

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

PARSHAS VAYETZEI

Yaakov's Conversation with the Shepherds

BACKGROUND

When Yaakov arrives at Charan, he encounters some shepherds at the well on the city's outskirts. The Torah records the following conversation between them:

וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם יַעֲקֹב אַחֵי מֵאֵין אַתֶּם וַיֹּאמְרוּ מִחָרָן אָנַחְנוּ.
וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם הֲיֹדְעֶתֶם אֶת לָבָן בֶּן נָחוֹר וַיֹּאמְרוּ יָדַעְנוּ.
וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם הֲשָׁלוֹם לוֹ וַיֹּאמְרוּ שָׁלוֹם וְהִנֵּה רָחֵל בִּתּוֹ בָּאָה עִם הַצֹּאן.

*Yaakov said to them, "My brothers, where are you from?" And they said, "We are from Charan."
He said to them, "Do you know Lavan, the son of Nachor?" And they said, "We know [him]."
He said to them, "Is it well with him?" And they said, "It is well, and behold, his daughter Rachel is coming with the flock."¹*

Yaakov's final question here, "Is it well with him?" is somewhat puzzling. Having been instructed by his parents to make his way to Lavan, that is what he should have been doing, so that his third question really should have been, "Can you please tell me how to get to his house?" What does he mean by asking the shepherds about how Lavan is doing? Let him get to Lavan's house and then he can see for himself!

WELL PLACED INQUIRIES

It is possible to approach this whole conversation from an entirely new perspective; namely, Yaakov is trying to use it as an opportunity to find out about Lavan. Yaakov will likely be at Lavan's house for a significant duration, so the more he knows from the outset about the type of person Lavan is, the better equipped he will be in terms of knowing how to deal with him. Rivka's memories of Lavan from their shared childhood were of a somewhat crafty and devious personality. However, many decades have passed since then. Perhaps, in the interim he has become more honest and honorable – or perhaps he has become craftier than ever!

How can Yaakov attain clarity on this issue? Needless to say, he cannot just approach the shepherds and ask them if Lavan is morally deficient. However, he might be able to get some sort of picture by asking

¹ Bereishis 29:4-6.

them an innocent, but leading question, such as, “Is all well with him?” Their response to this question could well reveal something about Lavan’s character, whether they say as much in words (“Yes, he is much loved in this town for his upright ways,” or “Why shouldn’t all be well with a trickster like him?”) or alternatively, perhaps through intonation and intimation.² This, then, is what lies behind Yaakov’s question of, “Is it well with him?”

REBUKE AND REVELATION

Developing this idea further, this might help explain Yaakov’s follow-up comment, which is even harder to understand. Verse 7 reads:

וַיֹּאמֶר הֵן עוֹד הַיּוֹם גְּדוֹל לֹא עַתָּה הָאֶסְףִי הַמִּקְנֶה הַשָּׂקוּ הַצֹּאן וּלְכוּ רְעוּ

He said, “Behold, the day is still long, it is not yet time to gather in the flock; water the flock and continue grazing!”

If Yaakov asking how Lavan was doing was somewhat mystifying, him telling a group of total strangers how to do their job is completely baffling! Perhaps, however, this was still part of Yaakov trying to find out about Lavan. The shepherds had answered his question about Lavan by briefly stating, “It is well with him.” This alone does not reveal much about Lavan. However, if indeed everyone gets on well with him, then finding out more about *their* moral character will yet reveal something about Lavan, since they are unlikely to be on good terms with someone whose moral standing they clash with. The question is: How is it possible to find out what type of people they are? The answer is to rebuke them, for the way a person reacts to rebuke reveals a lot about that person. If their reaction betrays low moral standing, then Yaakov can yet learn about the type of people with whom Lavan gets on well, which will reflect on Lavan himself. Hence, Yaakov rebukes and upbraids them about not watering the flock.

In the event, their response to this also did not reveal much as, amazingly, they were quite amenable to his words of rebuke, explaining simply that they could not water the flock until all the shepherds had arrived. Having showed themselves to be morally upright people, this too failed to confirm for Yaakov anything about Lavan’s devious character. Thus, even after the exchange with the shepherds, the matter remains inconclusive. By this stage, and with Rachel having arrived at the well, Yaakov sees that he is significantly more likely to find out about his uncle from her, which he then proceeds to do.

² Based on Kli Yakar.

Lavan's Brother and Rivkah's Son

וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב לְרַחֵל כִּי אָחִי אַבְיָהָ הוּא וְכִי בֶן רִבְקָה הוּא

*Yaakov told Rachel that he was her father's brother and that he was Rivkah's son.*³

There appears to be an obvious redundancy in this verse, for surely being Lavan's relative and Rivkah's son are not two different things; was Yaakov not Lavan's relative purely *because he was* Rivkah's son? For this reason, the Midrash⁴ explains that these two phrases reflect two specific characteristics: If Lavan wants to be tricky, then I am "his brother" in trickery, while, if he wants to be upright and honest, then I am also "Rivkah's son" and am certainly capable of acting in that way.

The Ohr Hachaim Hakadosh explains that Yaakov did not mean to mention these as two alternative paths of behavior, either of which he could adopt. After all, is it even at all desirable that Yaakov should assume the devious behavior of Lavan in order to counter him? Rather, Yaakov was saying the following, "Tell your father that as resourceful as he is in deviousness, I am, likewise, resourceful in protecting myself. However, do not think that I mean that he can expect me to act toward him in the same underhanded manner that he might act toward me, for that is something I cannot allow myself to do. For at the same time as I am "his brother" in trickery, I am also "Rivkah's son," and that is a status that I am not prepared to compromise by stooping to his level or employing his methods.

Indeed, it may be said that the challenge of the Jewish people throughout the ages has been to be the "brothers of Lavan," anticipating and protecting themselves against his schemes and devices, while at the same time maintaining their moral status as "sons of Rivkah," eschewing any methods that would taint or compromise that exalted calling.

³ Bereishis 29:12.

⁴ Bereishis Rabbah 70:13, cited in Rashi loc. cit.