

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP



LAVAN AND YAAKOV IN THEIR OWN WORDS

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Lavan said to Yaakov: Can you be my brother, and serve me for free?! Tell me what your usual salary is! (29:15)

Lavan: It's been a month. I can't deny my obligation to feed my sister's son, but it doesn't seem fair that he spends all his time learning Torah (if that's really what he's doing; it's not clear to me why he left yeshiva¹ if that's all he wants out of life) while everyone else is working. My own sons are grumbling. Maybe a subtle hint would do it? I could pretend that he was already doing work I should pay him for, and ask him to name his own salary. Then once he's named it – I think he's unlikely to cheat by setting it at an unreasonable level - I'll have a basis for demanding accountability.

Yaakov loved Rachel; He said: I will serve you for seven years in exchange for Rachel, your daughter, the younger one. (29:18)

Yaakov: It's been a month. My mother sent me here to be safe. She was sure Uncle Lavan would protect me from my brother. But she also warned me to thoroughly examine the teeth of any horse he tries to gift me.

So here's what I think he's up to. His workers don't live anywhere near as well as I do right now. Agreeing to a salary as an employee would be setting a firm and much lower cap on his obligations, probably without any corresponding limit on mine. Even admitting that I have a 'standard salary' would dramatically lower my social position from honored guest to servant. This might even be a test to see whether I deserve his respect.

At the same time, I feel guilty not working. This is not one of those Zevulun-Yisso(s)cher relationships; it's more as if an alcoholic religious minority held the swing vote in a democracy and forced the majority to buy them lots of single-malt scotch.

I have an idea! My cousin Rachel is beautiful, and I really wouldn't mind marrying her when I'm properly settled. She's also younger (did I mention prettier? And **much** more cheerful?) than Leah. What if I told Uncle Lavan that I'd

work for him for, say, seven years, in exchange for marrying Rachel?

Let's think this through carefully. There's a chance he'll say yes. If so, then I won't be an employee, but rather still family – even closer family! and since I won't have a salary, he'll have to support me for seven more years in the manner to which I've become accustomed. And at the end of that, he'll have to give me her dowry, and she really is beautiful, so all that would be great.

Now he might say no because Leah isn't married yet, and it would be cruel to have her be the bridesmaid at a younger sister's wedding. But that's not a big deal - in seven years I'm sure that she will be married (although despite the old family joke about two brides for two brothers, I don't think that Esav is the man for her, and in any case I don't think he'll be talking to Lavan as long as I'm here).

Worst comes to worst, he says no, and then I've offered, and he still has to support me and treat me as family. Well, real worst-case scenario he somehow finds a way to have me marry Leah instead. So I'll try and specify Rachel as carefully and redundantly as I can².

Lavan said: It is better, my giving her to you, than my giving her to another man: stay put with me. (29:19)

Lavan: That was really clever! I underestimated him. I wonder if my sister warned him about me?

Meanwhile, a lot can happen in seven years, and perhaps I see a way to save Leah from that brute. I really don't want her crying like this for the rest of her life³.

Yaakov worked for Rachel, seven years. They seemed in his eyes like single days, in his love for her. (29:20)

Yaakov: That went by faster than I had thought possible. I really appreciate Uncle Lavan taking care of all the arrangements, and paying for both the florist and the band, and the people here really seem to love the open bar! But this local custom of the groom drinking a P'chaim with every guest

¹ Specifically *עבר שם ועבר*

² See Rashi: *ברחל בתך הקטנה* became a Rabbinic catchphrase for the (generally futile, as here) strategy to bind dishonest people to contracts by writing them in minute detail.

³ See Rashi

seems a little excessive, especially for someone who doesn't usually drink except for kiddush.

Yaakov said to Lavan: Produce my wife, because my time is completed; and I will go in to her (29:21). . .

What have you done to me! It was for Rachel that I served you; why did you deceive me? (29:25)

Lavan:

It cannot be done that way in our place, to give the younger before the elder. (29:26)

Also, you forgot to specify the woman this time.

Complete this week - that one as well is given you for the service you will serve with me, seven other years. (29:27)

Leah is your wife now, and you are responsible to maintain her social status.

Yaakov did so: He completed that week; He gave him Rachel his daughter, to him as a wife. (29:28)

Yaakov:

Thoughts the night before a wedding

Eisav's shadow lingers in her eyes;
every time we mate
I become the brother I despise⁴.
My birthright, my blessing, and my wife
belong to him, so I hate
everything of value in my life
except Rachel, who loved me at first sight.
The wild dreams of love-crazed youth
are mine again tonight
transforming beauty into truth
desire into right.
Leah deserves more,
but this week's wait
seemed longer than the seven years before.

It happened that after Rachel gave birth to Yosef, that Yaakov said to Lavan: Send me away, and I will go, to my place and to my land. Give my wife and my children, whom I have served you in exchange for them, and I will go . . . (30:25-26)

⁴⁴ Cf. Dr. Aviva Zornberg's understanding of Yaakov dressing up as Eisav, and Rashi and Nechama Liebowitz on the identity of the angel with whom Yaakov wrestles

⁵The Hebrew word for female is *nekeivah*. See צרור המור בראשית ל"כ"ה לפי שלבן אמר נקבה שכרך עלי' ובזוהר אמרו שאמר לא תתן לי מאומה, לפי שלבן אמר נקבה שכרך עלי'

And the next seven years felt even longer, because I had nothing to look forward to except leaving. I don't believe that Lavan will ever give me anything but promises and daughters.

I must remember not to agree to anything. But it burns me up to let him get away with this.

I don't think he has any excuse to keep me here now that Rachel has given birth. But I must remember not to agree to anything.

Lavan said to him: Please, if I have found favor in your eyes; I have divined that Hashem has blessed me for your sake. (30:27)

Lavan: The truth is that he's been a good husband to Rachel, and in some ways a better husband to Leah, and we've all prospered. Bilhah and Zilpah seem okay as well. On the other hand, maybe he didn't really want Rachel to get pregnant – the only time I've ever heard him raise his voice was when she demanded children. Do you suppose I could get him to agree to another multiyear contract in exchange for another woman?

(Yaakov does not respond.)

He said: Nakvah⁵ your price upon me, and I will give it.

He said: You know the service I have done for you, and how your flocks were with me. The little that was before me waxed and became a multitude, and Hashem blessed you as my associate; but now, when will I also do for my house?

He said: What can I give you?

He said: You will give me nothing! If you do this thing for me, I will return, shepherd your flocks, guard ...

(30:28-31)

Yaakov:

That was quite a dig: I have more than enough women, thanks to him. Regardless, he makes it very clear that I take nothing with me if I leave. Even if he changes his mind and decides to be generous, he'll hold it over me forever that I owe him, and I'm obviously not good at resisting. I really wish I could prevent him from saying "I made Yaakov rich"⁶, when really it's the other way around. Maybe he doesn't know about recessive genes?

Shabbat shalom!

לפי שראה לבן שיעקב היה חומד הנשים עד שהיו לו ד' נשים, ולכן א"ל: אם אתה חפץ בנקבה אחרת - אמור לי. וזהו נקבה שכרך עלי' = מה נקבה תרצה בשכרך? ואתן לך.
לזה א"ל לא תתן לי מאומה, כי כל שעשיתי היה לשם שמים.
ואולי לזה א"ל לא תתן לי מאומה = לא תשים לי מום בזה, כמו שאחז"ל ולא תעש לו מאומה.

⁶ cf. "ולא תאמר אני העשרתי את אברם", בראשית י"ב: כג.

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