

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP



WAS LAVAN'S ANGER JUSTIFIED?

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

Lavan's relationship with Yaakov begins in abuse without malice. Lavan genuinely (I contend) sees Yaakov as a member of his extended family whom he wishes well. He derives no schadenfreude from Yaakov's suffering. He would be as happy or happier to treat Yaakov well if their interests coincided completely. He would probably rather mistreat an unrelated stranger.

Lavan's relationship with Yaakov ends in frustrated malice. Lavan thinks of doing evil to Yaakov, but G-d forbids him to act on that thought.

My question is whether the progression from abuse to malice is inevitable, and if it is not, whether Yaakov bears any responsibility for how things turn out.

From a purely psychological perspective, it is easy to craft a narrative in which this progression is inevitable, and Yaakov bears no responsibility. Abuse is often a form of coercive control veiled by the illusion of love. Human beings generally make at least one attempt to escape such control, and every attempt to escape punctures the illusion that willingness to put up with abuse is an expression of love. The abuser perceives this as a personal attack and as a breach of relationship, and reacts with anger and hatred. That's exactly what happens here. It is a commonplace that the most dangerous time for an abused wife is just after she leaves. Plausibly the same is true of an abused son in-law.

Halakhic obligations toward the spiritual welfare of others, such as *areivut* and not placing stumbling blocks before the blind, never require anyone to endure abuse for the sake of the spiritual welfare of their abuser. Yaakov had a perfect right to leave.

Nonetheless, from a literary perspective, I think the Torah is read most smoothly as assigning some degree of responsibility to Yaakov for the way the relationship ends.

The simplest evidence of this is the Torah narrator's description of Yaakov's actions in 31:20.

וַיִּגְנֹב יַעֲקֹב אֶת־לֵב לָבוֹן הָאֲרָמִי
עַל־בְּלִי הַגִּיד לוֹ כִּי בָרַח הוּא׃

*Vayignov Yaakov et lev Lavan HaArami
al beli higyd lo ki boreiach hu*

Yaakov 'stole the heart' of Lavan the Aramean
in not telling him that he was fleeing.

The idiom "stole the heart" appears in one other context in Tanakh. 2Samuel 15:5-7 describes how Avshalom would ingratiate himself with every litigant coming to his father David's court, until

וַיִּגְנֹב אֶבְשָׁלוֹם אֶת־לֵב אֲנָשֵׁי יִשְׂרָאֵל׃

Avshalom stole the hearts of the people of Israel.

Ritva to Chullin 94a notes that the halakhic prohibition *geneivat daat* (= 'theft of mind', deception) is derived from these verses. Siftei Kohen to Bereishis 40:15 makes the application to Yaakov explicit. Yosef assigns his being kidnapped ("*stolen from the land of the Hebrews*") as intergenerational punishment:

שבעוון שגנב אבי לב לבן – גונבתי,

שאסור לגנוב דעת הבריות, אפילו דעתו של עכו"ם

for the sin of my father having stolen the heart of Lavan the Aramean, I was stolen,

because it is forbidden to 'steal the mind' of human beings, even of idolaters.

Given that Yaakov behaved improperly, we must ask what caused his moral error.

The Torah offers a complex account of Yaakov's motivation for leaving. He hears Lavan's sons complaining that his wealth is illegitimately taken from their father (and thus that Yaakov, a mere son in-law, is taking their rightful inheritance), and notes that a negative change in Lavan's own attitude. He reports this to Rachel and Leah. In the course of his report, he self-justifies via an extensive complaint about Lavan, and also mentions a dream in which G-d told him to return to his birthland. Rachel and Leah validate his complaint, join themselves to his self-justification, and encourage him to follow G-d's instruction.

All well and good. But none of this explains why Yaakov did not simply tell Lavan that he wanted to go home. Perhaps more importantly, none of this explains why Yaakov has not previously mentioned the dream. Note that the narrator never reports the dream directly. I suggest that this is not to cast doubt on the veracity of Yaakov's report, but rather to make clear that it had no immediate impact on him; it becomes relevant to the narrative only when he reports it, which is only after he notices the change in Lavan's attitude.

Or if you prefer: Yaakov becomes open to having this dream only after noticing that change.

Deborah quotes Rabbi David Silber as noting that Yaakov's dream here demonstrates a moral regression. An "angel of the Elo-him" identifies itself as "the El of Beit El" where he anointed a monolith; but at Beit El, Yaakov saw G-d as the Tetragrammaton. The initial dream featured "angels of Elo-him" ascending (*olim*) a ladder to Heaven; this dream has sheep copulating (*atudim olim al batzon*). When a visitor who arrived dreaming of angels begins dreaming of copulating sheep, it's past time for him to go home.

But copulating sheep have a very specific meaning in this context – Yaakov is dreaming of the clever way in which he has revengeed himself economically on Lavan. Lavan's sons are not entirely wrong. Lavan mistakenly thought he and Yaakov were playing a game of pure chance. Actually, he had been suckered into playing blackjack against a card counter, or an electronic game against someone who knew a cheat code. But Yaakov hears only justification in the dream; G-d has seen everything that Lavan did to him, and therefore must approve of his response.

Or: G-d very, very much wants Yaakov to leave, and Yaakov won't leave until he is wealthy. And: G-d wants Yaakov to leave and confront Esav, but Yaakov won't do that until the risk to his wealth from Esav is less than the risk to his wealth from Lavan. So G-d supports Yaakov in creating both wealth and risk.

Lavan accuses Yaakov of "driving his daughters like captives of war" and contends that he would willingly have sent Yaakov off joy and music. Yaakov responds that he was afraid lest Lavan take his daughters from him by force.

Men often justify their aggressions against each other as intended to protect women. Sometimes they are sincere.

In our case, Rachel and Leah supported Yaakov's decision to leave, and his economic self-justification, by complaining that their father had treated them as "strangers", that he had "sold them" for Yaakov's labor (rather than providing them with a dowry), and that he had illegitimately deprived their children of a share in his estate (instead reserving all for his sons). By their own account, Lavan had no interest in them as human beings; so why would he take them away from Yaakov by force? Furthermore, in the final treaty, Lavan stipulates that Yaakov treat his daughters well, which suggests that in fact he did care about their welfare, so long as their interests were not opposed to his.

Rather, both Yaakov and Lavan are avoiding the real issue between them, which is the sheep (not the *Rachel*). Lavan would indeed have given Yaakov *and his wives* a festive send off - so long as they took nothing else with them. Neither Yaakov nor his wives are willing to do this. So they deceive Lavan into believing

that they have no plans to leave. Indeed, Yaakov's eventual parting words to Lavan are a claim that "you would have sent me off empty", coupled with an economic self-justification.

Not all commentators agree with Siftei Kohen's assessment that Yaakov behaved wrongly. One midrashic stream relates to Yaakov as "the thief who was rewarded", and compares him to Pinchas, the killer who was rewarded, meaning that his violation of the legal norm was justified by the law's failure to enforce justice. But the obvious difference is that Yaakov's zealotry for justice is inextricably tangled with self-interest.

Aviva Zornberg brilliantly explains that Yaakov's successful impersonation of Esav leads him to wonder whether at heart he really is the same as Esav. This conflict with "the Esav within" is resolved only when "he is left alone, and a man wrestles with him"; the other wrestler plainly represents Esav, and yet Yaakov is the only one present, so the battle must be internal to Yaakov.

Yaakov's resort to trickery here is essentially an impersonation of Lavan, but one of which he is not self-aware. The confrontation with Lavan prefigures the confrontation with Esav; but the night before, Yaakov does not see the angel of Lavan, and so cannot wrestle with and defeat him. Siftei Kohen would then be correct in seeing Yaakov's deception of Lavan as a sin never repented of, and therefore still requiring atonement, and perhaps that the story of Yosef must be read in that light.

None of this undermines the fact that Lavan was an abuser; that Yaakov had every right to leave; and that Yaakov had every right not to leave emptyhanded. I think it's also clear that Yaakov had every right to use Lavan's tactics against him if that was the only way to leave; he could justifiably have used whatever force was necessary, as well. I contend that the Torah would not criticize him if he used Lavan's tactics to obtain what he needed to live a comfortable and dignified life with his family.

However, Yaakov ended up using Lavan's tactics to get what he deserved, not what he needed. Sometimes that may be necessary or justified. But we should always be wary of justice achieved at the cost of virtue.

Shabbat shalom!