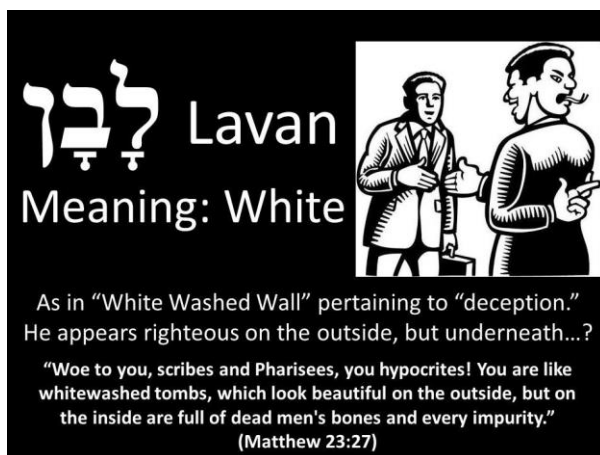


We first meet Lavan the Uncle of Ya'akov (Jacob) way back in Parashah Chayei Sarah (**Genesis 24:29-60**), where he is the spokesman for his father Bethuel's house, who is impressed with the gold jewellery adorning his sister Rivkah.

Lavan is dominant throughout the negotiations with his father playing very little role in approving of Rivkah's consent to marriage. Initially, Rivkah runs to tell her mother about the encounter at the well, but once Lavan finds out he immediately takes charge. Lavan's character is subtly revealed. Hearing that Eliezer was a servant of Avraham and that he was dispensing lavash gifts on a mere child, Lavan assumed that even greater gifts lay in store for the rest of the family. Prior to this, Eliezer describes his mission to Rivkah and when he is before Lavan and Bethuel, the Torah seems to repeat the entire narrative over again, which is not worthy, as the Torah usually uses words economically. But there are subtle changes in Eliezer's recounting of his mission and the events at the well that display great wisdom

in the servant. He emphasises Avraham's greatness, his credentials, his miraculous life and his accomplishments, thus appealing to Lavan's materialistic outlook.

Now, much later, in parashah Vayetzei, we get a good overview of his moral character. Near on everyone has met and had to deal with someone like Lavan in their life, particularly in the work arena and in family situations.



The name "Lavan" is interpreted as "glowing with wickedness," and the name of his people, "Arammi" ("the Aramean") referring to the Aramaic-speaking tribal confederation is an anagram of "ramma'ah" meaning "impostor." Lavan is called also "the master of impostors." Rabbinic commentary notes that when he saw the bracelets on Rebekah's arms, he determined to kill Eliezer; but the latter, divining his intention, pronounced the Sacred Name, by which he caused camels to remain suspended in the air above the well. This, and Eliezer's

resemblance to Avraham made Lavan believe that Eliezer was Avraham. Lavan therefore invited him to enter the house (Midr. Abkir, in Yalk., Gen. 109; comp. Midr. Hagadah on Gen. xxiv. 23).

Lavan Worse Than Pharaoh?

Lavan is referenced significantly in the Passover Haggadah, in the context of the answer to the traditional child's question, "Why is this night different from all other nights?" The prescribed

answer begins with a quote from Deuteronomy 26:5, "a wandering Aramean was my father", alluding to Ya'akov, but here interpreted unusually as "an Aramean (imposter) destroyed my father," as made clear by the rabbinical exegesis read in the Seder:

"Come and learn what Lavan the Aramean sought to do our father Ya'akov. For Pharaoh issued his edict against only the males, but Lavan sought to uproot all, as it is said, 'An Aramean would have destroyed my father, and he went down to Egypt and he became there a nation, great, mighty and populous.'"

The idea is that without Lavan's deception with replacing Rachel with Leah, there would have been no sibling rivalry, as Yoseph would have been the uncontested leader of the fledging nation of Yisrael. When Lavan married Ya'akov to Leah first, it caused Leah's sons to precede Yoseph in birth order, so that they felt justifiably outraged when their father seemed to violate social norms by treating his youngest son as his heir, in preference to his older sons' natural and legal rights. In this way, Lavan can be seen as "seeking to uproot all", by attempting to sever the family tree of the Patriarchs between Jacob and Yoseph before the Children of Israel could become more than a single small family.

Living with The Enemy

Upon seeing Ya'akov make his way into their community, Lavan thought that if Eliezer, a servant of Avraham, brought with him ten camels loaded with the goods of his master, Ya'akov being Avraham's grandson, would certainly bring still greater riches. He consequently ran to meet Ya'akov, and, seeing the latter without camels, thought that perhaps he had gems on his person or in his mouth. He therefore hugged and kissed him (**Gen. R. lxx. 13; comp. Midr. Hagadah, l.c.**).

Disappointed at not finding anything valuable, Lavan said to Ya'akov: "I had the intention to make you my king; but, as you possess nothing, you are nothing more than a simple relative of mine" (Gen. R. l.c.; comp. Gen. xxix. 14). It is cited in Rabbinic commentary, that Lavan was such a wicked man that even Esav was afraid of him, which gives us insight into the an additional motive for him to go there.

Lavan begins by seeming like a friend. He offers Ya'akov refuge when he is in flight from Esav, who has vowed to kill him. Yet it turns out that his behaviour is less generous than self-interested and calculating. Before Ya'akov's arrival, Lavan's flocks were scanty, as they had always decreased through pestilence (**Pirḳe R.El. xxxvi.**).

The Deception

Ya'akov agrees to work for seven years for Rachel. During these years Lavan's flocks increase and Lavan could see that he was a blessing to his household. So he assembled his countrymen and consulted with them on the best way to retain him. Before Ya'akov's arrival there had also been a scarcity of water, but now water was in abundance. Lavan took pledges of his countrymen that they would not divulge his design, and then pawned the pledges for wine which he served to their owners, who were his guests. Lavan extinguished the light in the banqueting-room so Ya'akov could not see that he was about to marry Leah. On Ya'akov inquired the reason, Lavan answered that it was a custom of his country. The guests, drunk with wine, sang "ha Lia," meant "she is Leah"; but Ya'akov did not understand the real meaning of the exclamation

(**Gen. R. l.c.; "Sefer ha-Yashar," section "Wayeḡe"**).

When Ya'akov found out that he had married Leah, he approached Lavan, extremely angry having felt deceived, but Lavan said that it was not the custom among his people for the youngest daughter to be wed over the eldest. Furthermore, he sighted Ya'akov's deception with his father Yitzhak as an example of him doing the very same thing, deceiving him and stealing Esav's blessings, not to mention his birthright. Ya'akov saw this as a sign from Elohim that he was being repaid measure for measure and agreed to work a further seven years for Rachel, whom he loved.

When Yoseph is born to Rachel, Ya'akov tries to leave. Lavan protests. Ya'akov works another six years, and then realizes that the situation is untenable. Lavan's sons are accusing him of getting rich at Lavan's expense. Ya'akov senses that Lavan himself is becoming hostile. Rachel and Leah agree, saying, "He treats us like strangers! He has sold us and spent the money!"

Ya'akov realizes that there is nothing he can do or say that will persuade Lavan to let him leave. He has no choice but to escape. Lavan then pursues him, and were it not for Elohim's warning the night before he catches up with him, there is little doubt that he would have forced Ya'akov to return and live out the rest of his life as his unpaid labourer. As he says to Ya'akov the next day: "The daughters are my daughters! The sons are my sons! The flocks are my flocks! All that you see is mine!" It turns out that everything he had ostensibly given Ya'akov, in his own mind he had not given at all.

Lavan treats Ya'akov as his property, his slave. He is a non-person. In his eyes Ya'akov has no rights, no independent existence. He has given Ya'akov his daughters in marriage, but still claims that they and their children belong to him, not Ya'akov. He has given Ya'akov an agreement as to the animals that will be his as his wages, yet he still insists that "the flocks are my flocks."

What arouses his anger, his rage, is that Ya'akov maintains his dignity and independence. Faced with an impossible existence as his father-in-law's slave, Ya'akov always finds a way of carrying on. Yes, he has been cheated of his beloved Rachel, but he works so that he can marry her too. Yes, he has been forced to work for nothing, but he uses his superior knowledge of animal husbandry to propose a deal which will allow him to build flocks of his own that will allow him to maintain what is now a large family. Ya'akov refuses to be defeated. Hemmed in on all sides, he finds a way out. That is Ya'akov's greatness. His methods are not those he would have chosen in other circumstances. He has to outwit an extremely cunning adversary. But Ya'akov refuses to be defeated or crushed and demoralized. In a seemingly impossible situation, Ya'akov retains his dignity, independence and freedom. Ya'akov is no man's slave.

Lavan is, in effect, the first anti-Semite. In age after age, Jews sought refuge from those, like Esav, who sought to kill them. The nations who gave them refuge seemed at first to be benefactors. But they demanded a price. They saw in Jews people who would make them rich. Wherever Jews went, they brought prosperity to their hosts. Yet they refused to be mere chattels. They refused to be owned. They had their own identity and way of life; they insisted on the basic human right to be free. The host society then eventually turned against them. They claimed that Jews were exploiting them, rather than what was in fact the case, that they were exploiting the Jews. And when Jews succeeded, they accused them of theft: "The flocks are my flocks! All that you see is mine!" They forgot that Jews had contributed massively to national prosperity. The fact that Jews had salvaged some self-respect, some independence, that they too had prospered, made them not just envious but angry. That was when it became dangerous to be a Jew.

Lavan was the first to display this syndrome, but not the last. It happened again in Egypt after the death of Yoseph. It happened under the Greeks and Romans, the Christian and Muslim empires of

the Middle Ages, the European nations of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and after the Russian Revolution.

In her fascinating book *World on Fire*, Amy Chua argues that ethnic hatred will always be directed by the host society against any conspicuously successful minority. All three conditions must be present:

[1] The hated group must be a minority, or people will fear to attack it.

[2] It must be successful, or people will not envy it, merely feel contempt for it.

[3] It must be conspicuous, or people will not notice it. Jews tended to fit all three. That is why they were hated.

And it began with Ya'akov during his stay with Lavan. He was a minority, outnumbered by Lavan's family. He was successful, and it was conspicuous: you could see it by looking at his flocks.

What the sages are saying in the Haggadah now becomes clear. Pharaoh was a one-time enemy of the Jews, but Lavan exists, in one form or another, in age after age. The syndrome still exists today. As Amy Chua notes, Yisrael in the context of the Middle East is a conspicuously successful minority. It is a small country, a minority; it is successful, and it is conspicuously so. Somehow, in a tiny country with few natural resources, it has outshone its neighbours. The result is envy that becomes anger that becomes hate. Where did it begin? With Lavan.

Put this way, we begin to see Ya'akov in a new light. Ya'akov stands for minorities and small nations everywhere. Ya'akov is the refusal to let large powers crush the few, the weak, the refugee. Ya'akov refuses to define himself as a slave, someone else's property. He maintains his inner dignity and freedom. He contributes to other people's prosperity, but he defeats every attempt to be exploited. Ya'akov is the voice that says: I too am human. I too have rights. I too am free.

If Lavan is the eternal paradigm of hatred of conspicuously successful minorities, then Ya'akov is the eternal paradigm of the human capacity to survive the hatred of others. In this strange way Ya'akov becomes the voice of hope in the conversation of humankind, the living proof that hate never wins the final victory; freedom does.