

Shabbat Vayeitzei Shalom



Laban Greet Jacob by Rembrandt Hamensz van Rijn (1606-1669).
Also attributed to Ferdinand Bol.

by Phyllis Chesler

I am continually amazed, awed, humbled, by how much happens in each parsha. What *doesn't* happen in this one? Ya'akov escapes, has a dream or a vision of angels on a ladder which reaches up to heaven, God speaks directly to him, Ya'akov makes a deal with God (!), and does so in God-language which can either be read as in the past or in the future. (28: 20-21). Oh, let's not forget, eleven of the twelve tribes are born—which might never have happened if Lavan, Ya'akov's uncle on his mother Rivka's side as well as Nahor's grandson

and thus, Avraham's great nephew—had not married Ya'akov to both his daughters—and gifted each with a shifha "l'esha." Since both Avraham and Rivka sent for brides from Padan Aram—how bad could these genetic relatives have been? Were they all evil idol-worshippers?

I want to focus on only one protagonist—the much rabbinically maligned Lavan, Rivka's brother, described everywhere as a "rasha," "trickster," "cheater," and idol worshipper. We first meet him in Chayei Sarah where we see him "running" to where Rivka stands with Avraham's servant, Eliezer. Some say that Lavan "ran" because he feared his sister might be in danger (Ohr HaHayim), or because he saw and coveted the jewelry Rivka was then wearing—but what Lavan says (24:31) is this: "Come, you are God-blessed, why are you standing outside, I have cleaned the house and prepared a place for the camels." The Ramban commends Lavan as "ethical and pious" because Lavan personally feeds Eliezer's camels and provides water to wash Eliezer's feet and those of the men who have accompanied him. In (24:50-51), both Betuel, Rivka's father, and Lavan, her brother, respond to Eliezer in this way: (Your mission) is from God...let her be a wife to your master's son as God has spoken." Further, both Lavan and Rivka's mother ask Rivka what *she* chooses to do and then either both or only Lavan bless Rivka: "Our sister, may your offspring and descendants become numerous and may they inherit the gates of their enemies." (24:58-59). Thus far, Lavan, reviled as an idol worshipper, is also Avraham's great nephew as well as Rivka's brother. He does absolutely nothing wrong, nothing evil; in fact, Lavan understands that this marriage has been arranged by Avraham's God. He is hospitable, gracious, quick-acting—and thus, even resembles Avraham. These shared traits may be one of the reasons God chose Avraham.

In Vayetzei, Lavan also greets Ya'akov with the same effusiveness and sense of kinship as he formerly greeted

Eliezer. Once again, (29:13) Lavan “runs” to greet Ya’akov. “He embraced him and kissed him and brought him to his house” and in (29:14) invites Ya’akov to live with him for one month. Also in (29:14) Lavan tells Ya’akov that you are my “bone and flesh” and, contrary to superficial readings, in (29:15) says the following: “Hachee Achee atah, v’avadtanee henam? Hagedah le ma m’shurktecha”? Just because you are my relative, must you work for me without pay? Tell me what your wages should be.” Lavan is willing to pay Yaa’kov for his services. It is Ya’akov who, in (29:18) **offers** to work for Lavan for seven years in exchange for Rahel, Lavan’s younger daughter.” Some say this is because Ya’akov had no dowry to offer for Rahel and feared he might lose her. Others say that Lavan’s switching of Leah with Rahel on Ya’akov’s first wedding night is medah k’neged medah, a balancing out of what Ya’akov and Rivka did to Yitzhak when they switched the covenantal blessing from Eisav to Ya’akov. A divine comeuppance and a redemptive corrective. (Ellen Frankel, Ilana Pardes).

There is so much more to say about Lavan’s understandable desire to keep his daughters and grandchildren with him; about both his generosity towards his two daughters as well as his apparent dis-inheriting of them—and, even when Lavan knows he has lost them forever, he admonishes Yaa’kov in (31:50) not to “afflict his daughters or marry other wives in addition to them.” But I must stop for now. This controversial interpretation merits a much longer essay.

My beloved chevrotah [Rivka Haut](#) (z”l) and I went walking through Tanach in search of fathers who loved their daughters. We considered Yitro and his daughter Zipporah; the Bnot Zlophechad who wanted to keep their father’s memory alive; Calev ben Yefuna and his daughter Achsa; Rahab—yes Joshua’s Rahab; the father of the unnamed pilegish B’Givah, who wanted to keep his daughter with him longer. However, unexpectedly, we were forced to conclude that Lavan viewed

his daughters as his "heart" and may have loved them best. Rivka died before we could complete this D'var and I have hesitated these eight years, uncertain, perhaps unwilling, to complete it without Rivka by my side.

Shabbat Vayeitzei Shalom.