What Did Yaakov Steal from Lavan?

Class notes • Rabbi Yossi Michalowicz

1. What did Lavan think he had lost?

Lavan tells Yaakov that he has the power to do him harm and that Hashem warned him against speaking to Yaakov, for good or for bad. In the next pasuk, he asks why Yaakov stole his gods. Rachel took the terafim without Yaakov's knowledge. Why would Lavan still trust gods that someone could carry away? And how could he claim the power to harm Yaakov after hearing Hashem's warning?

Source 1. Bereishis 31:29–30. See also Bereishis 31:19, 32.

2. What did Yaakov see at the well?

Yaakov removes a stone the shepherds normally move together. Rashi compares it to removing a stopper from a bottle. The Midrash reads the well as Sinai and the three flocks as Kohanim, Leviim, and Yisraelim. The Ramban sees an allusion to the Beis HaMikdash and the three pilgrim festivals. In the reading developed in the shiur, the water is Torah and the stone is the yetzer hara that obstructs access to it. Yaakov's action shows Rachel what he has come to accomplish.

Sources 2–3, 9. Bereishis 29:2–3, 9–10 and Rashi to 29:10. Bereishis Rabbah 70:9, Ramban to Bereishis 29:2, and Zohar I 151b.

3. Why was Lavan's house so important?

Hashem promises to guard Yaakov wherever he goes. In the very place where his mission seems most endangered, Yaakov builds the family that will become Klal Yisrael. The Yalkut Reuveini adds a mystical dimension through the souls associated with Lavan's flocks. The outcome at Sinai gives Yaakov a reason to persevere in Charan.

Sources 6–8. Bereishis 28:15, Zohar I 166b, the Pesach Haggadah at Maggid, and Yalkut Reuveini citing Galya Raza.

Yaakov in Lavan’s house

What Yaakov understood about his mission and Lavan’s power

4. Why did Yaakov speak so bluntly?

Yaakov asks Lavan for Rachel in unusually direct language. Rashi explains that Yaakov was already eighty-four and was thinking about raising the twelve shevatim. The shiur reads his wording as part of his strategy. Lavan could understand the request in ordinary terms, while Yaakov kept his spiritual aims private and carried them out in his work and home. When he sees that Lavan’s attitude has changed, Hashem tells him to return home.

Sources 4–5, 10–11. Bereishis 29:15, 21 and Rashi to 29:21. Bereishis 31:2–3.

5. How can a kelipah serve the good?

Lavan imagines that evil has power of its own. Yaakov’s success under his roof exposes the mistake. The Baal Shem Tov teaches that when evil brings about good, it becomes a “throne” for good. The shiur illustrates this with a banana peel. An empty peel can pass for a whole fruit, and a peel can also protect the fruit inside. Lavan unwittingly helped create the conditions in which Yaakov raised his family and fulfilled his mission.

Sources 12–13. Toldos Yaakov Yosef, Bo, citing the Baal Shem Tov. Berachos 5a on examining one’s deeds when facing hardship.

6. Why is a kal vachomer an answer to prayer?

Moshe asks Hashem to heal Miriam. Hashem responds with a comparison to a daughter shamed by her father. Rashi explains the kal vachomer and the rule of dayo, which limits the period to seven days. The Maggid of Mezritch connects the first of the thirteen ways of expounding Torah, kal vachomer, with Keil, the first attribute of mercy. Hashem shows Moshe the inference he can make to awaken the mercy for which he prayed.

Sources 14–15. Bamidbar 12:13–14 and Rashi, Bava Kamma 25a. Or Torah, Beha’aloscha §137, and Bnei Yissaschar, Maamarei Rosh Chodesh 4:3.

What Yaakov took

The kal vachomer we can make ourselves

7. Lavan’s refusal and Yaakov’s response

If Hashem forbids even speaking against Yaakov, surely harming him is forbidden. Lavan refuses to draw the inference. Yaakov uses a kal vachomer to take a lesson from Esav’s determination. The Kedushas Levi reads “From my enemies, Your mitzvah makes me wise” as an instruction for avodas Hashem. If someone gives himself so fully to something fleeting, how much more devotion can we give to a mitzvah that endures?

Sources 16–19. Shemos 34:14. Bereishis 25:26 and Rashi. Tehillim 119:98. Kedushas Levi, end of Bereishis.

8. What does it mean to steal Lavan’s heart?

The Torah says that Yaakov “stole Lavan’s heart” by leaving without telling him. The Tiferes Shlomo reads the words as a lesson in how Yaakov took Lavan’s determination and applied it to serving Hashem. The Gemara identifies the “foreign god” within a person as the yetzer hara. Yaakov shows how even the effort we see directed toward harmful ends can spur us to greater effort in our own avodah.

Sources 20, 22. Shabbos 105b and Tehillim 81:10. Bereishis 31:20, 26. Tiferes Shlomo, Toldos, s.v. “Vatomer Rivkah.”

9. A practical kal vachomer

Rav Mordechai Gifter told his talmidim about a businessman who could meet him only at six in the morning because he left for work at 6:30. If someone can rise that early for his business, how much more readily can we rise for davening? The shiur applies the same question to communal life. When we see how relentlessly others pursue their aims, what could we accomplish with more of that resolve in Torah, mitzvos, and strengthening Klal Yisrael?

For reflection. Where do I already show this kind of effort, and which mitzvah or communal responsibility could benefit from it?