

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Kalman *ben* Herschel *a"h*
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his *neshamah*

Back to the Beginning

PARSHAS TZAV 5778

The main theme and purpose of the Pesach Haggadah, of course, is the recounting of the episode of Yetzi' yas Mitzrayim – the Exodus from Egypt. But a most intriguing aspect of this treasured and familiar document is the introduction, at a key point in the Haggadah, of a character who seems to bear little relation to the matter at hand.

What can perhaps be considered the main body of the Haggadah is the summation of the events as recorded in Sefer Devarim (*parshas Ki Savo*). Referring to this passage and its place in the Haggadah, the Mishnah states (*Pesachim 10:4*):

וְדֹרֵשׁ מֵאַרְמֵי אוּבָד אָבִי, עַד שְׂיִגְמוֹר כָּל הַפְּרָשָׁה כְּלָהּ.

“One expounds beginning with the verse, ‘An Aramean (Lavan) sought to wipe out my forefather (Ya’akov)...’ (*Devarim 26:5*) and continues until he completes the entirety of that section (which includes Ya’akov’s descent to Mitzrayim and all of the events that unfolded there for the Jewish people, from their enslavement to the redemption).”

What, indeed, is Lavan’s place in this narrative? The only plausible explanation, it would seem, would be that he in some way did play a key role in the Exodus story. But what was it?

Setting the Wheels in Motion

The commentators offer some interesting insights on this score. *Ma’asei Hashem*, for example, attributes the unfolding of Yisrael’s circumstances in Mitzrayim to Lavan’s apparent penchant for idolatry. As we know, Yisrael’s sojourn in Mitzrayim had its roots in the great famine that engulfed the region during the time of Yosef. Ya’akov instructed his sons where they should go to purchase food: וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב לְבָנָיו... הִנֵּה שָׂמַעְתִּי כִּי יֵשֶׁבֶר בְּמִצְרַיִם רְדוּ-שָׁמָּה – “And Ya’akov said to his sons... ‘Behold, I have heard that there are provisions in Mitzrayim; go down there and purchase them for us from there’” (*Bereishis 42:1,2*). This set in motion the chain of events in which Ya’akov and his sons eventually relocated to Mitzrayim, the place from which their progeny would only be redeemed hundreds of years later. In his comments on this verse, Rashi notes that the *gematria* (numerical value) of the word רָדוּ (“Go down”) is 210 – equivalent to the number of years the Jews would be enslaved there.

In any event, the question arises: Why, indeed, did Ya’akov send them specifically to Egypt? There was another viable option – the country of Aram, home of his uncle Lavan. What didn’t he send them instead to acquire food from that familiar country? Thus, *Ma’asei Hashem* explains that Ya’akov couldn’t take the risk, for the spiritual danger was too great. Ya’akov recalled how Lavan had tried to entice him to adopt idolatrous practices during his own sojourn there. And so, with that possibility removed, there remained only one option – Mitzrayim. What emerges, then, is that Lavan – even if somewhat indirectly – was indeed

responsible. By rendering Aram inhospitable for the Jewish people, he was the cause of their journey to Mitzrayim and the subsequent affliction they endured in that place.

Tragic Trickery

Interestingly enough, the *Alshich Hakaddosh* understands Lavan's role as going back even farther than does *Ma'asei Hashem*. Whereas the *Ma'asei Hashem* saw it as being rooted in Ya'akov's instructions in parshas Mikeitz ("*Redu...*"), the *Alshich* perceives his role as manifest already in the events surrounding Ya'akov's marriage, as recorded in the beginning of parshas Va'yeitzei.

Recall that the event that first connected Yisrael with Mitzrayim was the incident involving Yosef and his brothers. They, of course, were jealous of Yosef, whom they perceived as "lording it" over them. Resentful of the special favor he received from his father, they were eventually led to subduing and selling him to Egypt as a slave. This, in essence, was the initial catalyst for all that was to follow: Yosef's eventual rise to prominence and assuming leadership over Mitzrayim; the brothers' return and ultimate reunification with their lost brother; the descent of Ya'akov and his whole household to Mitzrayim; and, of course, the subsequent proliferation of the nation and their induction into slavery.

But recall, as well, that Lavan had "tampered" with Ya'akov's early marriage plans. Ya'akov had intended to first marry Rachel (mother of Yosef), but was tricked by Lavan into actually taking Leah first. Consider, then, what would have happened had Lavan played matters straight and stuck to the original plan. Even if Ya'akov would eventually have married Leah as well, Rachel's child – Yosef – would indeed have been the rightful firstborn (as opposed to Leah's son being the firstborn). Then the brothers would not have experienced the same degree of envy and anger at Yosef's superior status, as they would have viewed him as the bona-fide firstborn and elder brother.

In other words, it was indeed Lavan who precipitated Yisrael's enslavement in Egypt – by switching around the brides. It was his machinations that eventually led to the sale of Yosef to Mitzrayim and all the events that developed as a result. In recognition of his responsibility, then, we begin this major portion of the Seder night by ensuring that Lavan receives the blame that is his due: "*Tzei u'lemad mah bikeish Lavan Ha'arami la'asos l'Ya'akov Avinu...* – Go and study what Lavan the Aramean sought to inflict upon our Father, Ya'akov..."

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