

Moral Clarity Found in Our Hagaddah

Every leil Pesach, as we sit around our Seder tables enraptured by the excitement of re-experiencing our Exodus from Egypt, we encounter a seemingly bewildering statement in our Haggadah:

צא ולמד מה בקש לבן הארמי לעשות ליעקב
אבינו שפרעה לא גזר אלא על הזכרים, ולבן
בקש לעקור את הכל שנאמר ארמי אובד
אבי...¹

Come and learn, what Lavan wanted to do to Yaakov. Paroh only decreed against the boys, but Lavan tried to destroy everyone!

The Haggadah makes a powerful assertion: Lavan is a more evil villain than Paroh! And yet, when we reflect on this comment, we are perplexed. Is this really true?

In Shemot 1, Paroh declares *hava nitchakma lo*, let's outsmart the Jewish people to stop their growth into nationhood. First, he commands the midwives to murder all the baby boys at birth. Then, he instructs the Egyptians to throw the baby boys into the Nile River. Finally, he enslaves the Jewish people for 210 years with incredibly hard back-breaking work. Paroh is clearly an evil leader! What could Lavan have done that inspired our Rabbis to assert that his depravity was of greater intensity than murdering babies and enslaving our people?

When we first meet Lavan in Bereishit 24, the word that best describes him



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is selfish. His introduction is preceded by Avraham's servant arriving in town to find a wife for his master's son, Yitzchak. Rivkah is showered with jewelry and a promise to marry the chosen son. At this point, she retreats to her family home and Lavan emerges soon thereafter.

Vayehi kir'ot et hanezem, as soon as he sees the jewelry (24:30), he engages the stranger. In fact, Rashi writes that Lavan only bothers to meet the stranger in order to procure some jewels for himself. As the story continues, Lavan, Rivkah's brother, does not sit quietly in the marriage negotiations. He speaks out of turn, rudely cutting off his own father to have a say in the deal (24:50). The characteristics of Lavan in this story are of a selfish, greedy and disrespectful individual, but not of an evil person or a murderer!

In our second encounter with Lavan (Bereishit 29), his role evolves from brother to father (of Rachel and Leah). He is now in charge. However, his character is unchanged, tricking Yaakov into marrying the wrong daughter, thus ensuring Yaakov's continued indentured work relationship. And, when Yaakov

decides to leave, taking with him a fair portion of Lavan's animals as compensation for his unpaid labor, Lavan chases him down. At this point, G-d has to intervene and threatens Lavan:

וַיִּבֹא אֱ-לֹקִים אֶל לָבָן הָאֲרָמִי בְחֶלֶם הַלַּיְלָה
וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ הַשְׁמֵר לְךָ פֶן תִּדְבַר עִם יַעֲקֹב מִטּוֹב
עַד רָע.

And G-d came to Lavan in a dream at night saying: Be careful don't say anything to Yaakov, not something good or bad!

Bereishit 31:29

G-d warns Lavan to leave Yaakov alone!

Shockingly, even after G-d reprimands Lavan for his behavior toward Yaakov, Lavan (foreshadowing the behavior of other villains, such as Bilaam) ignores G-d. And, so, perhaps this is the evil attribute that our Haggadah is alluding to. However, as the story continues, this seems unlikely, since even as he chases Yaakov, screams at him, accuses him of stealing his idols, and searches his tents, he concludes by consecrating a treaty with him (and goes home empty-handed). Lavan ignores G-d's warnings because he is overcome with rage. He feels he has

been robbed of his family, his animals, his possession, and needs to confront Yaakov. He showed disrespect to G-d by ignoring his warning, but he does no physical harm to Yaakov. So we are still left with our question of where do we see Lavan being more evil than Paroh?

Looking for Answers

To begin formulating an understanding of our statement in the Haggadah, we must search further for answers. Fortunately, we are helped because many of the mefarshim are disturbed by this concern as well.

Rashi

Rashi asserts that Lavan's plan was to murder Yaakov. When chasing Yaakov, his true intention is to kill our third founding father, thus negating the future Jewish nation. G-d warns him specifically because G-d knew Lavan's true intentions. Then, after being warned, Lavan changes his plan. Instead of murdering Yaakov, he simply yells at him. Accordingly, the Haggadah is telling us that we blame Lavan for his evil intentions. Had Lavan murdered Yaakov, he would have prevented the creation of the Jewish nation. Just that consideration makes him worse than Paroh.¹

Abarbanel

A second approach is found in the Abarbanel. He writes that Lavan's true intentions are revealed to us in his words to Yaakov (when he catches up to him):

וַיַּעַן לָבָן וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל יַעֲקֹב הַבְּנוֹת בְּנֹתַי וְהַבְּנִים
בְּנֵי וְהַצֵּאן צֵאֲנִי וְכָל אֲשֶׁר אֶתָּה רֹאֶה לִי הוּא
וְלִבְנֹתַי מָה אֶעֱשֶׂה לְאֵלֶּה הַיּוֹם אוֹ לִבְנֵיהֶן אֲשֶׁר
יָלְדוּ.

*Lavan answered and said to Yaakov:
The daughters are my daughters, the sons*

*are my sons, and the flocks are my flocks,
and all that you see is mine! Yet what
can I do now about my daughters or the
children they gave birth to?*

Bereishit 31:26

Lavan thinks it is all his! Everything that Yaakov attained during his servitude is really his, and none of it is Yaakov's. Lavan's intention is to reclaim everything from Yaakov. He wants to reclaim his daughters, his grandchildren, and all of his wealth, thereby impeding Yaakov's return to Israel and creation of the chosen nation. Again, Lavan's desire to forego the formation of the entire Jewish nation could be the basis for determining that he is worse than Paroh.

The Vilna Gaon

An additional approach can be found in the Haggadah of the Gra: We don't know the terrible transgressions that Lavan wanted to do to Yaakov, and that is precisely the lesson of the Haggadah! Chazal are teaching us that terrible calamities can happen to us throughout history but G-d protects us from them. Recognize all the miracles that G-d does for us all the time—even those we don't know about.²

An Alternative Perspective

These are three possible perspectives from the mefarshim to address why the Haggadah accuses Lavan of being worse than Paroh. However, there is a completely different perspective that we can consider regarding Lavan and his persona. Perhaps Lavan really isn't all that evil. Let us revisit the Lavan stories with this new perspective and then consider what this means for our understanding of the passage in the Haggadah.

In that first story of Lavan, Bereishit 24, we observe Lavan mimicking the actions of Avraham by performing the mitzvah of *hachnasat orchim*, inviting guests. He rushes to greet the servant of Avraham, offers him a place to stay, water to wash his feet, food and drink to satiate for him and his animals. Recall that providing water to him and his animals resembles Rivkah's actions, which was the very reason she merited marrying Yitzchak, and joining the Jewish nation.

Further, Sforno³ writes that the Torah notes that Lavan saw the jewelry only to teach us that his hurrying to greet the stranger stems from his heartfelt appreciation for how nicely the guest treated his sister, Rivkah. Lavan is a loving, protective brother. He takes such an active role in the marriage negotiations—even cutting off his father—only to ensure his sister's wellbeing. His concern is entirely for her (hence, his desire for her to remain at home for as long as possible— Bereishit 24:55—and assurance that she wasn't being forced to leave home and marry a stranger). It is Lavan who insists on asking Rivkah for consent before being sent away (24:57). He is only looking out for the welfare of his sister! In addition to helping Rivkah, it is Lavan who recognizes Hashem as the G-d of the world as he admits to the servant, *meHashem yatza davar*, this marriage was made in Heaven (24:50)! Therefore, in the first story of Lavan, we learn three things about him: He is a gracious host, protective of his sister, and G-d-aware. At this point, he doesn't sound terribly evil!

In our second Lavan story, Yaakov is running from Esav, and needs a place to stay. He is all alone, penniless and terrified that his brother will hunt

him down. He desperately looks for his uncle's home as a place of respite. Lavan doesn't hesitate, invites Yaakov into his home, provides him with food and shelter, and much more. In fact, he invites Yaakov to be part of his household and family. He provides Yaakov with employment and offers a salary. It is Yaakov who insists on working for free in return for marrying Rachel and marrying into the family (29:15-18).

So why does Lavan trick Yaakov into marrying Leah? The answer is simple. The same Lavan who goes out of his way to protect his sister Rivkah, has grown up and become an over-protective father. Leah, his older daughter, does not share the physical beauty of his younger daughter Rachel:

וַעֲיִנֵי לֵאָה רַבּוֹת וְרַחֵל הֵיְתִיב זִפְתַּי וְיָפֶת מִרְאָהּ.

Leah has sensitive eyes and Rachel was beautiful.

Bereishit 29:17

From the missing statement of her beauty (as it states about almost all famous women in the Torah⁴), the Torah is politely implying that she is not! [Alternatively, this phrase may even mean that she was sickly. Chizkuni (29:9) infers that the sensitivity in her eyes prevents outside exposure for long periods, hence it is Rachel—and not Leah—who tends the sheep.⁵] And the worries of an over-protective father with a less than beautiful older daughter are exacerbated by society's norms:

וַיֹּאמֶר לָבָן לֹא יַעֲשֶׂה בֶן בְּמִקְוָמֵנוּ לָתֵת הַצֵּעִירָה לְפָנֵי הַבְּכִירָה.

Lavan said, it is not done where we live to marry off the younger daughter before the older.

Bereishit 29:26

He tries to spare his daughter from the social stigma associated with a younger sister marrying first. It is for this reason that he tricks Yaakov into marrying Leah. Although wrong, it is hard to blame Lavan for all the problems in the future of the Jewish people that result from that action.

So we are forced to look to our third Lavan story, Bereishit 31, to figure out how he is worse than Paroh. There, Lavan chases Yaakov out of desperation and heartache. His son-in-law, two daughters and twelve grandchildren just moved away without saying goodbye. This is exactly what he says to Yaakov:

וַיֹּאמֶר לָבָן לְבָן לֵיַעֲקֹב מָה עָשִׂיתָ וַתִּגְנֹב אֶת לִבִּי וַתִּגְנֹב אֶת בְּנֹתַי כַּשְּׂבִיּוֹת הָרֶב.

Lavan said to Yaakov: What did you do?! You stole my heart and you treated my daughters like war captives.

Bereishit 31:26

This is not a murderer talking, but rather a desperate, broken man who can't understand why his family just moved away without saying a word. Evidently, even after being warned by G-d to desist, the pain of losing his family overwhelms his behavior. His last words to Yaakov are to instruct him to be good to his wives, Lavan's daughters (31:50). To the end, he is a protective father.

When we appraise Lavan from this perspective, he may not appear righteous, but neither is he a villain. And certainly he doesn't appear worse than Paroh. Evidently, the Haggadah is forcing us to think about Lavan from two perspectives: (1) Pure evil and (2) his implied attributes from the *pshat*, simple read of the Torah.

But if so, why does the Haggadah choose to present Lavan as evil?

The answer is simple: Chazal generally

present all villains in Tanach as extremely bad. Thus, the Gemara, in *Megillah* 11a, explains the word *hu* found before the name of a villain in Torah:

הוא אחשוורוש הוא ברשעו מתחילתו ועד סופו הוא עשו הוא ברשעו מתחילתו ועד סופו.

"He is Achashverosh," he was evil from his beginning to his end. "He is Esav" he was evil from his beginning to his end. The word *hu* is coming to teach us that a villain is uncomplicated and is not capable of change; he is evil from the very beginning of his life until he dies.

Why do our Rabbis do this? Simple! The role of Chazal is not to record what transpired in history but rather to impart the values of history. We should learn about the good from virtuous people and learn to avoid the attributes of the evil ones. This explains why every villain in Torah is contrasted to a hero, the person with all of the positive attributes.⁶

The focus of Chazal's message is to make the moral picture clear. Good versus evil and heroes versus villains. Of course, the hero has to win. Therefore, in the narrative of Yaakov's growth, we contrast him to two horrible characters, Lavan and Esav. In this moral vision, Lavan hates everything that Yaakov represents, and wants to upend it all, just as Esav does. The message of our Rabbis is moral clarity.

This message is foundational for the Seder night. Reading the Haggadah is central to *sippur yetziat Mitzrayim*, experiencing the story of our journey out of Egypt. The focus of this mitzvah is *vehigadeta levincha*, sharing the message with our children. Precisely at the Seder, we impart to our progeny the difference between heroes and villains. In fact, our

Haggadah provides a similar contrast between the *chacham* and the *rasha*, the righteous and evil sons.

And yet, when looking closer at these two figures, their differences aren't as extreme as they may seem. Both use language in the third person, thus excluding themselves. The *chacham* says:

מה העדת והחקים והמשפטים אשר צוה ה'
אלקינו אתכם?

What are the laws that G-d commanded you.

The *rasha* says:

מה העבודה הזאת לכם.

What is this work for you?

Despite the similarity, one brother elicits our praise and the other we “smack his teeth.”

Therefore, when the Haggadah imparts the values of *yetziat Mitzrayim*, the focus is moral clarity and contrast. Our Haggadah compares the evil villains (Paroh, Terach, Lavan and Esav) to the heroes (Moshe, Aharon, the Jewish people, and l'havdil, G-d Himself). This is the message of the Haggadah.

But we have a second religious tradition, that of the text of the Torah itself. This tradition recognizes that moral messages are not as clear and require greater effort. The lives of Terach, Lavan and even Esav teach us positive and negative messages. This tradition provides the message

of ambiguity, of humanity, and of complexity.

Lavan may not have been a role model of virtue in every situation, but he must have imparted some goodness. He merited to be the father of two of our Matriarchs, brother of the third, and is the grandfather of the twelve tribes. Lavan teaches us that life is complex and multifaceted.

As we approach leil Seder, we should be inspired to appreciate the complexity of the humanity all around us, while imbibing the moral clarity of our Rabbis.

Endnotes

1 This image of Lavan “the murderer,” comports with the larger narrative surrounding Yaakov’s life. Yaakov, the righteous chosen son of Yitzchak, needs to escape from the evil that seems to follow him. First, he escapes from Esav, the evil brother who wants to kill him (Bereishit 28). Then, he runs from Lavan, who Rashi describes as his evil father-in-law trying to kill him too (Bereishit 31). Yaakov must face down both his enemies before returning to his father, now ready to become a founding father of Am Yisrael. To do so, he faces Lavan and makes peace with him (Bereishit 31) and then makes peace with Esav too (Bereishit 33). Yaakov runs from Esav to Lavan and then back to Esav again. In this connection between Esav and Lavan, we see further support for Rashi. Esav, who explicitly states his intention to kill his brother, is juxtaposed to Lavan, whom Rashi says also intended to kill Yaakov.

2 *We don't sense the miracles that He performs consistently, but nevertheless, He is always*

performing great miracles. Come and learn from Lavan the Aramean, meaning that at first glance, we can't see the evils that Lavan did to Yaakov and we don't know what Lavan wanted to do to Yaakov. Nevertheless, the Torah teaches us about him by stating “An Aramean tried to destroy my father.” It must be that Lavan tried to uproot everything and the Holy One Blessed Be He turned everything around for the good. This is what he does for us constantly, even if we can't sense it.

שאין אנו מרגישים בנסים אשר הוא עושה תמיד אעפ"כ הוא עושה תמיד נפלאות גדולות לבדו. וצא ולמד מלבן הארמי כלומר שבהשקפה ראשונה לא נראה הרעות אשר עשה לבן ליעקב ואינו ידוע לנו מה ביקש לבן הארמי לעשות ליעקב ואעפ"כ העיד עליו הכתוב ארמי אובד אבי אלא ע"כ הוא בקש לעקור את הכל והקב"ה היפך לטובה כן עושה תמיד נסים עמנו אף שאין אנו מרגישים.

3 Sforno (24:30) states: וחשב שאין ראוי להיות: כפוי טוב — He thought that it is not proper to be ingratiated.

4 Sarah (Bereishit 12:14), Rivkah (Bereishit 24:16), Avigail (Shmuel I 25:3), Batsheva (Shmuel II 11:2), Tamar (Shmuel II 13:1), Avishag (Melachim I 1:4), Esther (Esther 2:7).

5 *Rachel was coming with her father's sheep because she was a shepherd" but Leah had sensitive eyes and the wind and air were difficult for her. Therefore, she wasn't a shepherd.*

ורחל באה עם הצאן אשר לאביה כי רועה היא - אבל לאה עיניה רכות והרוח והאוויר קשים לה לפיכך לא היתה רועה.

6 For example: Yishmael the evil son is compared to Yitzchak the righteous son; Esav the violent one is contrasted to Yaakov *ish tam*, the simple spiritual one; Paroh, the murderer of Jews to Moshe the savior of Jews; Achashverosh the drunk to Esther the woman of grace and charm. The contrast to their opposing character exacerbates the horror of the villain.

