

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Vayetze
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Vayetze – Getting the last word

In this week's Parasha of Vayetze, we read about Yaakov's time in Charan at the home of Lavan, his wicked father-in-law. During that time, he built up a large and prosperous family. After 20 years he planned to leave and return to his parents in the land of Canaan. However, knowing Lavan's character, Yaakov decided that the best way to extricate himself was to leave without notice while Lavan was off travelling. When Lavan heard that Yaakov and his entire family had left, he took his men and chased after them.

Hashem appeared to Lavan in a dream at night and warned him not to harm Yaakov. Lavan caught up with Yaakov and the Torah records their confrontation and their heated discussion. Let's recap the dialogue:

Lavan: Lavan pretended that he was simply upset at the way that Yaakov had left. “You didn't even allow me to kiss my children goodbye! You have acted foolishly! And why did you steal my idols?”

Yaakov: “I was afraid that if you knew I was leaving, you might take your daughters from me. Whoever stole your idols shall die. You are free to check our belongings and tell me if you find anything that belongs to you”.

After Lavan searched through Yaakov's belongings and failed to find anything, Yaakov became angry. He accused Lavan of acting in an oppressive and duplicitous manner.

Yaakov: “I did nothing wrong. I served you faithfully for all of these years and in return you continuously changed the terms of our arrangement to your own advantage. If not for the protection of Hashem, you would have sent me away empty-handed”.

Lavan: “The daughters are my daughters. The children are my children. The flock is my flock. Everything that you see here is mine! Now let us make a covenant”.

Yaakov does not respond.

From this discussion, it seems that Lavan had the last word.

The Gemara records numerous discussions between the Sages. Each side presents their view and they debate back and forth in an effort to discover the truth. Using logic, evidence and traditions that they have inherited from their teachers, the battle rages. As a general rule, the last Sage to speak is considered the authoritative opinion.¹ If the Gemara does not record any additional response, it usually means that the other side did not have a response

¹ There are exceptions to this rule.

worth recording. This seems to support the notion that if one person makes a claim and his opponent remains silent, the silent party has conceded.

That reminds me of a well-known joke. The old-timer used to enjoy bragging about his successful marriage. "In every discussion with my wife, I always make sure that I have the last word. And the last word is usually 'Yes, Dear, whatever you say'." Perhaps that is why he was happily married for so long!

Yaakov was clearly in the right. Lavan was deceptive and dishonest. Why did Yaakov allow Lavan to have the 'last word'? Lavan's final claim was ridiculous. By his silence, we could mistakenly assume that Yaakov did not have a worthy retort and was conceding to Lavan.

However, in truth Yaakov was being smart. Even though Lavan's arguments were nonsensical, he had offered to enter into a treaty, and let Yaakov go peacefully with his family. (Lavan was no doubt influenced by Hashem's warning!) Yaakov understood that debating and arguing with Lavan would achieve nothing, whereas Lavan himself had suggested a peace treaty. Thus, there was nothing practical to be gained by continuing the dispute. Yaakov's aim was to get his family away from the spiritually unsafe house of Lavan and back to his home in the land of Canaan. By focusing on the big picture and foregoing a verbal battle, Yaakov was able to achieve his desired outcome.

When we are involved in disputes, we often let our ego get in the way. It becomes less about the issue and more about the stance taken. People who are involved in disputes may not recognise that the matter has become personal. They may try to counter this tendency by appealing to a higher purpose. When someone who is involved in a dispute says: "it's the principle of the matter", many times it is really not so. (Unless the 'principle of the matter' is that the person has to always be right!)

When we are involved in a dispute or disagreement, we have to be aware of when our ego is becoming too heavily involved. In many cases it does not matter whether we are 'right' or seen to be right. If we manage to step back and focus in the outcome that we believe is best, we may have more chance of achieving our goal. And ironically, often the most important 'issue' is not the task at hand but maintaining or re-establishing a peaceful relationship with our opponent. This is called being relationship-focused rather than task-focused.

Let's try something this week:

1. When involved in a dispute or disagreement, try to notice when our ego is becoming too heavily involved.
2. Try to identify the important overall objective that we are trying to achieve and try not to be clouded by personal animosity or achieving a 'win'. Be prepared to lose the battle in order to win the war.
3. Remember, sometimes it is more important to be **smart** than to be right.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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