

בס"ד
כ"ג כסלו תשפ"ב
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פרשת וישלח

Parshas Vayishlach begins with Yaakov preparing to face Esav again in Charan after twenty years of estrangement, where he comments "עם לבן גרתי," I lived with Lavan as a stranger. Rashi¹ brings two interpretations for this comment. One component is that this is an aspect of Yaakov's humility, for he is remarking to Esav, "You worried about the blessings that I took from our father that promised me mastery and material success and prosperity, but fear not; for the past twenty years, I have lived as a stranger in somebody else's house, and I have not gained the prominence that the blessing promised me." More famously, Rashi provides the explanation that גרתי is the numerical equivalent of תרי"ג, explaining that Yaakov didn't learn from Lavan's deeds and kept the 613 mitzvos, so he is expressing that, "while materially, I wasn't so successful, I wanted to let you know that I nonetheless was able to preserve my integrity, while my loyalty to mitzvos and values remained intact." Evidently, there are some things that Yaakov was ready to easily let go of, such as material prosperity, and there are other things that he tightly held onto, such as his commitment and fidelity to mitzvos.

There is, however, another dimension to the relationship between גרתי and תרי"ג מצוות שמרתי. Rav Moshe Shapiro cites an idea from the Shelah HaKadosh that the term *mitzvah* has its root not only in צו, referring to instruction, but also צוות, which means connection and company. The mitzvos are not just a list of instructions; they also define our association, belonging, and community, providing an identity by bonding us to HaKadosh Baruch Hu and making our place in His world of truth.

It is in this context, explains Rabbi Moshe Hauer, we can now understand another double layer of this verse. When Yaakov says that he lived with Lavan as a stranger because he kept mitzvos, it means that his anchor and identity came from Hashem's world, making him a foreign alien in Lavan's sphere. While Yaakov may have been a good guest with loyalty and commitment, working diligently through all kinds of weather to keep his deal and guard Lavan's flocks while serving as a caring contributor to the society around him, he was a stranger because the values of that society were so different from his own. The תרי"ג mitzvos defined his identity and sense of belonging, yielding the name לבן גרתי, a certain level of estrangement when it came to identity and values from the physical community that he was a part of.

In an essay penned for Tradition in 1964,² Rav Soloveitchik speaks of how as Jews, we are forced to "belong to the human society and, at the same time, we feel as strangers and outsiders... involved in the cultural endeavor, yet committed to another dimension of experience." He explains that we must handle both the "dignity of man" and "the sanctity of the covenantal community," dealing with a double-edged confrontation between universal and covenantal. The phrase עם לבן גרתי serves as a reflection of our own aspiration of mitzvos, allowing us to form an identity and association with values that the Torah proclaims as truths, which in turn creates a home for us not only in our mode of behavior but our sense of identity and values. While it may be accompanied by a sense of estrangement from our surrounding society and its values, that is simply a part of what it means to be Klal Yisrael in Galus. May we bear it with fortitude and dignity in the highest form, ensuring that the preservation of our Torah identity and values are imbued and inculcated in its mitzvos, now and forever.

¹ רש"י בראשית לב: ד"ה גרתי

² <https://traditiononline.org/confrontation/>