

# This Land is My Land

## A Breslov Perspective on the Holy Land

### Essay #36—Parshat VaYeitze 5762 (1)

Hello and greetings from Jerusalem, Israel. Despite the Foreign Minister and his UN speech of giving away the Land to make room for a Palestinian state, I still hope that Jerusalem, along with the remainder of the Holy Land, under the domain of God, His Torah and Israel will continue forever. Which, of course, brings us to this week's "this Land is my Land," also despite said minister's efforts to the contrary. For what type of a human being can formulate such plans and make such statements—to hand over his birthright without any shame whatsoever?

"And Yaakov left Beer Sheva to go to Charan. He passed by the place and slept there...God appeared to him and promised him...I am the God of your fathers...the Land upon which you are laying I will give to your descendents...Your seed will increase and you will spread westward, eastward, to the north and to the south..." (*Genesis* 28:13). The Talmud asks, "Is the promise to Yaakov a mere strip of land that he can sleep upon? A few feet of land? What's the big deal?" The Talmud's question seems more in line with Peres's and Arafat's vision of a "greater Israel"—a few feet of nothing! The Talmud answers that God folded the entire Land of Israel to fit beneath Yaakov so that he lay down upon the **ENTIRE LAND**. This was meant to be symbolic of Yaakov's descendents being able to easily conquer the Land (*Chullin* 91a; see Rashi on *Genesis* 28:13). As such, the Talmud's answer is almost as perplexing as its question. For as we see it today, not only does it not seem easy to conquer the Land, but the opposite seems true! Elected officials of a government propose to give away the Land to its bitter enemies who are sworn to its destruction. What's more, this is taking place with the sanction of (almost) every government in the world, as well as the institutions of the media. "To be conquered easily?!" This might sound funny if what we see wasn't so tragic. There must be a lesson for us here.

Yaakov was forced to flee Esav. He swore that he would kill Yaakov as soon as possible. Why should Yaakov live in the vicinity of a crazed, established killer? So he moved. However, on the way to his uncle Lavan, he stopped at the Beit Midrash (house of study) of Ever to fortify his spirituality with Torah study. As we have seen ([essay #34](#)), the main protection against Esav the murderer is Torah study, for the Torah insights draw power from the sword of Esav to punish the wicked. However, since Esav isn't a pushover Yaakov had to take flight. After his fourteen years of study, he arrived at his uncle Lavan's, where he spent an additional twenty years, fourteen years of work just to get his wives, and an additional six years working for a wage. In this parshah we are introduced to the most expert bamboozler of all times, Lavan. If you thought Esav connotes deception, wait until you meet Lavan!

Reb Noson often describes the battles between Yaakov on one side, and Esav and Lavan on the other. Esav, according to the holy writings, was probably the most evil person to have ever lived. From his youth he engaged in every evil and sin possible. Yet he became a clever deceiver, and though known in the district as evil personified, he worked upon his father to have him think he was an upstanding citizen. Esav thus personifies the wicked who have many desires, immoral lust, idolatry and avarice, gluttony, etc. He revels in it. But, at the very least, unless he sets his mind to deceive, you're aware of his evil and

can try to avoid him.

Not so Lavan, who was a natural deceiver, in every cell of his body. "Lavan" in Hebrew means "white," for Lavan presented himself as being "lily white," a perfect and honorable gentleman and businessman. But our Sages tell us, that more than anyone else, we have to be especially wary of such impeccable types. "Go and learn! Pharaoh set out to destroy only the male children [by casting them into the river], but Lavan tried to uproot all of Israel" (Passover Haggadah)! Lavan's clever, cunning and subterfuge is far more dangerous than Esav's sword. Keep your distance from the sword and you avoid Esav. With Lavan, though, there's no reprieve, no quarter given, not a moment's rest or peace.

For example, the six years Yaakov spent working for Lavan were begun with a specific contract of how many sheep of what type Yaakov would receive. Set agreements, set parameters, all is well. Six years times twelve months equals 72 months. We find that Lavan changed Yaakov's wages 10 *monim* (times) (*Genesis* 31:7). Rashi explains that *manah* (the singular form of the word *monim*) means a unit of ten. Thus the wages were changed ten *monim* (10x10) times. Even if we leave *monim* as a single unit, in six years Lavan changed—in his favor—Yaakov's pay schedule nearly twice a year. Understanding ten *monim* as 100 times, means that in 72 months Lavan changed Yaakov's payment schedules about every three weeks! Not likely that Lavan was ever voted "best employer!" So let's look at the parshah from the beginning and get some insights into the battle over the Holy Land, as it plays itself out between the Lavans and Yaakovs of our generation. But first let's tell a Reb Noson story.

Reb Noson had a childhood friend who overextended himself in business and went bankrupt. With none of today's bankruptcy laws to save him, he felt he had no choice but to run away from home. On his way, the man passed through Breslov and remembered his old friend Reb Noson, and went to visit him. As the two friends were talking, the man began to pour his heart out to Reb Noson, telling him all about his pressing financial woes. Hearing the problem, Reb Noson said to him, "You are truly in trouble, but your advice is not good. Wherever you go, your troubles will be written all over your face. I doubt you'll get more than a day or two of hospitality from anyone. Then what? You'll be a stranger in a strange city. What will you do then?"

"Take my advice and 'run away'—directly to God! Return to your home town. But instead of going home, go straight to the *beit midrash*. In your hometown people know you are not a thief. There you are respected as a businessman who worked hard, but met with hard times. When your family discovers that you've returned, they'll come screaming and yelling, but you be silent. Do not answer. Just run to Torah and prayer. If you follow this advice, you'll see that in a few days, God will help you straighten out your mess."

Reb Noson's words, spoken with true feeling and concern for his friend, entered the man's heart. He returned to his town and headed straight for the *beit midrash*. He began studying Torah and praying, and remained silent in the face of all opposition. A few days later, the townspeople gathered to discuss the situation. His friends and acquaintances, realizing this was no more than his having fallen upon hard times, decided to lend him the money he needed to set up a business and get back on his feet. Reb Noson's friend began to divide his time between Torah, prayer and work. He was blessed, and his new business grew steadily until he was able to pay both the loan and the rest of his debts, as well (*Avanehah Barzel*, p.82ff).

As with Yaakov of old, as with the Jews throughout the generations, and as with ourselves, today, we find ourselves beset by pressures from all sides, with no one to whom we can think we can turn. We just

feel like running away from it all. That would be fine, if we had where to run. But, after September 11, there aren't many havens to be suggested. So Reb Noson's advice, "Run away—directly to God!" is much more realistic than we might otherwise have thought. So it has been the Jewish answer throughout the generations and we can see it in the story of Yaakov.

As we mentioned earlier, Yaakov spent fourteen years in the *beit midrash* in order to protect himself against Esav as well as to fortify himself against wily Lavan. When he felt strengthened enough from the Torah, Yaakov forged ahead into Lavan's territory, despite knowing who Lavan was and what he was capable of doing. (Yaakov's mother, Rivkah, was Lavan's sister and he must have been forewarned with many a tale of Uncle Lavan's chicanery.)

Then—why go there in the first place? Because Yaakov was a Jew and the first thing a Jew has to do is to establish a Jewish home, where the transmission of knowledge of God can continue from generation to generation. Yaakov knew his wives-to-be were there awaiting him (cf. Rashi 29:17). So he went, despite any foreboding he may have had about Lavan. Though he fortified himself with Torah, Yaakov didn't rely on that alone, for he knew its limits. He knew he had to pray and pray hard for protection from God. Esav he could deal with: the man was a known murderer, with desire for honor, glory, respect, power, wealth, women, etc. But Lavan was an enigma. One never knew what to expect, even from moment to moment. Torah is a known, it can battle the known. But prayer is about the unknown and is the ultimate power to counter the unknown.

Thus, as soon as Yaakov arrived, Lavan was there waiting for him with "open arms" as well as with open hands, to try to get whatever he could out of Yaakov. Though Lavan said to Yaakov, "You are my flesh...stay with me for 30 days," we find that Yaakov was put to work herding Lavan's flocks even as a house guest. Lavan, pleased with Yaakov's work, managed to croak up an offer for wages. "What would you like as payment?" he asked. Yaakov answered, "Your daughter, the younger one, Rachel." Rashi explains, "Rachel" refers to a woman, one specifically named Rachel. "Your daughter" means to preclude a woman named Rachel who is not Lavan's daughter. Finally, "younger" refers to the specific daughter, the younger of the two, and not Lavan's elder daughter especially renamed Rachel. Why was Yaakov so specific in identifying whom he wanted to marry? He knew Lavan was a con-man and would try to avoid complying. Did it help? Is the media pro-Israel?

Even though Lavan switched his daughters and substituted his older daughter Leah, Yaakov's prayers helped. Such is the power of prayer, as we will discuss in the next essay.

(to be continued)

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