The Measure of Time

by

Rabbi Eliyahu Safran

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As one gets older, one is continually amazed at how rapidly time seems to accelerate. As a young man, there were indeed such things as the “lazy days of summer” but now, summer no sooner begins than I’m stamping snow off my feet! There are, of course, other times when time seems to move at a glacial pace, when each tick-tock of the clock seems to take hours upon hours.

Could time really move at varying paces depending on our perceptions? Perhaps not according to the physicist, but our own experiences suggest that time, rather than a straight arrow, is an undulating chord.

Yaakov is a case in point. Having fallen in love with Rachel, his Uncle Lavan gives permission for him to marry her, but only on the condition that he work for him for seven years.

Seven years! To our ears that sounds an eternity. Hard labor! The injustice of it. But, our sages teach us that those seven years were no such thing for Yaakov. Quite the opposite.

For Yaakov, those years “seemed … a few days because of his love for her.”

Old men reckon the passage of time as measured against an end. But young men are forever impatient. How could Yaakov, who was indeed a young man, not have chafed each and every day of his servitude? How could each moment not seem to be interminable?

Love.

The Torah is clear that Yaakov was not working *for* Lavan but for Rachel. He was working *b’Rachel*. Not only did Yaakov *feel* that his time and effort was invested in his love for Rachel but he wanted it understood by everyone else that whatever labors he endured, he endured for one reason and one reason only, so he could marry the woman he loved; so he could wed Rachel.

Lavan, slippery and devious in his way, would not be able to deny this fact later. *Mizrachi* focuses on the words, *be’ahavaso osa* – because of his love for her. A moment of love is like an eternity. And so, Yaakov’s intense love for Rachel made the seven, long years of labor under the hand of the despicable Lavan as the blink of an eye. To win for himself a love like Rachel, seven years passed in no time at all. A few days. Indeed, let us not overlook that during this time Yaakov must have recalled the words his mother, Rivkah, spoke him when she told him to go to Charan, that he would only need to remain “for a few days.”

While most of us react with anger or anxiety when something we want passionately is delayed for even a short period of time, let alone seven years, the Tur adds perspective to the years of Yaakov’s labors which seemed to be no more than a “few days.” Whereas most of us would focus on the actual passage of time and how those long hours, days, weeks, months and years felt to Yaakov, the Tur focuses instead on Yaakov’s deep and abiding appreciation for Rachel’s worth.

When we consider any amount of time we expend “wasted” if it is expended for something we do not deem worthwhile, the opposite is also true – if we value our endeavor then the time devoted to it is time well spent. The Tur makes an analogy to one who pays what may appear to be an exorbitant price for a unique, perfect piece of jewelry. The *meivin* who willingly spends riches on the jewelry no doubt understands that the exquisite and exceptional piece is, in truth, worth much, much more than the fortune he has paid for it. So too, the *meivin* Yaakov. He was under no illusion. Seven years is a long time… *but not when you know the value of what the investment of that time brings to you*! So it was that those seven years were to him “but a few days.” In his mind, there was no price too high to pay for Rachel. *Sforno* is explicit in this regard, “he thought that it was indeed appropriate to pay such an excessive price.”

The jewel, Rachel, was well worth it.

 Rav Aharon Kotler, *z’l*, asked a perceptive question about Yaakov’s years of labor for Rachel, whose idea was it for Yaakov to work for seven years? Lavan’s? Or Yaakov’s? The text suggests that it was Yaakov’s. “Yaakov loved Rachel, so he said, ‘I will work for you for seven years, for Rachel your younger daughter.’”(29:19)

Why would Yaakov suggest such a price without even waiting to hear what Lavan's fee might be? Whatever Lavan's demands, Yaakov had certainly proved himself resourceful enough to meet whatever was expected of him! So why seven years?

From this, Rav Aharon takes a life lesson that might be more relevant in our modern times than even a generation or two ago. We see so many marriages fall apart not for lack of love but for lack of preparation. Rav Aharon suggested that Yaakov was quick to offer the seven year term because he knew he was not ready to get married, establish a family and produce the twelve shevatim that would become *Klal Yisrael*.

Yaakov was wise enough to understand that he had to invest time, thought, sentiment, and reflection in order to prepare for marriage.

But did he not sit and learn for fourteen years in Ever's Yeshiva *prior* to arriving to Lavan's house? Certainly that is more than enough time for reflection and learning, no? Is there anything more valuable than high-quality, intensive Torah learning? Of course not. But even Torah learning might not be enough to adequately prepare one to live in the big city, in Lavan's domain, and to be able to respond to life’s situations and challenges with honesty, impeccable integrity, and deep sensitivity. Such preparation requires in-service training in Lavan’s courtyard, the most challenging of circumstances of trickery and deceit, the equivalent of Wall Street, 47th Street, Broadway… you name it!

Yaakov knew that to be a loving and sensitive husband, a model father and the progenitor of the shevatim, he had to be the epitome of honesty and sensitivity. The classroom for such lessons was not only Ever’s Yeshiva or even his father’s house, but the world itself. Learning how to respond as a Yaakov to the evil in the world required the Lavan laboratory for a seven year term!

With such a life purpose and mission before him, Yaakov considered the seven long years he labored to marry Rachel but a few days. Had he pursued one of life's many senseless narishkeiten, then those seven years would have definitely been as an eternity. But tending Lavan's sheep in order to prepare for a meaningful life and marriage to Rachel was no hard labor or excessive price.

It could very well have been the greatest bargain ever made!