

Mussar HaTorah

Torah Insights into Human Nature – Dedicated in memory of Rabbi A. Henach Leibowitz zt"l

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Parashas Vayeitzei

“I WILL SERVE YOU SEVEN YEARS FOR RACHEL, YOUR YOUNGER DAUGHTER.” (BEREISHIS 29:18)

Lavan did indeed have a third, youngest daughter

WHEN SPEAKING to Lavan, Yaakov was very precise in his description of his chosen bride. Rashi explains that Yaakov suspected Lavan of deceitful dealings and wanted to preclude Lavan from giving him Leah, who was older, and also to exclude any other girl named Rachel, who would not be his daughter. The Divrei Dovid questions why Yaakov added Rachel's name – if Lavan had only two daughters, then the term, “younger daughter” could only refer to Rachel. He answers that Lavan did indeed have a third, youngest daughter. If Yaakov would have only said, “your younger daughter” – leaving out the name – it would have implied the youngest daughter. It is true that Lavan would not have wanted to hand over his youngest daughter for marriage when he had two older single daughters. Nevertheless, Yaakov was concerned that Lavan would feel compelled by the power of truth to follow Yaakov's request for the “younger daughter,” and give the youngest over the middle daughter. Yaakov therefore needed to specify three terms: “Rachel, your younger daughter.”

Who could imagine that Lavan would insist being honest?

When dealing with Lavan, Yaakov became very wary and shrewd. He spoke in very specific terms because he understood that Lavan had no reluctance to lie, cheat or deceive. Why would Yaakov think that Lavan would suddenly decide to be bound by the truth? Lavan's entire claim in the incident was the importance of marrying older daughters first. Who could imagine that Lavan would insist being honest and giving the hand of his youngest daughter when it goes against his best interests?

Every sinner has a recognition and awareness of right and wrong

What an incredible insight we have here about the nobility of the human soul! Yaakov was not misguided in his evaluation of Lavan's possible actions. Yaakov knew that Lavan was a hardened liar who would use every dirty trick to get the outcome he desired. Yaakov also knew the power of the human soul to improve and its desire to do what is right. Even Lavan, the epitome of a cheater and swindler, might suddenly be moved to follow the *emes* and do the right thing. The implication of the Divrei Dovid is not that Yaakov was imagining that Lavan would suddenly become a *baal teshuva* and retire from his fraudulent dealings. Astonishingly, even the scoundrel Lavan, while still immersed in his crookedness, might feel a desire to follow the truth and even feel bound by it to the extent that he would surrender his own personal agenda. No one, Yaakov reasoned, is beyond hope, even his greedy and conniving uncle Lavan.

The most vile criminal can still appreciate and feel compelled to follow a higher road of moral behavior, and sometimes just for a single act of decency. We can never write off another human being because of his corruption or lack of moral values. At any moment he can surprise us and reach for a higher level of decency and morality. Whether he follows it or not, every sinner has a recognition and awareness of right and wrong, even when he chooses not to follow that inner moral compass.

May we see the nobility and greatness that lies within every person's soul, and may we be inspired to try to reach that spark and fan it into a flame that will illuminate his entire life, and transport him from the darkest depths of corruption and falsehood to the radiant peaks of integrity and truth. The potential is there, it merely awaits our efforts to bring it to actuality.