What Did Yaakov Steal from Lavan?

Parshas Vayeitzei

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Lavan's Two Statements

This week is Parshas Vayeitzei. Yaakov flees his home and spends twenty years in Lavan's house in Charan. We're going to look at what we can learn from Yaakov's conduct and apply it in our own lives.

Let's start at the end of the story. Yaakov comes penniless to his uncle Lavan's house. Over twenty years he becomes wealthy and has twelve of his thirteen children. Lavan prospers from Yaakov's shepherding, and Yaakov prospers too. Then Yaakov sees that it is time to leave.

Yaakov leaves while Lavan is away. When Lavan finds out that Yaakov and his whole family have left, he pursues them, intending to harm Yaakov. Hashem comes to Lavan in a dream that night and warns him. When Lavan catches up with Yaakov, far from Charan, we come to Source 1.

Source 1 · Bereishis 31:29–30

יֵשׁ־לְאֵל יָדִי לַעֲשׂוֹת עִמָּכֶם רָע, וֵאלֹהֵי אֲבִיכֶם אֶמֶשׁ אָמַר אֵלַי לֵאמֹר, **הִשָּׁמֶר לְךָ מִדַּבֵּר עִם־יַעֲקֹב מִטּוֹב עַד־רָע**. וְעַתָּה הָלוֹךְ הָלַכְתָּ כִּי־נִכְסֹף נִכְסַפְתָּה לְבֵית אָבִיךָ, **לָמָּה גָנַבְתָּ אֶת־אֱלֹהָי?**

I have the power to do you harm, but the God of your father said to me last night, "**Beware of speaking to Yaakov, whether for good or for bad**." And now you have gone, because you longed so deeply for your father's house. **Why did you steal my gods?**

1. Does Lavan have the power to harm Yaakov, or doesn't he? In the same sentence, Lavan says, "I have the power to do you harm," and tells Yaakov that Hashem warned him. If Hashem said no, how can Lavan still say, "I have the power"? Look at it the other way. If Lavan recognizes Hashem's power, why is he worshipping idols and asking for them back? If he doesn't recognize Hashem's power, why does he listen to Him? Why doesn't he go ahead and kill Yaakov?

2. How much value can an idol have if somebody can steal it? Rachel took the *terafim* without Yaakov's knowledge. Lavan knows his gods were there before Yaakov left. He was away when Yaakov's family left, and now the gods are gone. He assumes someone in the group took them. Isn't he embarrassed to ask Yaakov, "Why did you steal my gods?" If your god can be carried off like any other possession, what kind of power can it have?

Consider the historic accusation that the Jews killed Jesus Christ, an accusation that has been used to justify hatred of Jews. The question I'm asking from a Jewish perspective is this. How do you kill a god? If he can be killed, he isn't a god. Lavan's question raises a similar problem. If someone can steal your god and carry it away, why do you still want it back?

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1 The central teachings of this shiur are drawn from Rav Pinchas Friedman's *Shevilei Pinchas*, Vayeitzei, Maamarim 23 and 24.

Yaakov's Strength at the Well

Let's go back to the beginning of the story. When Yaakov first comes to Charan, he asks the shepherds why they're lying around by the well. They tell him they have to wait for the other shepherds before they can move the stone. Then Rachel comes. Look at what Yaakov does as soon as she arrives, in Source 2.

Source 2 · Bereishis 29:10, excerpt

וַיִּגַּשׁ יַעֲקֹב וַיְגַל **אֶת־הָאֶבֶן** מֵעַל פִּי הַבְּאֵר.

Yaakov drew near and **rolled the stone** from the mouth of the well.

Notice how many actions the Torah describes in quick succession. Yaakov rolls away the stone and waters the sheep. The other shepherds are waiting for enough people to move the heavy stone. Yaakov just goes over and takes it off. In Source 3, Rashi describes how easily he did it.

Source 3 · Rashi on Bereishis 29:10

ויגש יעקב ויגל. כזה **שמעביר את הפקק מעל פי צלוחית**, להודיעך שכחו גדול.

"Yaakov drew near and rolled it away." Like someone **removing the stopper from the mouth of a bottle**, to show you how great his strength was.

We've discussed Yaakov at the well before. This time we'll take a new approach.

3. What is Yaakov trying to prove? He could have waited for everybody to arrive and let them move the stone together. Yaakov is a modest man. Why does he appear to be showing off his strength?

Yaakov's Request for Rachel

There is another question a little later. Yaakov agrees to work seven years for Rachel. When his years of work are up, Yaakov asks Lavan for Rachel. Notice how he words his request. That's Source 4.

Source 4 · Bereishis 29:21

וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב אֶל־לָבָן, הָבָה אֶת־אִשְׁתִּי כִּי מָלְאוּ יָמָי **וְאָבוֹאָה אֵלֶיהָ**.

Yaakov said to Lavan, "Give me my wife, for my days are fulfilled, **so that I may come to her**."

"My days are fulfilled" means that the term of work is up. "So that I may come to her" means that he wants to be intimate with her. In Source 5, Rashi explains why Yaakov puts it this way.

Source 5 · Rashi on Bereishis 29:21

מלאו ימי. שאמרה לי אמי. ועוד מלאו ימי, שהרי אני בן שמונים וארבע שנה, ואימתי אעמיד שנים עשר שבטים? וזהו שאמר ואבואה אליה, והלא קל **שבקלים אינו אומר כן**, אלא **להוליד תולדות** אמר כן.

"My days are fulfilled." The days my mother told me about. Another explanation is that my days are fulfilled, for I am already eighty-four years old. When will I raise the twelve tribes? This is why he said, "So that I may come to her." Surely **even the coarsest of people would not speak that way**. He said it **in order to have children**.

Even the coarsest person, Rashi says, would not put it this way. Rashi gives two readings of "My days are fulfilled." Yaakov's mother told him how long to stay away. And he is already eighty-four. When will he get to raise the twelve tribes? That explains the urgency, but why speak so bluntly? Rashi's answer is that

Yaakov said it in order to beget generations. But the question seems stronger than the answer. How does wanting children explain this way of speaking?

4. Even with Rashi's explanation, isn't this a very uncouth way for Yaakov to speak?

Yaakov said it because he wanted to have children. Even so, he could want to have children without putting it quite so crudely. In Yiddish, the word is *grub*. Someone who speaks that way is called a *grubyan*. "May I have my wife so that we can live together as husband and wife?" That would be a courteous way to say it. "Can I have sex with her?" Even a person with no Torah upbringing would ordinarily know to speak with more restraint. Yet this is Yaakov Avinu speaking. And what answer have we been given? He spoke that way because he wanted to have children. We still have to understand how that explains his choice of words.

The Risk of Entering Lavan's House

We're going to look at the parsha in two parts. First, what was Yaakov's plan? Second, how did he carry it out? There's a different message in each part.

The Zohar tells us how dangerous it was for Yaakov to enter Lavan's house. Look at how the Zohar describes him in Source 6.

Source 6 · Zohar, Vayishlach 166b

לבן הארמי קליה אזיל בעלמא **דלא הוה בר נש דישתזיב מניה**, דהוא הוה חרש בחרשין ורב בקוסמין ... ועם כל דא **לא יכיל ביעקב**.

Lavan HaArami's reputation went throughout the world. **No one escaped him**, for he was a sorcerer skilled in sorcery and a master of magic … and despite all this, **he could not prevail against Yaakov**.

Going into Lavan's house was like going to the head of the mafia, the Mediterranean mafia. Lavan was a robber, a thief, and a cheat who had every kind of power at his disposal. The Zohar singles out his sorcery. That was how he got what he wanted.

How did Lavan succeed? The old-fashioned mafia would pull out guns and shoot people. Lavan used sorcery to get what he wanted. He used it for evil ends, and as the greatest of the sorcerers, he had tremendous power at his disposal. This is where Yaakov had to go.

That was the man Yaakov had to go and live with. We speak about this danger every year in the Haggadah. Look for it in Maggid. See Source 7.

Source 7 · Pesach Haggadah, Maggid

צא ולמד מה ביקש לבן הארמי לעשות ליעקב אבינו, שפרעה לא גזר אלא על הזכרים **ולבן ביקש לעקור את הכל**, שנאמר: ארמי אובד אבי.

Go and learn what Lavan HaArami sought to do to Yaakov Avinu. Pharaoh decreed only against the males, while **Lavan sought to uproot everything**, as it is said, "An Aramean sought to destroy my father."

Lavan wanted to strip Yaakov of his spirituality and turn him into one of his own people. That was his whole game plan.

Yaakov was so afraid to go that Hashem gave him the dream of the ladder. Hashem had to bless him and reassure him, as if to say, "I know how frightened you are, but I will protect you." Only after Hashem promises to protect him is Yaakov willing to go. He is caught between a rock and a hard place. At home, Esav wants to kill him. If he goes to Lavan, Lavan wants to destroy him spiritually. That is the great danger Yaakov finds himself in, whichever direction he takes.

What Yaakov is living through is an example of *maaseh avos siman labanim*. What happened to the patriarchs is a sign for their children. We have to recognize that we sometimes face situations of this kind as well.

We may never have to deal with a Lavan directly. But listen to the news for even a little while and you can see how much corruption there is in the world. Think of the stories that were coming out in Hollywood and in politics when I gave this shiur. They showed how people in positions of power could behave in vile ways while continuing to be protected and revered by those around them.

Once their conduct comes to light, people feel they have to say something, and even then they may do nothing about it. It is disgusting to see what goes on and how far the influence of that behavior can reach. The wider world has been influenced by it, and plenty of Jews have been drawn in as well. Seeing that, you could easily begin to despair.

Here is one of the great ironies of the whole story. Imagine that you didn't know what happens next in the Torah, and I told you about three great tzaddikim, Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. Yaakov is still unmarried, and he will have to marry if he is to have children and raise a family. Where would you expect him to do best, both in raising those children and in establishing himself financially? If I asked you to name the single best place for him, what would you say? At home, of course. Home would seem to be the obvious answer. The difficulty, of course, is Esav.

Why didn't they just send Esav away? That's a question for another parsha class.

Hashem could have made things very easy. Imagine Yaakov receives the blessings, Esav comes in, and Yitzchak says to him, "Now I see quite clearly what kind of fellow you are. Esav, it would be better if you left." Just as Sarah told Avraham to send Yishmael away, you might have expected someone to send Esav away. For whatever reason, that did not happen. But imagine Yaakov raising a family in Hebron, with Rivka and Yitzchak there to help. Could you ask for a better Bubby and Zaidy?

If you told me that Yaakov had stayed there, raised a family, and had twelve children, I would say it made perfect sense. But suppose you told me that all of his success would come in a place of spiritual terrorism, a place where everything to do with religion was mocked and where what people taught and practiced was crooked and disgusting. There, of all places, he would be wildly successful. Who would ever have predicted such a thing? Yet that is exactly what happened. That is the great miracle of the story, as it were.

5. How did Yaakov become most successful in the very place where we would have expected him to be least successful? Why did Hashem arrange it that way, and what is the message for us?

The Souls in the Flock

There are many Midrashim that describe how successful Yaakov was. They draw parallels between his success with the sheep and what happened later in Egypt. Yaakov's household went down to Egypt with seventy souls, and six hundred thousand people left Egypt. The Midrashim speak at length about Yaakov's success with the sheep as well. The whole story of those sheep is complicated enough to

deserve a parsha class of its own. It is a deeply mystical story, and I haven't yet found all the material I would need to present its details accurately.

It is a very mystical story. What Yaakov was doing is far from an ordinary part of the way we understand this parsha. Besides raising a family, and besides becoming what we would call a multimillionaire, he carried out *tikkunim*, spiritual repairs, for hundreds of thousands of souls that had left the world unfulfilled. There was the generation of the Flood, the generation of the Tower of Bavel, the generation of Sedom, and a generation of idol worshippers. All these people, whose generations are remembered for their wrongdoing, had died without a tikkun, without completing the spiritual work they had come into the world to do.

Source 8 · Yalkut Reuveini, Vayeitzei, s.v. E'evor bechol tzonecha, citing Galya Raza

תתקע"ד דורות היו **מגולגלים בצאן לבן**, ואחר כך הוליכם יעקב למצרים, ומשם זכו **להתגלגל במין אנושי**, ולכן היו ישראל פרים ורבים מאד במצרים.

For 974 generations they were **reincarnated in Lavan's sheep**. Afterward Yaakov led them to Egypt, and from there they merited to **return in human form**. That is why Israel were so fruitful and numerous in Egypt.

Their lives had ended with their work unfinished. How did that affect Yaakov, and how did it come about? The details would take us much further afield. The teaching is that the souls of those lost generations entered the sheep Yaakov raised. As he tended the sheep and took care of them, he was able to bring about a tikkun for those souls. Yaakov took those sheep with him to the land of Canaan. It was their offspring that the family later took down to Egypt. The souls of those troubled generations, in other words, had passed into the sheep before they made their way to Egypt.

In Egypt those souls went from the sheep into human beings, into the Jewish people. According to this teaching, these were among the Jews who left Egypt. This all takes place in the realm of souls, and it gives us a measure of how successful Yaakov was. Think of all he accomplished with his twelve sons, and then with the seventy souls who went down to Egypt. Beyond even that, he contributed to the elevation of hundreds of thousands of souls.

There is a remarkable story about this. You have to be willing to think a little in the language of Chassidus and Jewish mysticism to hear it. The Kozhnitzer Maggid recalled, "How pleasant it was when I was a little sheep under Yaakov's care, and he would give me a little tap with his whip to keep me moving."

The Kozhnitzer Maggid was describing a gilgul from many years earlier. He said he remembered Yaakov caring for him as a sheep. It gives us a glimpse of what Yaakov accomplished in a place that was the opposite of spirituality. To go into those details, you would need Kabbalah and an understanding of how souls transmigrate. My point here is what this teaches us about Yaakov's *avodas Hashem*.

Yaakov raised twelve remarkable children and became wealthy. He never resorted to crooked or deceitful behavior. Every dollar he made was an honest dollar, in a world where that was hardly the rule. He also elevated hundreds of thousands of souls through tending the sheep. All this is hinted at in the apparently innocuous story of Yaakov's arrival in Charan.

This brings us back to Question 5. Yaakov succeeded even in the mystical realm of *gilgulim*, the transmigration of souls. That makes our question even stronger. How did he accomplish so much in Lavan's house, and why did Hashem arrange it that way?

The Well and the Stopper

Let's go back to Yaakov's arrival at the well. It seems like an ordinary story at first. In Source 9, notice how much detail the Torah gives us about the well, the stone, and the flocks.

Source 9 · Bereishis 29:2–3, 9

וַיַּ֣רְא וְהִנֵּ֤ה בְאֵר֙ בַּשָּׂדֶ֔ה וְהִנֵּה־שָׁ֥ם **שְׁלֹשָׁ֖ה עֲדְרֵי־צֹ֑אן** רֹבְצִ֣ים עָלֶ֔יהָ, כִּ֣י מִן־הַבְּאֵ֗ר הַהִוא֙ יַשְׁקוּ֙ הָעֲדָרִ֔ים, וְהָאֶ֥בֶן גְּדֹלָ֖ה עַל־פִּ֥י הַבְּאֵֽר. וְנֶאֶסְפ֥וּ־שָׁ֖מָּה כָּל־הָעֲדָרִ֑ים וְגָלֲל֞וּ אֶת־הָאֶ֣בֶן מֵעַ֗ל פִּ֤י הַבְּאֵר֙ וְהִשְׁק֣וּ אֶת־הַצֹּ֔אן, **וְהֵשִׁ֙יבוּ֙ אֶת־הָאֶ֣בֶן עַל־פִּ֔י הַבְּאֵ֖ר לִמְקֹמָ֑הּ**. ... עוֹדֶ֣נּוּ מְדַבֵּ֔ר עִמָּ֑ם, וְרָחֵ֗ל **בָּ֚אָה עִם־הַצֹּ֣אן אֲשֶׁר֔ לְאָבִ֖יהָ**, כִּ֥י רֹעָ֖ה הִֽוא.

He saw a well in the field, with **three flocks of sheep** lying beside it. From that well they would water the flocks. A large stone lay over the mouth of the well. All the flocks would gather there. The shepherds would roll the stone from the mouth of the well, water the sheep, and **return the stone to its place**. … While he was still speaking with them, **Rachel came with her father's sheep**, for she was a shepherdess.

Here is our next question. Why do we need this whole story? The Torah could simply tell us that Yaakov comes to Charan, meets Rachel, and goes to Lavan's house. It is a fine story on its own, but why tell us all these particulars? Why does the Torah devote so many pesukim to what happened at the well? The Midrash is going to help us answer that.

The source is **Bereishis Rabbah, chapter 70, sections 8 and 9.** The Midrash offers several readings of the pesukim. Rabbi Yochanan sees in them a picture of Har Sinai, where the Jewish people would receive the Torah. He identifies the well with Sinai, the three flocks with Kohanim, Levi'im, and Yisraelim, and the watering of the flocks with hearing the Ten Commandments. Let's develop that reading by looking more closely at the pesukim. Each part of the scene points forward. The water represents Torah itself, and the scene tells Yaakov what he must prepare his descendants to receive.

(The Ramban on Bereishis 29:2, citing Bereishis Rabbah 70:8, calls the encounter a *sod remez le'asid*, a hidden sign of what lay ahead. In that reading, the well points to the Beis HaMikdash and the three flocks to the pilgrims of the three festivals.)

(The Zohar, Vayeitzei I, 151b, says that Yaakov saw the well above corresponding to the well he encountered below. The scene at the well thus had a spiritual dimension.)

Everything Yaakov does here will help prepare the Jews to receive the Torah at Mount Sinai, the Torah that is compared to water. There are three flocks of sheep lying beside the well. The Jewish people are likened to holy sheep, with the sheep's obedience a part of that image. We are called the holy flock, and the three flocks represent the three groups within that future Jewish people, the Kohanim, Levi'im, and Yisraelim. The shepherds water all three flocks from the same well. At Har Sinai the entire Jewish people will hear the Ten Commandments, and they will drink in the words of the Torah from the same source.

But there is a great stone over the mouth of the well. Rabbi Yochanan's Midrash identifies the great stone with the Shechinah. If we take the interpretation a step further, ***the stone also pictures the yetzer hara***, which tries to stop the water from flowing and keep us from learning Torah. All the flocks gather to move that stone. In the same way, all the Jewish people come together as one to receive the Torah. At the giving of the Torah, they move the stone aside and the *yetzer hara* is removed from their hearts. The Torah then says that the shepherds roll the stone back into place. After Har Sinai, the *yetzer hara* returns and can once

again close off that access. The whole scene shows what Yaakov is preparing the Jewish people to experience at Sinai.

Hashem has arranged this encounter as if to say to Yaakov, "Remember what you have come here to do. Your task is to leave this place with a people capable of receiving the Torah."

While Yaakov is speaking to the shepherds, Rachel comes with the sheep. Rachel will be a matriarch of the Jewish people. On the mystical reading, the sheep carry the holy souls that will one day be part of the Jewish people. Rachel is watching the sheep that belong to her father, and on this reading, they are also the flock of her Father in Heaven.

When Yaakov sees all this, he is overcome by the sense of his mission. As he comes to Charan, he sees what is on the line. "**The destiny of the Jewish people depends on what I do here. I must succeed.**"

Think of what will happen eventually. There will be this great well of Torah, and there will be whole flocks of Jews who want to receive that Torah. Then Yaakov sees Rachel bringing the flocks. He is overwhelmed by what he sees, but he knows it has to happen, and there is something he can do right now. He has to give the sheep water. He takes hold of the stone and rolls it away all by himself. That brings us back to our question. Why did he have to move it himself?

Why didn't he wait for anyone else? Yaakov was using his strength to give Rachel a hint about his mission. His task was to free the souls that were held, as it were, within those sheep. In the analogy, he had to remove the stone, the obstruction put there by the *yetzer hara*. He was showing Rachel that his work was to remove what barred those souls from pursuing their spiritual purpose.

We also asked why Rashi describes Yaakov moving a stone of such weight by comparing it to taking the stopper out of a bottle. What is it about that particular image that helps us understand what Yaakov did?

Rashi could have compared it to a man picking up a mountain, or described the ease of it by comparing it to changing a baby's diaper or walking across the street. Why a stopper? Usually, it is the stopper in a bottle of wine. If you want to drink fine wine, first remove the stopper. That was Yaakov's hint to Rachel. His job was to take out the stopper so all the souls still held in the flock could come out.

That answers Question 3. By moving the stone himself, Yaakov was showing Rachel what he had come to accomplish. His mission was to remove what stood in the way of freeing and elevating those souls.

Yaakov wants to bring something great into being through this work. Taken together, the sources show us how grave the danger was, how great the mission was that Yaakov had to accomplish, and how remarkably well he managed to carry it out.

How Yaakov Concealed His Mission

Now the question is how he did it. Imagine Yaakov waltzing into Lavan's house and announcing, "I'm a great spiritual person, and I've come here to accomplish great spiritual things." What would Lavan say in response? "Get out of here. I'm not interested in you or what you have come to do."

Imagine a secular family with one Haredi relative. He says, "I'm coming to your house for Pesach, and I'm bringing all my stringencies with me. We can't begin the Seder before nightfall. There can't be any chametz, and we have to have *shemurah matzah*." The family answers, "You know what? You can leave. We don't need you to come if you're going to insist on all that. If you want to come and do things the way

we do, we'll have a little piece of matzah, and we'll serve it with bread and ham and everything else. If you want to be with us on those terms, fine."

Yaakov understood what he had come to do. He could not let Lavan know what was really going on or reveal what he hoped to accomplish in his house. It was clear to Yaakov that he could not let on about any of it. So he came to Lavan appearing to be a man very much like Lavan himself.

Yaakov works for Lavan without pay for a month. During that time Lavan can observe him. Yaakov can keep his religious life private. If he wants to pray at night while watching the sheep, nobody is there to see him. Then Lavan asks him what wages he wants. Listen to the word he uses in Source 10.

Source 10 · Bereishis 29:15

וַיֹּאמֶר לָבָן לְיַעֲקֹב, **הֲכִי־אָחִי אַתָּה** וַעֲבַדְתַּנִי חִנָּם? הַגִּידָה לִי מַה־מַּשְׂכֻּרְתֶּךָ.

Lavan said to Yaakov, "Should you work for me for nothing **because you are my kinsman**? Tell me what your wages should be."

Lavan calls Yaakov his brother. He's saying, "I see you're like me. You're my nephew, but you're also a man who wants to make a living. You can't work for me for nothing."

What does Yaakov ask for as his wages? He asks to marry Rachel and offers to work seven years for her.

What does Yaakov have to do throughout his dealings with Lavan? He has to give Lavan the impression that he is less religious than he really is. In that respect he has to behave a little like Esav. As we've seen in previous parsha classes, Esav has abdicated his role in the Jewish people, and Yaakov has to take on some of the role that would have been Esav's. When Yaakov goes to Lavan, he has to be very careful about how religious he appears. He even has to be careful to speak in terms that make sense to Lavan.

Who is Yaakov dealing with here? He is tending the sheep. He isn't trying to convert people in Lavan's house. At this point, he has no wife or children of his own there to speak to.

Later, when Yaakov has a household of his own, he can speak openly about serving Hashem with his family and practice privately with them. But whenever he had to deal with Lavan, he always put on a facade.

What does that façade sound like? Imagine him saying to Lavan, "Look, I've worked for you for seven years. Give me my wife so I can sleep with her." That is the way Lavan would hear the bluntness of Yaakov's request.

That answers Question 4. Yaakov has no intention of telling Lavan that he wants to bring holy souls into the world. Rashi says that he spoke that way to bring offspring into the world. That is precisely the point. To bring those holy children into being under Lavan's roof, Yaakov had to keep his true purpose hidden. So he speaks in language Lavan is willing to hear.

As long as Yaakov can conceal his real intentions, he can do the spiritual work he came to do without having to worry about Lavan discovering it. Then Yosef is born and the time comes for Yaakov to think about leaving. As if to say, "Yaakov, you have accomplished what you came here to accomplish," Hashem allows Lavan to become suspicious. That gives Yaakov a sign that his work here is done and he must prepare to leave. Consider how long Yaakov kept his purpose concealed. Over the course of those twenty years, he had managed to sustain the appearance that Lavan was willing to believe.

Source 11 · Bereishis 31:2–3

וַיַּ֣רְא יַעֲקֹ֔ב אֶת־פְּנֵ֖י לָבָ֑ן וְהִנֵּ֣ה אֵינֶ֔נּוּ **עִמּ֖וֹ כִּתְמ֥וֹל שִׁלְשֹֽׁום**. וַיֹּ֤אמֶר ה' אֶל־יַעֲקֹב֙, שׁ֣וּב אֶל־אֶ֔רֶץ אֲבוֹתֶ֖יךָ וּלְמוֹלַדְתֶּ֑ךָ, **וְאֶֽהְיֶ֖ה עִמָּֽךְ**.

Yaakov saw from Lavan's expression that **he was no longer disposed toward him as before**. Hashem said to Yaakov, "Return to the land of your fathers and to your birthplace, and **I will be with you**."

Yaakov sees that Lavan is beginning to wonder about his children. Imagine Lavan asking, "They have peyos. What are they doing?" He is beginning to suspect that Yaakov's family is different from his own. Hashem tells Yaakov that it is time to leave. Yaakov tells Rachel and Leah, and now they are going to go. He has managed to conceal his true intentions throughout his twenty years there. Look again at Source 11. Yaakov sees that Lavan's face is no longer what it was yesterday and the day before.

What Lavan Discovered

Yaakov has been able to build an extraordinarily religious family, to accomplish great *tikkunim*, and to do so through the sheep he has tended. He literally has holy sheep. For twenty years he has done all of this right under Lavan's nose. Once Lavan grows suspicious, the time has come to leave. And that is exactly what Yaakov does.

As soon as Yaakov leaves, Lavan begins to understand. Imagine him saying, "Why did he suddenly run away like that? It must be that Yaakov was on the side of holiness all along. This is bad news for me."

Lavan's reaction is, in effect, "I've been tricked for twenty years. All this time I never realized he was more clever than I am. He has outwitted me, and I can't stand it. Now I'm going to kill him." So he sets out after Yaakov with the intention of killing him.

Then Hashem appears to Lavan in a dream at night. What does He say? "Beware of speaking to Yaakov, whether for good or for bad." Remember the exact wording. The warning is about speaking, and it carries an implication about doing harm as well. That brings us back to the question we asked at the beginning. Does Lavan recognize God's power, or does he think there is a power that can operate independently of God?

Either way, Lavan's behavior is difficult to understand. If he believes in God's power, why is he still worshipping idols? If he doesn't believe in God's power, what stops him from going ahead with his plan against Yaakov?

To see the answer, ask what Hashem was telling Lavan that Lavan had never understood. This is a very important point. Lavan knew there was a Creator. He would never have denied it. He knew there were both good and evil in the world. All of that he understood. What he believed, despite recognizing a Creator, was that it was up to human beings to determine which side would win the battle.

In Lavan's view, God created both spiritual and non-spiritual people. God wanted the spiritual people to win, but Lavan figured that because God gave both sides an opportunity, either side could win. We can compare this to the struggle between good and evil in Christian terms. In that comparison, there is a God who wants the good, the spiritual side, to win, but there are also people working for the opposite outcome. Whoever tries harder is going to win. In other words, Lavan could believe in God and still think God had acknowledged a force of evil that could compete with the good.

In effect, Lavan said, “Let the better man win.” But he made a huge mistake. **He didn’t realize that even the forces of evil are all under God’s rules.** Why, then, did God give evil the power it appears to have? There is one reason. Its apparent power gives a person a genuine choice. Lavan might ask, “How can I say ‘hocus pocus’ and cause terrible things to happen to other people? Where is God in that?” God is giving him free will. Ultimately, even the power that evil appears to have can be made to serve the cause of good.

Evil is here to serve the cause of good because it has no independent source. Everything comes from Hashem. Imagine what Hashem is saying to Lavan. “You see good and evil in the world. You choose the side of evil, and you imagine you can use it to defeat the good. ***Understand that I can cause the very things you do, to bring good into the world!*** What is the strongest proof? You are the most wicked person in this story, and Yaakov has been right under your nose for twenty years. Under your nose he became wealthy, and under your nose he became a great tzaddik. Do you know how that happened?”

“You yourself helped make it happen.” Imagine how crushing that is for Lavan. That is what Hashem is telling him. Evil cannot act independently of Hashem’s will. When Hashem warns him against speaking for good or for bad, He is telling Lavan something Lavan had never understood before. ***Even the forces of evil can become tools in God’s hands for building holiness.*** A person may be foolish enough to think that he can do whatever he wants. God is the One directing what ultimately comes of it, and evil has no power to operate on its own.

By the time Lavan catches up with Yaakov, he has received that message. What is he really upset about? The loss of the idols bothers him much less than the dawning realization that the work of his life has come to nothing. How does Hashem show that to him? Look at what Yaakov has managed to accomplish under his nose. Imagine Lavan saying, “I see that you really did want to go home, and I see how successful you were. You went right into the jaws of the lion, pulled out its gold fillings, and came away without a scratch.”

“You’ve proved that I have no strength of my own. Why did you steal my god?” Notice the word elokai. It is related to elokim, which can express power. In this reading Lavan is saying, “You stole my power. You took away even the feeling that I could do something on my own.” A person might think, “I’m on the side of evil, and at least I can put up a good fight. If I lose, I can still say we fought fair and square. We put everything we had into the game, and you happened to be stronger than we were.”

Lavan realizes his defeat goes even deeper than that. “I never had a chance to win. The whole time, all I did was help you.” He had built an entire career out of doing evil and been as good at it as anyone could be. Then came his great opportunity. “Yaakov is coming. If I can persuade him to come over to the dark side, I can gain control of the whole world.” And what happened? ***Everything Lavan did only made Yaakov better.*** Under God’s rule, Lavan never had the kind of independent power he had counted on, and Yaakov’s success proved it. “Why did you steal what I thought was my godlike power?”

That answers Question 2. When Lavan asks, “Why did you steal my gods?” he is saying, “You showed me that I have no power of my own.”

A Throne for Good

The Toldos Yaakov Yosef, one of the principal disciples of the Baal Shem Tov and the author of the first printed sefer of Chassidus, records a teaching he received from his Rebbe. That’s Source 12.

Source 12 · Toldos Yaakov Yosef, Parshas Bo, in the name of the Baal Shem Tov

קבלתי ממורי **כשהרע הוא גורם טוב, נעשה כסא אל הטוב**, והכל טוב גמור, כמעט ביטול הקליפות מעין העתיד.

I received from my teacher that **when evil brings about good, it becomes a throne for good**, and everything becomes wholly good. It is almost a nullification of the kelipos, a foretaste of what is to come.

What does it mean that evil can become a throne for good? We call the forces of evil *kelipos*. In Hebrew, a *kelipah* is a peel or a shell.

A banana has a peel, a *kelipah*. An orange has a peel. Nuts have a shell, also a *kelipah*. The force of evil is called a *kelipah*. Now why call it by that name? It is a curious choice of word, and there are two ways to understand it, both of them right. When you look at a banana, the part you see is the peel. The fruit itself is hidden from you. In theory, you could make a small hole in the bottom, take out all the fruit, and still have a beautiful-looking peel. That is one way of looking at conduct that runs against what Hashem wants. It can look very attractive from the outside, like that perfectly good-looking peel.

There's nothing inside. It looks attractive, but there is no substance to it. That is one understanding.

There is also a deeper understanding. **The peel protects the fruit and tells you when it's ripe.** The forces of evil are called a *kelipah* because, in Hashem's hands, they can serve to protect what is good.

Imagine a contest. In one corner you have Mr. Tzaddik with all his spirituality. In the other corner you have Mr. Rasha with all his evil forces. You might think that the stronger one will win. The peel, though, is there to protect the fruit. Lavan intended to destroy Yaakov. The more he tried, the more Yaakov succeeded. This is what it means that Lavan was like a *kelipah*. You might ask how Lavan could be protecting Yaakov when he was trying so hard to destroy him. In Hashem's plan, that was what his efforts ended up doing the whole time.

Source 21 · Malachi 1:2–3, excerpt

אָהַבְתִּי אֶתְכֶם אָמַר ה', וַאֲמַרְתֶּם בַּמָּה אֲהַבְתָּנוּ? הֲלוֹא־אָח עֵשָׂו לְיַעֲקֹב נְאֻם־ה', **וָאֹהַב אֶת־יַעֲקֹב, וְאֶת־עֵשָׂו שָׂנֵאתִי**.

"I have loved you," says Hashem. You ask, "How have You loved us?" "Is Esav not Yaakov's brother?" declares Hashem. "Yet **I loved Yaakov, and I hated Esav**."

Lavan wanted to destroy Yaakov, and Hashem used Lavan's actions to build Klal Yisrael. But Lavan still answers for what he chose to do and what he meant to do. That's why the Navi can say, "I loved Yaakov, and I hated Esav". **Hashem can bring good out of what a person does, and that person is still responsible for the harm he intended.**

When Mashiach comes, what we have just described will be more clearly evident than it has ever been before.

The Gemara gives an example in what it says about *yissurim*, or suffering. Suffering is a terrible thing to experience, and it can also be a kind of peel. If we judge it only by how painful it is, we can miss what may come from it. Look at Source 13.

Source 13 · Berachos 5a, excerpt

אם רואה אדם שיסורין באין עליו, **יפשפש במעשיו**.

If a person sees suffering coming upon him, **let him examine his deeds**.

The Gemara says that when suffering comes upon a person, he should examine his actions.

Someone gets sick. Our first reaction is, "That's terrible. This illness has come from outside and is hurting the person. We have to do something to stop it." Of course we do everything we can to help the person get well. The Gemara asks us to consider what can come out of the experience as well. It can prod the person to examine his actions, wake up, and do *teshuvah*. If he does, the illness itself can turn out to have been an occasion for growth.

That brings us to the end of the first part. What do we learn from Yaakov's story? **A person can achieve greatness even in the place that seems least conducive to it.**

A person might think, "If only I were in a perfect environment, I could be a really good Jew. In the environment I'm actually in, how can I possibly do it?" Yaakov's story invites you to ask what that difficult environment might teach you and how it might make you a better Jew. Is your situation harder than what Yaakov had to contend with in Lavan's house? Lavan was the worst of the worst.

Think of how much better things turned out than Yaakov might have expected. Imagine asking him just after he receives the brachah from his father, "Yaakov, dream a little. Twenty or thirty-four years from now, what would you hope to have accomplished?" "I'd like to have many children, many sheep, and a life of great spirituality." Those would all be worthy things to hope for. But where did he actually achieve them? In Lavan's house. Whatever he might have wished for, that was where he accomplished it, specifically in Lavan's house. It seems that if Yaakov had been able to stay in Canaan, all of this would never have happened in the same way.

There is something we can draw out of the evil we encounter in the world and put to use. Its ultimate purpose is to make what is good even better. In the image we have been using all along, what looks like a threat to the fruit can turn out to be the peel that protects it.

Think back to Question 5. The reason Yaakov could become so successful in the very place we would have expected him to fail is that Lavan's power was never independent of Hashem. Hashem could turn every bit of it toward the growth that let Yaakov leave Lavan's house a great tzaddik. Of course, you still have to believe in yourself and exercise care. Had Yaakov been careless, he could have fallen in. So the next thing we need to ask is how Yaakov actually succeeded. So far I've told you why there's reason to have hope. Now we have to work out what to do with it.

Miriam and the Kal Vachomer

The Maggid of Mezritch, a disciple of the Baal Shem Tov, brings us to the story of Miriam. She speaks *lashon hara* about Moshe and is struck with *tzaraas*. Moshe cries out to Hashem. Notice which of Hashem's names he uses: Keil, aleph-lamed. Of all the names he could have used, he chose this one. Look for it in Source 14.

Source 14 · Bamidbar 12:13–14

וַיִּצְעַק מֹשֶׁה אֶל־ה' לֵאמֹר, **אֵל נָא רְפָא נָא לָהּ**. וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה, **וְאָבִיהָ יָרֹק יָרַק בְּפָנֶיהָ**, הֲלֹא תִכָּלֵם שִׁבְעַת יָמִים? תִּסָּגֵר שִׁבְעַת יָמִים מִחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה וְאַחַר תֵּאָסֵף.

Moshe cried out to Hashem, "**God, please heal her**." Hashem said to Moshe, "If **her father had spit in her face**, would she not be humiliated for seven days? Let her be confined for seven days outside the camp, and afterward let her be brought back in."

Hashem answers that if Miriam's father had spit in her face, she would be ashamed for seven days. She is to remain outside the camp for seven days. Rashi explains what lies behind that answer. It's as if Hashem says, "I'm the one who has shown her my displeasure over the *lashon hara*." Look at Source 15. Rashi explains that spitting in her face here means turning an angry face toward her.

Source 15 · Rashi on Bamidbar 12:14; see Bava Kamma 25a

ואביה ירק ירק בפניה. ואם אביה הראה לה פנים זועפות, הלא תכלם שבעת ימים? **קל וחומר לשכינה ארבעה עשר יום**, אלא דיו **לבא מן הדין להיות כנדון**, לפיכך אף בנזיפתי תסגר שבעת ימים.

"If her father had spit in her face." If her father had shown her an angry face, would she not be humiliated for seven days? **All the more so, fourteen days in the case of the Shechinah**. But a conclusion derived by inference **need only be as stringent as the case from which it is derived**. Therefore, even under My rebuke, let her be confined for seven days.

If Miriam's own father were upset with her, wouldn't she withdraw for seven days out of shame? That gives us a *kal vachomer*, an *a fortiori* argument, or an argument from the lesser case to the greater. If she would withdraw for seven days when her father was upset, all the more so when she has incurred the displeasure of the Divine Presence. You might therefore think she should have to stay away for fourteen days. Rashi explains why the argument goes only as far as the case from which we are learning. Its starting point is seven days, and seven days suffice. This is a little *lomdus*, the sort of Talmudic reasoning you might work through with your thumb in the air. The greater case could suggest fourteen days, but the comparison establishes seven.

A *kal vachomer* is an *a fortiori* argument. Take this chair. Suppose you want to know whether a grown-up adult can lift it. Now suppose you see a young child, a five-year-old, pick it up. What do we know for sure? The adult can lift it. If a young child with less strength can lift the chair, all the more so a grown-up adult can lift it.

So now we have our next question. Why did Hashem answer Moshe's prayer with a *kal vachomer*? Moshe is asking, "Hashem, please heal her!" Rashi on Bamidbar 12:13 says that Moshe wanted an explicit answer. Will You heal her? You expect to hear that she is going to get better. Instead, Hashem asks how long she would be ashamed if her father had rebuked her and says that she must stay outside the camp for seven days. Hashem could simply have said that she would recover in seven days. ***What kind of answer is this to a tefillah for healing?***

Rabbi Dov Ber of Mezritch, the Maggid, explains the connection between two sets of thirteen in Torah (*Or Torah*, Beha'aloscha §137).

Consider two different sets of thirteen. We have the thirteen attributes of mercy, introduced in the familiar words "Hashem, Hashem, *Keil rachum v'chanun*." We also have the thirteen *middos shehaTorah nidreshes bahen*, the thirteen principles by which the Torah is interpreted. These are Talmudic tools for

reading. When the meaning of a passage in Torah is unclear, you can use one of the tools to draw out what the text is teaching. The Maggid of Mezritch says these two sets of thirteen are connected. If you want to evoke God's mercy, study Torah and use its thirteen interpretive principles to come to an understanding of what you are reading.

The thirteen *middos shehaTorah nidreshes bahen*, the thirteen ways of interpreting the Torah, correspond to the thirteen attributes of mercy. Hashem was telling Moshe, in effect, "If you want to help your sister, draw on the principles by which Torah is understood." We are about to see why the order matters. Match each principle with the attribute that comes in the same place and ask which one comes first. According to the Kabbalistic reckoning used here, the two appearances of Hashem's name are an introduction. **Keil is the first of the thirteen attributes of mercy.**

Which name is Moshe invoking when he says, "Keil, have mercy on my sister"? If he wants to awaken that attribute of mercy, he can use the first of the thirteen middos by which the Torah is interpreted. That first principle is *kal vachomer*, the *a fortiori* argument. This is why Hashem answers Moshe with such an argument. If her father turned away from her, she would withdraw for seven days. All the more so in the case of the Divine Presence. Through that very answer, Hashem is giving Moshe the tool he can use. He is teaching him what to do when he is in trouble and needs mercy.

Use the attributes of understanding Torah. And you want Keil? So then we will just use the *kal vachomer*.

What *kal vachomer* is Moshe being shown? If a rebuke from Miriam's earthly father would cause her to withdraw for seven days, all the more so a rebuke from the Shechinah. Rashi says the greater case might suggest fourteen days, but *dayo* limits what is derived to the seven days of the original case. The Maggid's chidush is that Hashem Himself states this *kal vachomer* in answer to Moshe's tefillah. By expounding the first rule of Torah, Hashem awakens Keil, the first attribute of mercy and the Name Moshe invoked to ask for Miriam's healing. ***The response itself does something for Miriam. It calls forth the mercy Moshe is asking for.***

The *Bnei Yissaschar* makes explicit what Moshe could do with that answer. Hashem was showing him the very *kal vachomer* he could learn, the one about Miriam's father and the Shechinah. **By learning it, Moshe could awaken the mercy he had just asked for on Miriam's behalf.** Hashem was teaching him what he could do for Miriam right then. (*Maamarei Rosh Chodesh*, maamar 4, §3.)

The Foreign God and Lavan's Claim

Each quality that serves a holy purpose has a counterpart that can be used for the opposite purpose. Think of chesed, kindness. You can exercise it in a holy way, and someone else can direct all that energy toward helping wicked people do terrible things. Qualities that can serve holiness can also be turned against it. The same applies here. Among the thirteen principles for understanding Torah, the first is *kal vachomer*. On the side of evil there is a force opposed to it. If the first principle corresponds to Keil, the name associated with mercy, what would its opposite be called?

Keil is the power of Hashem to show mercy. A person can be at the brink of death, and Hashem can restore him to life. The Torah warns us about an *el acher*, a supposed power that takes the place of the power of Hashem. The wording is in Source 16.

Source 16 · Shemos 34:14, excerpt

כִּי לֹא תִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לְאֵל אַחֵר.

For you shall not bow down to **another god**.

Instead of using power for mercy, that force wants to use it for destruction.

Go back to Source 1. Lavan says *yesh le'El yadi la'asos imachem ra*, "I have the power to do you harm." Why use the word El? **Lavan is saying that he believes he has the power of the *kelipah* to do real harm if he wants. His claim stands directly against the first attribute of mercy.**

The power to show mercy comes from Hashem, and a person can turn its purpose on its head. Think of someone who refuses to show mercy to the poor but urges mercy for terrorists who invoke Islam, or for people he fears might take advantage of refuge offered to Syrians in order to harm America. In the original shiur I invoked those examples, along with mercy toward Germans guilty of wrongdoing, toward other people doing harm, and toward liberal causes I was challenging, including the claim to a right to abortion. The examples all ask the same question. Where is that mercy being directed, and what is it being used to defend? That is what I am calling *el acher* here. Lavan claimed to act under that other power even after acknowledging Hashem's authority.

That is what a *kelipah* can look like. Somebody can show mercy where it serves evil. That is the force of *el acher* applied in the wrong place.

Lavan claims he has that other power and can use it to hurt Yaakov. As Lavan sees it, "I have that other power. If I want, I can hurt you."

Here is the *kal vachomer*. What exactly did Hashem say to Lavan? He warned him against speaking to Yaakov, whether for good or for bad. Now suppose Lavan says, "Hashem warned me about what I say. Did He tell me I couldn't hurt Yaakov?" What would you tell him? Apply the *kal vachomer* to Hashem's words. **If Hashem warned you against even saying anything bad to Yaakov, then all the more so He doesn't want you to do anything bad to him.** Would Hashem forbid the speech and still permit the harm?

You might respond, "But Hashem didn't say outright that Lavan couldn't hurt him." ***That is precisely where the kal vachomer comes in!*** If Hashem doesn't want Lavan even to speak to Yaakov for good or for bad, then all the more so He doesn't want Lavan to do him any harm. What did Hashem actually say? His warning was about speech. And what do you learn when you apply the *kal vachomer*? Lavan certainly must refrain from doing anything bad to him. There is a separate point here about the apparent good of the wicked itself being bad. We can leave that point aside for now. For the argument we are following, begin with the warning against even speaking badly.

Now Lavan can answer, "God wants me to refrain from saying anything bad. You Jews accept *kal vachomer* as one of the ways to learn Torah. I don't accept that form of argument. All He said was that I may not speak badly, so I can still do harm." That is how he can say *yesh le'El yadi*, "I have the power in my hands." In Lavan's mind, he draws on *el acher*, the power he calls another god.

We can now see how Lavan can claim he has the power to harm Yaakov even after Hashem's warning. He insists he has only been told what he may say. He says, in effect, "Hashem told me what I may say. You may infer from that what I may do, but I don't hold by a *kal vachomer*. I could kill you with my own hands." That is consistent with the force he follows.

That leaves us with a question. **If Hashem wanted to stop Lavan from hurting Yaakov, why didn't He simply say, "Don't touch him"?**

What Yaakov Learned from Esav and Lavan

And if Lavan refuses to draw the inference, why doesn't he try to hurt Yaakov? The answer begins at Yaakov's birth. This is the most important part of the class. Look at Source 17.

Source 17 · Bereishis 25:26, excerpt

וְאַחֲרֵי־כֵן יָצָא אָחִיו, וְיָדוֹ **אֹחֶזֶת בַּעֲקֵב עֵשָׂו**, וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ יַעֲקֹב.

Afterward his brother came out, with **his hand grasping Esav's heel**, and he called his name Yaakov.

Rashi gives the explanation that Hashem named him Yaakov. A name expresses the essence of a person. Why is Yaakov named for holding Esav's heel? A pasuk in Tehillim gives us the answer. In effect, you're calling him "Heel." Why would his reaching for Esav's heel give him the name by which we know him? See Source 18.

Source 18 · Tehillim 119:98

מֵאֹיְבַי תְּחַכְּמֵנִי מִצְוֹתֶךָ, כִּי לְעוֹלָם הִיא־לִי.

Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies, for **it is forever mine**. The Kedushas Levi also reads the opening words as "**From my enemies, Your commandment makes me wise**."

There is something we can learn from our enemies that can make us wiser in the way we serve Hashem. How do we do that? Look at Rav Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev in Source 19.

Source 19 · Kedushas Levi, end of Parshas Bereishis, s.v. Od yevo'ar v'Noach matza chen

דהכלל, **כל דבר שהצדיק רואה ממנו לוקח עבודת ה'**, ואם רואה חס ושלום איזה אדם מתאוה לעבירה לוקח הצדיק מזה התאוה עבדות ה', שאומר בלבו קל וחומר, מה זה שמתאוה לדבר עבירה שהוא כלה ונפסד בזמן מועט, **מכל שכן שראוי לו להתלהב לעבודת השם יתברך שעבודה זו יקיים לעולם**.

A tzaddik **takes a lesson in serving Hashem from everything he sees**. If, Heaven forbid, he sees someone longing to commit a sin, he takes a lesson from that desire. He makes a kal vachomer in his heart. If someone longs for a transgression that will soon pass away, **how much more fitting is it to be aflame for the service of Hashem, which endures forever**.

Rav Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev gives us the key. A tzaddik learns how to serve Hashem from whatever he sees, even when what he sees is plainly wrong. If he sees somebody eager to commit a sin, he pays attention to the intensity of that desire. Think of the lengths some people go to in order to take advantage of women without their consent. Think, too, of the sums some people are prepared to spend to pay for sex. The tzaddik sees how much energy a person can put into getting what he wants.

Look at how driven people can become over such things. What am I supposed to learn from that? The tzaddik looks at the intensity of the desire and asks what it would mean to put that kind of energy into serving Hashem. Now he can make a *kal vachomer*, the *a fortiori* argument. If a person can want a sin so badly, what does he actually gain from it? The pleasure is temporary. It is here today and gone tomorrow.

Look at what people are willing to invest in a Super Bowl ticket. For a game that lasts about three hours, they will spend thousands of dollars for seats on the fifty-yard line. How much of what they spent all that money to experience stays with them once the game is over?

How much more effort, then, should I be willing to put into a mitzvah, whose value lasts forever? That may be the most important *kal vachomer* you ever make. Do you need to be a Talmudist to understand it? Look at what goes on around you. Think of the billions of dollars people spend on pleasures they know are degrading. Think of the time and effort people devote over the course of their lives even to ordinary pleasures that fade, including things that are perfectly innocent. Look at how much work they are willing to do for an experience that will pass.

That is where I begin to make the *kal vachomer*. What remains afterward from all that effort? The pleasure itself passes. Hashem, on the other hand, has given me Torah, mitzvos of lasting value, and a pleasure that can last beyond the moment. Shouldn't I be willing to make at least the same effort for those things? That is what I learned from my enemies. I learned more from watching them than what to stay away from. I learned something about how to act. Give it everything you have. Be willing to spend on it, make every effort you can, and keep thinking about how to do it well.

Why does Hashem give us cell phones in a world where people can also use them to do terrible things? Listen to how attached we can get to them. *Tamid ani tzarich liros es ha-cell phone*. I always have to look at my phone. "Cell phone, cell phone!"

It is almost as though I'm saying, "How much I love you, my cell phone. When I get up in the morning, I have to say hello to you. Before I go to sleep, I have to check you again. I check all the time because I might have missed an important message." Now imagine bringing that same excitement to a mitzvah. That is a *kal vachomer* we can make in everyday life. Of course, people vary in how much they actually need to look at their phones. If you loved Hashem that much, perhaps you wouldn't feel such a need to check your phone so often. Think of something in the world you are crazy about. Shouldn't you feel at least that much excitement about *avodas Hashem*?

That's what Yaakov was doing. He comes out holding on to the heel of his brother, Esav. What does that mean? "There is something about Esav that I need to hold on to and learn from." Look how far Esav will go for a pleasure that passes. He is willing to sell his *bechorah*, his birthright, for a pot of beans. What would I be willing to give up to hold on to my birthright? Look how much effort he is prepared to make, risking his life to hunt for venison. How much effort should I be prepared to make to bring Torah into the world? That is a *kal vachomer* for your whole life.

Who gave you the opportunity to make this particular *kal vachomer*? The people whose conduct you would never want to imitate. Without seeing their eagerness for what they do, you would never have had quite this example to learn from. You can make this *kal vachomer* without sitting in a yeshivah and working through a Gemara with your thumb in the air. Anyone can do it. The Maggid brings this back to our own avodah. ***How do you awaken the first attribute of mercy, Keil? Do you want Hashem to have mercy on you? Make the kal vachomer!*** Imagine saying, "Hashem, I'm in big trouble," and hearing the answer, "Look how much you love all these ordinary things. Where is that excitement when it comes to Torah?"

Why not make the *kal vachomer* right there? When you look around and see so much evil, ask how the very energy people put into it could spur you on to do good. Yaakov is saying, in effect, "This is how I mean to live. This is what I want to learn from Esav. I'm going to pay close attention to what he does."

Yaakov can learn even more from watching Lavan. “As soon as Lavan heard I was coming, look how excited he was. He ran to meet me. He hugged me and kissed me because he thought I had brought money. Look how he ran! Shouldn’t I run like that to do a mitzvah?” That is the kind of thing Yaakov was doing throughout his time with Lavan.

Do you see what this brings into view? It is a striking comparison. Set the forces of good and the forces of evil alongside one another and ask how each side deals with the very same line of reasoning.

On the side of good is Keil. I recognize Hashem as the source of my power, and I know He can show me mercy. I can put the *kal vachomer* to work in my own life. On the other side stands Lavan. “I believe there is another power apart from Hashem. I don’t accept your *kal vachomer*. Hashem tells me to refrain from even speaking badly. Very well, I’ll refrain from speaking badly. Doing something bad is another matter. That I’ll do.”

So why didn’t Lavan harm Yaakov? Here is the answer. The forces of evil can operate with strength when people on the side of good fail to see the power they have. Once Yaakov uses that power properly, Lavan loses the ability to disregard the *kal vachomer* and act as if its conclusion has no force.

You can imagine the retort. “God can say what He wants. If I’m told I shouldn’t touch the man, all right, I won’t just touch him. I’ll kill him.” Think of the German example I brought up in the shiur, of people pursuing their ends without regard for God or for where that reasoning would lead them. I then asked the same kind of question about a very different example, the concern for animal life voiced by groups such as PETA.

Think of somebody who is deeply worried about saving a whale, yet is prepared to defend an abortion even at eight months. What happens to the *kal vachomer* then? A whale commands that person’s concern. Where is the concern for the child? If an animal’s life can awaken that much concern, what happens when we apply the same reasoning to a human life so late in pregnancy? And how can we expect others to make this kind of *kal vachomer* if we Jews fail to make the right ones ourselves? When I gave the shiur, there was also a man running for the Senate in Alabama who was facing accusations. They were allegations, and my concern at the time was how easily people could wave them away when the candidate was on their side. We see the same pattern today. A charge that would be taken seriously against an opponent can suddenly seem unimportant when it is made against someone we support. In terms of the shiur, what happened to the *kal vachomer*?

In a case like that, we can fail to draw the obvious inference. “Send it to an ethics committee” can be another way of saying that nothing will happen. Even when there is a picture in another case, a man can simply say that he is sorry. What does an apology amount to if that is the end of the matter? Why is it so hard to follow through on this kind of *kal vachomer*? In the terms of the shiur, the difficulty comes when people live as though there is no God and no divine authority to answer to.

Why Lavan Couldn’t Act

When Jews put the *kal vachomer* to work on the side of holiness, the forces of evil lose their ability to set its conclusion aside. **Now we can return to Question 1.** Hashem says to Lavan, in effect, “Refrain from even speaking badly to Yaakov.” And Lavan replies to himself, “I don’t accept the *kal vachomer* that you would draw from that.”

“I don’t accept the *kal vachomer*, so I can still kill them.” Yet look what happened. How did Yaakov achieve such spiritual success, and how did his children grow up to be a spiritual family? Yaakov lived by

the *kal vachomer*. He saw Lavan's eagerness to do wrong and said, "How much greater should my own efforts to do good be?" Once Yaakov made that inference and lived by it, Lavan lost the ability to escape the force of the same argument. ***If even harmful speech was forbidden, all the more so was harmful action.*** Lavan thought he had the power to act, and now he saw for himself that he was powerless.

He sees just how powerless he is. That is the deeper meaning of the *kelipah*, the peel or shell. It is as though the lesson were addressed to Lavan himself. "Lavan, all your life you have been a *kelipah*." Think back to the peel covering the banana. What looked like an independent force of evil was the outer covering. "Look how I run after aveiros. I run after this wrongdoing and then after another." That whole display of energy and drive was the shell.

Yaakov learns how hard he has to work. As hard as Lavan works for his evil, I have to work for my goodness. And Lavan, thank you very much. You taught me.

Source 22 · Bereishis 31:20, 26, excerpts

וַיִּגְנֹב יַעֲקֹב אֶת־לֵב לָבָן הָאֲרַמִּי, עַל־בְּלִי הִגִּיד לוֹ כִּי בֹרֵחַ הוּא. ... וַיֹּאמֶר לָבָן לְיַעֲקֹב, **מֶה עָשִׂיתָ וַתִּגְנֹב אֶת־לִבָּבִי?**

Yaakov stole the heart of Lavan HaArami by not telling him that he was fleeing. … Lavan said to Yaakov, "**What have you done, stealing my heart?**" See Tiferes Shlomo, Toldos, s.v. Vatomer Rivkah.

Now go back to Lavan's question, "Why did you steal my gods?" There are two answers. ***First, Lavan discovered that Hashem had used him to build the very holiness he was trying to destroy, right there in his own house.***

Then he discovered what Yaakov himself had taken from him. The Tiferes Shlomo says that's what it means that Yaakov "stole Lavan's heart." Yaakov saw the energy and ingenuity Lavan put into doing wrong and said, "***If Lavan can put that much into what he's doing, how much more should I put into serving Hashem?***"

There's a story about my Rosh Yeshiva, **Rabbi Mordechai Gifter**, zichrono livrachah, that makes this practical. I thought I was a frum Jew. I had never realized how much there was to learn from an example like this.

Rabbi Gifter would often be upset when the bachurim slept in and came late for davening. Boys are boys. Sometimes they sleep in. He told us that he wanted an appointment with a man named Ratner who ran a large lumber company. He was raising money for the yeshiva and hoped to speak to him about it. "Rabbi," Ratner said, "I'm busy all day. If you come to my house at six in the morning, before I go out, I'll be happy to see you. Once I'm at the office, I don't have any time." Rabbi Gifter asked, "What time do you leave for work?" "I'm out the door by six-thirty. I've shaved, I'm ready to have breakfast, and I'm ready to go to work."

Rabbi Gifter drew the *kal vachomer* for us. "Ratner is a Yid who isn't religiously observant, and look how eager he is to get on with his business. At six in the morning he is already ready to go. Can't a yeshiva be ready for Shacharis by seven-thirty?" That was the *kal vachomer*, and that was the message he wanted us to take from the encounter.

The Foreign God Within and the Conclusion

That brings us to Source 20. The Gemara asks which foreign god is found within a person.

Source 20 · Shabbos 105b, quoting Tehillim 81:10

אמר רבי אבין, מאי קראה? לא יהיה בך אל זר ולא תשתחוה לאל נכר. **איזהו אל זר שיש בגופו של אדם? הוי אומר זה יצר הרע.**

Rabbi Avin said, "What verse teaches this? 'There shall be no strange god within you, and you shall not bow down to a foreign god.' **What strange god is within a person? It is the yetzer hara.**"

That is the struggle with the *yetzer hara*. **Don't let it become the foreign power that directs your life and twists the powers of mercy.**

Yaakov had a dangerous mission, and he was able to succeed even there.

Yaakov became wildly successful, and the very people trying to undermine him furnished the *kelipah* that protected what he was doing and helped him succeed. How could that happen? By now the answer should be clear. What can a person whose conduct is wrong give you, quite without intending to? An opportunity to make a *kal vachomer* about how hard you ought to work at doing good.

Suppose you live in a world that seems totally opposed to Hashem. Look at how hard people in that world work to make money. Look at how hard football players work to be the very best at what they do. Think of the energy people bring to pursuits whose value will pass. How much effort they make! Then think of what you might say about yourself. "I think I'm a good Jew. I do mitzvos." The example of all that effort invites you to ask how much of yourself you are actually putting into them.

"I don't put half as much effort into my mitzvos as that fellow puts into his aveiros." Or think about his excitement at a hockey game. He is on his feet, screaming and yelling. When I do a mitzvah, shouldn't I feel like shouting and jumping with that kind of joy? If you learn that from him, even somebody whose actions you reject can become your *kelipah*, the peel that protects and strengthens your *avodas Hashem*. And the argument goes a step further. Once you live by the *kal vachomer*, the opposing side must reckon with its logic as well.

What would the broadest *kal vachomer* look like? Hashem treats the nations of the world with kindness and gives them a beautiful world. Surely we can ask for abundant blessing for the Jewish people as well. Think of the relationship between a king and his subjects. If an ordinary subject receives a blessing, would you expect less for the king's own child?

Wouldn't you expect the child of the king to be treated with particular kindness? Think about what this would mean for antisemitism. Antisemitism fails even the test of its own logic. If you treat one person with kindness, why would you withhold that same kindness from a Jew? In the image we have just used, this person is a child of the King. Yet those who hate Jews refuse to follow the *kal vachomer*. In the language of the shiur, they give their allegiance to *el acher*, the foreign god. And if we ourselves give our allegiance to a foreign power by letting the *yetzer hara* direct our lives, we weaken the very principle we are asking the rest of the world to follow. Then others feel free to ignore the *kal vachomer* as well, and that is where the trouble begins.

You want Hashem to show you mercy? You want to invoke the name Keil? Then pay attention to where you give your excitement and what power you allow to direct your life. Once the *yetzer hara* takes charge of that, *el acher* has found a place within you.

You have to be able to say, "I see the enthusiasm other people bring to what they do. I can learn from their enthusiasm while choosing what I devote my own energy to. I can use it to make something of myself." That is what put Yaakov to work.

Had Yaakov stayed at home with Yitzchak and Rivka, he would never have had such a close view of enthusiasm for wrongdoing, the very thing from which he could make his *kal vachomer*. Yitzchak was a great tzaddik, and his circumstances were different from Yaakov's. Yishmael was sent out of the household when Yitzchak was still a little boy. Yitzchak did not live next to a rasha whose excitement for wrongdoing could give him that particular opportunity to make a *kal vachomer*. Yaakov, in this respect, was remarkably fortunate.

For his first sixty-three years, Yaakov lives alongside Esav and learns from watching him. Then he spends fourteen years with Shem and Ever, preparing himself to learn the right lessons from Lavan. After that, he spends twenty years with Lavan. Through all those years, he learns to ask how he can use what he sees for good.

Yaakov was able to build an extraordinary family in circumstances that seemed to promise the opposite. How can life among people who do wrong become such a powerful means of growth? Through the *kal vachomer*, their energy can help teach you how to direct your own. So there is room for real growth even in *galus*. That is the message of Parshas Vayeitzei. As difficult as Yaakov's situation was, he thrived there.

Shmuel, Shaul, and Agag

There is one more case that helps us see where a *kal vachomer* can go wrong. Hashem sent Shmuel HaNavi to tell Shaul to go to war against Amalek and to spare none. Shaul spared Agag and the best of the livestock. Shmuel rebuked Shaul and later put Agag to death at Gilgal (I Shmuel 15:3, 9, 22–23, 33). Why did a king of Shaul's stature set aside a command he had heard so clearly?

The Gemara in Yoma 22b says that Shaul reasoned from the *eglah arufah*, the ceremony the Torah requires when even one person is found murdered and the killer is unknown. If the Torah makes such a point of a single life, how much more should he consider so many lives? Shaul asked what the children and the animals had done. A heavenly voice answered him with the words of Koheles, "Do not be overly righteous."

Look at what made Shaul's reasoning so persuasive. The *eglah arufah* teaches how seriously the Torah takes even one unexplained death. Shaul's compassion for the children and animals makes his question understandable. But the *kal vachomer* took a principle from one case and used it to set aside the explicit command in this one. **That is where the inference went wrong.**

You see the same problem in Shaul's defense of what happened to the livestock. He tells Shmuel that the people kept the best animals to offer to Hashem. Shmuel asks whether Hashem takes as much pleasure in an offering as in hearing His voice. ***"Obedience is better than sacrifice."*** The purpose Shaul gave for keeping the animals sounded religious. Shmuel brings him back to the particular thing Hashem had asked him to do (I Shmuel 15:15, 21–22).

The distinction is crucial. Lavan refused to draw an inference that followed from Hashem's words. Shaul drew an inference that led him to set aside Hashem's explicit words. Yaakov used the *kal vachomer* to deepen his own *avodas Hashem*. Amalek and *el acher* have the same *gematria,* 240. Shmuel's name can be read as *shemo El*, "his name is El." ***Even a kal vachomer that sounds merciful has to be tested against what Hashem actually asks of us.***

What We Can Learn Today

Take a contemporary example. Democrats won both houses of Congress in the November 2026 U.S. midterms, as the Associated Press reported. Reuters reported that Democratic lawmakers were already signaling investigations into the Trump administration, its allies, and certain companies once the new Congress takes office. Some see this as legitimate oversight. Critics see the risk of lawfare, in which pursuing one person also sends a message to others: get involved with Trump, or challenge what they call the Washington swamp, and you may pay a price. A threat of that kind can have an effect before a single case is decided. It can make people think twice about even getting involved.

What can we learn from that degree of focus? Look at the preparation, the coordination, the effort people will put into plans that may take years. ***If people can devote that much energy to gaining political power or keeping their opponents out, how much more should we be prepared to devote to something that will last?*** We can be that determined about making sure a Jewish child gets a Torah education, bringing someone who feels alone into the life of a shul, or following through when a family needs our help.

And how can it be that people who hate Jews sometimes appear to be winning? What can we learn from how persistently they organize, repeat a message, and recruit others? All the more so, we should organize to protect our community, answer lies with facts, strengthen Jewish learning, and help Jews feel that they belong. That is how what threatens us can become a *kelipah* that strengthens the good. ***The danger calls for action. It need not leave us afraid or paralyzed.*** If we make this *kal vachomer* and follow through on it, the very effort directed against us can spur us to do work we should have been doing all along.

Take the effort we just described in the Trump example. If people can plan so far ahead to make an opponent think twice before acting, how much more effort should we make now to keep the *yetzer hara* from finding an opening in the first place? Strengthen the habits that keep us from being drawn in. Build the relationships and communal protections before people who wish us harm get another chance. Think of Lavan. He wanted to uproot everything, yet Yaakov learned from his determination and turned it toward holiness. ***The very tools that threatened us can become the peel that protects us.*** When we put them to work for good, we have more room to protect and strengthen what we love than fear would have us believe.

Now go back to Moshe Rabbeinu. He called on Keil to heal Miriam, and Hashem answered with the *kal vachomer* that awakens Keil. That puts a question to us when we daven for mercy. If we can be so persistent in pursuing the things that matter to us in everyday life, how much more persistent should we be in our tefillah, in learning Torah, and in doing chesed for the people who need us? ***That is a kal vachomer we can make ourselves.***

He thrived because he understood the power of *kal vachomer*. That is how Yaakov turned what he learned from Lavan into a way of serving Hashem. Hashem should help us when we're surrounded by evil. Don't let it get you down. Say to yourself, "If that's what evil can do, then I can put that same effort into doing good." ***May we all be as successful as Yaakov.***