Can We Learn From Laban?

Our Galut in the Secular World

by

Rabbi Eliyahu Safran

Learn from Laban? The very thought of it seems absurd! In our tradition, Laban is the antithesis of all we hold up and admire. To model our lives in any way after him? To learn from him? Who could suggest such a thing? If any lesson is to be learned from Laban, having lived in the *galut*, the one most obvious seems to be to build higher walls, thicker walls, and greater protections between us and Laban.

Yet, we do ask, is there anything we can learn from Laban?

Perhaps it is not the question our most pious or studious would find meaningful. However, for a many of our community, there *are* lessons – important lessons – that we can learn from Laban. Consider for a moment the struggling student, or the OTD student, the student who has never found a way to relate to his *rebbeim*, or they him; consider the student who feels defeated and who is a stranger in his own yeshiva; consider the student who is confused and stands in opposition to his own environment. Perhaps such a student cannot learn from the teachers whom we revere, but he *can* learn and ironically it may be Laban’s lessons that can get him back “on the *derech*”.

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Before confronting Esau face to face, Jacob sent emissaries to transmit a message that begins, *Im Laban garti* – I have sojourned with Laban and I have lingered until now.

This is all true. Jacob lived (*garti*) around Laban but he always remained a stranger, a *ger*. He left his childhood home years before and then, as Rabbi Soloveitchik explains, lived “a long night of darkness, misery and distress.”  It is no easy task to survive an environment that is antithetical to one’s upbringing but Jacob emphasizes that he had not “gone off the *derech*.” As Rashi declares, “I have sojourned with Laban, yet I observed the 613 mitzvos.”

He had ample opportunity not to! Certainly the twenty-plus years he sojourned with Laban was more than enough time to lose his identity and traditions, to learn and embrace the ways of Laban. But Jacob asserts that he did not. “He had not assimilated; he had not integrated himself into Laban’s society and community; he had not accepted their morals, their code of ethics, or their lifestyle.” (Rav Soloveitchik)

He was as dedicated at the end of his servitude in Laban’s house as he was that first night he spent on the cold stones of Beth El.

With Chanukah approaching, we are reminded of how difficult it is to remain faithful in Galus. Indeed, Galus is the ultimate Rorschach test for all Jewish generations. How we understand and react to this reality defines us. We cannot avoid it. Galus is our reality. As it turns out, there are no walls tall enough nor wide enough to hold it at bay. As frightening as that is, the truth is that there can be no Geula without Galus.

The question for each generation and for each of us is, do we have what it takes to live through Galus, to be able to declare as Jacob did to Esau, “I have made it through Laban!” Implicit in his declaration was that he would survive all that Esau might have in store for him and his descendants, he would remain true and preserve Abraham’s covenant.

To be fully Jewish has nothing to do with time or place. *Im Laban garti*. Jacob sojourned with Laban and maintained his commitment. He tells us so himself! Which raises an interesting question, Is it appropriate for someone of Jacob’s religious and spiritual stature to “sing his own praise”?

While it seems that is exactly what Jacob was doing, Rav Meir Shapiro of Lublin suggests another perspective, a novel perspective that suggests a way for us to engage our Galus. It’s true, Jacob admits, I did observe the Taryag mitzvoth in Laban’s environment, but I did not absorb any lessons from Laban’s approach (*Lo lamadti mi’maasav ha’rayim*). What is there after all to learn from Laban?

The task is not to learn *what* Laban does. Rather, the lesson to be taken from Laban is his *approach*. Not the “what” but the “how”. Laban surely wreaks havoc around the world, his evil causing pain and distress everywhere. However, in wreaking that havoc, he does it with remarkable determination, enthusiasm and passion! His goals are to be condemned, but the passion with which he pursues them is to be emulated!

Consider our own synagogue communities. We are of one voice in holding up decency and righteousness as our goals. Our lives are defined by the observance of *mitzvoth*. We dutifully erect our *sukkot* and light our *chanukiot*; we arrive promptly for *minyan* and recite our prayers and blessings proficiently. My question, *how* do we pursue those noble goals?

Look around you in *shul*. Do you see determination and passion? Do you see a fraction of the inner fire that burns within Laban? No. We *shlep* into our familiar places and go through the motions. What we do is righteous and good. How we do those things does not inspire.

How can we expect the student who is struggling to keep up, who finds himself on the periphery for any number of reasons, to find his way to righteousness when the passion of Laban burns so much brighter than our own?

Those who destroy are heard.

Those who hate demand attention.

Those who stand for decency and goodness? They are too often silent. Why can’t we hear their outcry? When will we hear the roar of the vast majority of people who are good and decent and hold righteousness as their ideal?

It was not that long ago when American life was roiled in riots and protests, when American Universities were turned into armed camps and it seemed, in the words of Yeats, in his powerful poem, “The Second Coming”, that “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world…”. People were scared. It seemed that Laban has truly been let loose. It was at that time that President Richard Nixon called upon the “great silent majority” of Americans to stand with him against what seemed to be the forces of anarchy.

It seems that the majority is always silent.

But there are times, when the majority cannot afford to remain silent. We must learn from Laban that passion must fuel what we do. We must learn that only by matching evil passion for passion, voice for voice, determination for determination can we prevail.

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What is there to learn from Laban? The answer, Rav Meir Shapiro teaches thoughtfully, is that inasmuch as a person is obligated to serve God with every facet of his life, one must constantly be alert to *new ways* to achieve those goals. Just as one who seeks wealth is always on the lookout for new opportunities to increase his wealth, so too must we be looking for ways to increase our spiritual well-being. After all, when I see the lengths people go to in order to fulfill their carnal desires… how much *more* should I be willing to go to achieve my spiritual goals?

Rabbi Meir Shapiro makes clear that, far from boasting, Jacob was taking himself to task. “I lived with Laban all those years, I observed how single-minded he was in pursuit of his worldly desires. He let nothing get in his way. But I did not learn a lesson from him that could have enhanced my life.  Yes, I observed Taryag mitzvoth, but I never achieved the same fervor in pursuing my spiritual goals.  My excitement in observing mitzvoth paled to his thrill in pursuing his meaningless goals.”

We too often assume that our learning and observance must be measured against the finest and best among us. But such a perspective invites a sense of failure. How can I possibly live up to the standards and achievements of the Chofetz Chaim or Rav Aaron Kotler or Rav Moshe Feinstein? Wiser to evaluate our achievements not against the best but against the worst. *Im Laban*… It sounds odd. It *feels* odd. But isn’t that what Rav Shapiro’s teaching suggests? I cannot expect to be like Reb Moshe Zt’l or Reb Yaakov Zt’l but I *can* exceed the Labans of the world! I can certainly match the time and determination of those who instill fear and trembling in the world even if I can never match the time and spirituality of the best among us!

The Chofetz Chaim was once told about the seemingly enormous success of the missionaries throughout Europe.

“Oy vey!” the poor Jew cried. “What can we do to respond to all of this *sheker*, these lies, they are spreading?”

The Chofetz Chaim smiled. “If we were to work for the *emes* (truth) with an *emes* (genuine sincerity) like they work for the *sheker* with an *emes*, I can assure you that we would experience enormous success.”