

In-Law Problems

PARSHA INSIGHTS - VAYAITZAI (5758)

TWO SONS-IN-LAW CHASED; TWO DIFFERENT REACTIONS

“Yaacov was angry, and he argued with Lavan. Yaacov replied and said to Lavan, ‘What is my crime? What sin did I commit that you were in such hot pursuit of me?’” (31:36). We know that this dialogue occurred after Lavan chased Yaacov, following Yaacov’s quick departure from his land. Lavan had accused Yaacov of stealing his idols (31:30), and he proceeded to search thoroughly for them without success (31:33-35). Afterward, Yaacov expressed his disapproval at Lavan’s vicious behavior.

A *Midrash Rabba* analyzes these remarks of Yaacov. One would prefer to endure the anger - the indignation - of the forefathers, rather than the humility - the tolerance - of the children (*Beraishis Rabba* 74:10, using the *Matnos Kehuna’s* interpretation). In other words, the *avos* [forefathers] even at times of great emotional stress, kept their calm and continued to act in a dignified manner. Such was not the case with their descendants, even the most righteous of them. The greatest people of these later generations even when saying appeasing words, combined with them hints to violence - in stressful situations.

A circumstance warranting outright rage on the part of Yaacov instead yielded a relatively calm and polite rebuke from his mouth to his father-in-law. The *Midrash* continues to explain: Yaacov was displeased and he argued with Lavan, and he wondered to him what crime of his had precipitated Lavan’s unfair treatment of him. What would we expect to occur in such a case? Wouldn’t there be some physical violence and a beating in store for the wicked Lavan? What son-in-law would tolerate years of abuse followed by an unjustified chase almost to the death?

Rather than lashing out violently at his wicked father-in-law, Yaacov’s words were meant to appease Lavan, says the *Midrash*. *Yefai Toar* remarks that when our *pasuk* [verse] mentions Yaacov’s “anger” and “argument” with Lavan, it is trying to PRAISE Yaacov’s *middos* [character traits] and treatment of other humans. “It is not speaking in a derogatory way about Yaacov, rather in his praise. Even in his moment of exasperation, he spoke appeasing words.” He did not react the way most people would, with outright fury. **This is the meaning of the *Midrash*, that one would rather experience the annoyance of the *avos*, because even such moments of theirs were highlighted by calm, polite, humble words.** This is not so by later generations, as we will soon demonstrate.

To elaborate on this point, the *Midrash* continues by interpreting another *pasuk*. “...You have felt through all my vessels; what did you find from all the vessels of your house?” (31:37). Lavan had conducted a very thorough search, but he found NOTHING of his among Yaacov’s possessions. The *Midrash* comments that usually, a son-in-law living by his father-in-law would be EXPECTED to benefit from his father-in-law’s possessions at least a little bit. Wouldn’t it be understood, normal, and perhaps even acceptable if that son-in-law leaves his in-laws’ house with just a small utensil or two - a knife or something similar?



True, the son-in-law might eventually return the items when he realizes later that he has inadvertently taken them. Or the *Midrash* means that most fathers-in-law view their sons-in-law as sons, and the love they have for them prevents them from becoming upset about relatively trivial matters such as these. Experience shows that parents often feel that their items to belong to their children as well. There are surely different opinions and approaches to this matter, but these are a few comments to explain this *Midrash*.

But here, Yaacov pointed out to Lavan that not even a pin or needle of Lavan’s could be found among his belongings! Yaacov proved his innocence, but he did it in a non-violent manner.

Now we can study the end of this *Midrash*. One would prefer to encounter the displeasure of the fathers over the tolerance of the children. Of course, the term “fathers” refers to Yaacov *Avinu* [Jacob our forefather], as the *Midrash* has already explained. Yaacov’s moment of mild anger was a far cry from the rage that could have been expected in his situation. It was also much less violent than even the APPEASING words of Dovid *Hamelech* [King David], who lived so much later. When Shaul, Dovid’s father-in-law, was pursuing him almost to the death

because of his jealousy and paranoia at Dovid's immense success as a leader (and Dovid's status as the upcoming king), the *pasuk* says that Dovid came before Shaul's son, Yonasan, with some heavy questions. "What did I do? What is my transgression? What is my sin before your father, that he seeks my soul?" (*Shmuel Alef*, [Samuel 1] 20:1). The *Midrash* comments that even in the middle of Dovid's words of pacification, he mentions bloodshed - the topic of murder. Dovid refers clearly to the fact that Shaul seems to have been pursuing him to take his life. This is in stark contrast to Yaacov's above mentioned words. Think about it, says the *Midrash*. In both cases, the father-in-law was chasing the son-in-law. **In both cases, the chase was meant to be to the death.** Despite the similarities in circumstances, the reactions of the sons-in-law were so different. Yaacov did not even mention bloodshed. He simply asked Lavan why he was "in such hot pursuit" of him. Dovid, on the other hand, referred clearly to Shaul's attempt at his life.

The *Maharzav* comments that the *Midrash Tanchuma* 13 shows another difference between the reactions of Yaacov and Dovid to their violent fathers-in-law.



Incidentally, please know that Lavan - Yaacov's father-in-law, and Shaul - Dovid's father-in-law, cannot generally be compared. The latter certainly possessed a holy, Jewish soul, he started out as an awesome *tzadik* [righteous person], and he earned *Olam Habo* [the World to Come] after death (*Brachos* 12B based on *Shmuel Alef* 28:19; also see *Meam Loez* on that *pasuk*). Lavan, however, is known as an idolater, swindler, and an evil individual. The comparison is only that they both pursued their sons-in-law.

We never find that Yaacov pronounced any type of curse on his father-in-law, although Lavan's actions could have warranted such treatment. In contrast, Dovid DID hint to Shaul suffering some type of bitter end. When Dovid and his men had the opportunity to kill Shaul before Shaul would do so to them, Dovid prevented them from this. "Do not destroy him...rather, Hashem will smite him, or his day will come and he will die, or he will go down into battle and perish" (*Shmuel Alef*, 26:9-10). The *Midrash Tanchuma* points out that Dovid DID, in a certain sense, curse his father-in-law. This pronouncement was in the midst of Dovid's words of APPEASEMENT, when he was persuading his men not to lay a hand on Shaul! Thus, in the middle of his calming words, Dovid mentioned a curse. No such expression is found by Yaacov and Lavan.

The lesson is clear. Just as the level of prophecy attained by the forefathers was superior to anyone else's (Miriam's & Aharon's supposition in the *Sifri* 99, quoted in a footnote of the *Chofetz Chaim* - laws of *loshon hora* [evil gossip] 8:1 under the very bottom line), their *middos* - character traits and values, were unmatched. *Chazal* [our Sages] revere Dovid *Hamelech* as the paragon of humility and righteousness. Even so, his attainments did not approach those of Yaacov *Avinu*. May we be inspired by this to emulate all the pious deeds and accomplishments of our *avos* and *imahos* [foremothers].

By Rabbi Moshe Heigh

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