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VAYISHLACH: THE ANIMAL

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Yaakov's 20 Years With Lavan – How Did Nothing Rub Off?

I want to share a fascinating insight that needs to be expressed very carefully, because it's easy to misunderstand or twist what's being said. So I'm going to choose the next words slowly and precisely.

The Torah says that Yaakov sends a message to Esav:

“Im Lavan garti” — “I lived with Lavan...”

Rashi explains, as we mentioned previously:

“Garti” has the same letters as **Taryag** — 613.

Yaakov was saying:

“I lived with Lavan and still kept all **613 mitzvot**.

I didn't drop my learning.

I didn't drop my tefillah.

I didn't absorb his crooked ways.

I did not learn from his evil actions.”

The question is obvious:

How is that possible?

How does someone live with a Lavan — a manipulative, greedy, lying crook — for **20 years** and not absorb *anything*?

We all know how influence works.

My wife, for years, hated avocado.

Other people in my family hated olives.

You live around me long enough, eventually avocado and olives become part of your life.

You can't live in a house with someone and not pick things up.

You don't think you'll ever be a Mets fan — then one of your kids becomes a Mets fan and suddenly you find yourself checking the scores.

(Baruch Hashem, our house is a Yankees-only zone... but you get the point.)

You live with someone — your speech, your jokes, your eating habits, your reactions — all start to shift.

Chazal say:

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“Oy la’rasha, oy le’scheino” —

Woe to the wicked, and woe to his neighbor.

Live next to a rasha long enough and you begin to adopt his worldview, his language, his behaviors almost by osmosis.

So how can Yaakov say:

“Im Lavan garti... ve’taryag mitzvot shamarti...

ve’lo lamadti mi’ma’asav ha-ra’im”

“I lived with Lavan, kept all 613, and did not learn from his bad ways”?

How?

The Brisker Rav & the Rabbi From Hamburg

The Brisker Rav once met the Rabbi of Hamburg, and the rabbi asked him this exact question:

“How is it possible that a person can live with someone like Lavan for 20 years and not be influenced?”

And he gave a brilliant answer based on the verse.

Yaakov’s message to Esav continues:

I lived with Lavan “**va’yehi li shor va’chamor**” —

“and I had oxen and donkeys...”

On a simple level, he’s saying:

“I’m coming back with assets. I’ve been blessed with livestock.”

But this rabbi suggested a deeper layer:

Yaakov wasn’t just saying,

“I owned an ox and a donkey.”

He was saying:

“Lavan was my ox and my donkey.”

Meaning:

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Lavan never had spiritual influence over me because *in my eyes...*
he was not a role model, not a partner, not an equal.
He was the **equivalent of an animal** — an ox, a donkey — living purely for physical desire and self-preservation.

Now, stop.

This is where we must be careful.

The point is **not** that Jews see non-Jews as animals. That is absolutely not the Torah's view and not what is being said here.

The point is this:

When *anyone* — Jew or non-Jew — lives purely for their physical drives, with no higher purpose, no refinement, no morality — they are living the **life of an animal**.

They may have a human brain and a human passport, but the **life they are choosing** is an animal life.

And when you see that, you no longer aspire to imitate them.

You don't look at a horse and say:

“Maybe I should start flicking my tail like that.”

You don't see a dog and say:

“I like that barking, maybe I'll try it.”

You can live 20 years with your dog and you don't start barking.

You can live 20 years with a sheep and you don't start walking on all fours and going “baa.”

Because you understand instinctively:

That is not my category. I am not that.

Yaakov says:

“Lavan's life is pure animal — grabbing, twisting, always for himself.
I never saw him as a model for my own behavior.”

That was his protection.

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American Culture: The Tearoom, the Cholent, and the Escape Room

This is not only a Yaakov-in-Aram story.
It is our story in America.

You live in America long enough — you become American. Even with an accent.

How?

Let me give you one example: **Pesach programs**.

Go to a European Pesach program:

- Breakfast
- Lunch
- Dinner

That's it.

Go to an American Pesach program:

There is **never** a time of day when at least six kinds of food are not available somewhere. Ever.

And then, when you've been eating from early morning until late night, someone decides that at 1:00 AM, we still need more.

So we invent... **the Tearoom**.

The only thing it doesn't have is tea.

Cakes, jello, sushi, candy, fruit, more meat, you name it — and it must be open through the night to "bridge" you to the next meal.

This is not halacha.
This is not minhag.
This is just... **American excess**.

Or think of **cholent**.

Where did cholent come from?

Poverty.

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They couldn't afford meat, so they asked the butcher for bones. Bones went into water, add cheap potatoes, cheap beans, cheap barley — and whatever flavor the bones gave, that was Shabbat "meat."

Today?

Six types of cholent.

With hot dogs, without hot dogs, short rib cholent, marrow bone cholent.

(And by the way... hot dogs in cholent? That's an American crime. It's like putting a hot dog in your *Machsieh* — just don't.)

Same Shabbat, same pot — completely different spirit.

Or look at **Chanukah**:

Once upon a time, you got a gift on Chanukah. Singular.

Today: "What am I getting *tonight*?"

Every night: a present, an activity, an outing.

Chanukah vacation used to mean:

- A coloring book,
- Playing with your siblings in the yard,
- Maybe helping in the kitchen.

Now?

"Where are we going today?

Yesterday we did something; today we need *another* activity.

Escape room? Theme park? Trampoline place?"

You're paying \$50 per kid to lock them in a room so they can figure out how to get out. I can do that for free in my house. "Everyone in this room. Click. Mazal tov — you're in an escape room."

All of this quietly, slowly, **seeps in**.

You don't notice it.

It just becomes "normal."

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Throwaway Culture: Phones, Cars, and Bal Tashchit

Our culture is built today on **disposability**.

- One-time-use plates
- One-time-use cutlery
- One-time-use contact lenses
- And sometimes... one-time-use relationships.

Don't like your phone?

Get a new one.

Don't like your car?

Lease a new one every 18 months.

Don't like your marriage?

Throw it out and replace.

The Torah says:

“Bal tashchit” — don't waste, don't destroy.

I saw an article recently: the economy is “struggling” because Americans are *holding on to their phones longer*.

Imagine — people using a phone for 3 years!

The horror.

And why are we suddenly able to do that?

Because the courts caught phone manufacturers deliberately making phones obsolete, “bricking” older models to force upgrades. When they had to stop, magically the same phone works fine for 3 years.

Cars:

- Leases used to be 48 months,

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- then 36,
- then 24,
- now 18.

Eighteen months?

It takes me that long to learn all the buttons and menus just to turn off the crazy climate control my spouse set to 95°F.

Do you *need* a new car?

No.

But the culture whispers endlessly: “**Newer, newer, newer.**”

Again — I’m not saying it’s assur to lease a nice car or buy a new phone.

I’m saying:

Be aware: this is not “you,” it’s the **water you’re swimming in.**

The Generational Drift

Immigrant parents raised children with one mindset.

By the time the youngest arrives, the parenting has shifted halfway to the new culture.

My father escaped from Syria.

I was raised with “old country” ideas — food wasn’t wasted, money wasn’t thrown, life was simple.

By the time we got to my youngest siblings, my parents’ mindset had already shifted. The *chinuch* they got was much more “American.”

You might see it in your own family:

The oldest child and the youngest feel like they were raised in two different worlds.

That’s what **cultural seepage** looks like.

And if we don’t notice it, we just say:

“This is normal.”

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So How Did Yaakov Resist It? Seeing Lavan as an Animal

Now we can return to our core question:

How did Yaakov not get influenced by Lavan?

Because in Yaakov's eyes, Lavan's life was *purely animalistic*.

Again — not in an insulting, “he’s worthless” way.

There’s nothing wrong with being a donkey — **if you were born a donkey**.

But if you were born a human being with a **neshama**, with **Torah**, with the capacity for growth — and you choose to live only as a donkey — that is tragic.

Yaakov says:

“I never looked at Lavan as a model for how a human should live.
I saw him as a creature chasing money, comfort, and control — no higher purpose.
That’s not what I aspire to be.”

And because of that, his behaviors didn’t become attractive, didn’t become “normal.”

Human vs. Animal: When Does “Humanity” Start?

We all have an **animal** inside us:

- We eat — animals eat.
- We sleep — animals sleep.
- We use the bathroom — animals do, too.

Those parts are not uniquely human.

Humanity begins where:

- **Sechel** (mind)
- **Lev** (heart)

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- **Ratzon** (will)

start to rule over instinct.

On Pesach, we bring the **Korban HaOmer** — barley, classic **animal** food.

On Shavuot, we bring **Shtei HaLechem** — wheat, classic **human** food.

Chazal say:

- Pesach: we are taken out of Egypt physically.
- Shavuot: we receive Torah — we become truly **human**.

The 49 days of the Omer are the journey from **animal** to **human**.

A person who never works on anger, ego, desire, jealousy — who just lives as they are — may be a very nice animal, a very charming animal, even a humble animal if they were born that way...

...but without conscious growth, they're still living **below** their human potential.

So when Yaakov sees Lavan acting like a spiritual animal — grabbing, scheming, living only for himself — he doesn't say:

“Wow, that looks good.”

He says:

“That is a donkey.
And I don't copy donkeys.”

Protest Culture, Parenting, and Not Barking Back

We live in a city where if you don't like something, you take to the streets. Block traffic, scream, wave signs, shout people down.

At some point, others say:

“They're protesting? We also have to protest!”

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Is that always the right answer?
Maybe, maybe not. Case-by-case.

But here's the key:

If you think their behavior is animalistic — chaotic, violent, selfish — what sense does it make to **join them in the mud?**

Same with parenting:

The two-year-old at 2 AM in the airport is screaming, overtired, falling apart.
That's what toddlers *do*.

But then the parent, exhausted, starts screaming too — throwing their own tantrum at the toddler.

Who's the adult?

When someone goes low, the Torah doesn't say:

“Just grit your teeth and remember to go high.”

It says:

See them for what they're doing.
You are human. They are, in this moment, acting like an animal.
Don't bark back.

Rav Diskin's Question: Why Wasn't Lavan Influenced by Yaakov?

We've answered how Yaakov wasn't influenced by Lavan.

But Rav Eliyahu Diskin asks:

Why wasn't Lavan influenced by Yaakov?

If spending Shabbat with a tzaddik can change your life...
How does someone live with Yaakov Avinu for 20 years and walk away **unchanged**?

He answers with a brilliant mashal:

Imagine someone merits to meet the **Chafetz Chaim** — and is transformed forever.

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Now imagine you bring a **donkey** to meet the Chafetz Chaim.
Afterwards, you interview the donkey:

“So, what did you think of the Chafetz Chaim?”

The donkey says:

“About 120 pounds.”

That's all he can see.

The donkey doesn't perceive holiness or Torah or character refinement.
He perceives **weight on his back**.

Lavan looked at Yaakov and saw...

- Not a tzaddik
- Not a giant of spirit
- Not a man of truth

He just saw a person he could **use**.

When you've ever given to someone — money, time, favors, love — and they later stab you in the back, and you think:

“How could they do that to me after everything I've done for them?”

The answer is painful but simple:

They never saw you.
They only saw what you could **give** them.

They are like a **dog**.

A dog goes from person to person, sniffing:

“Do you have treats? Will you scratch my belly?”

If yes — they love you.
If no — they move on.

Some people are like that — their only interest in a human being is:

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“What can this person do for me?”

They are living in **dog mode**.

They did not see your kindness, your effort, your neshama — they only saw the “treats.”

Just as you don’t become a dog when you’re around a dog —
you don’t become a donkey when you’re around a donkey —
but you also can’t expect them to respond like humans.

The Final Lens

So what have we learned?

There are two modes of living:

1. Living your humanness

- Working on yourself
- Rising above instinct
- Using Torah to refine character
- Seeing people, not just benefits

2. Living your animalness

- Chasing food, comfort, pleasure, ego
- Using others
- Throwaway culture
- No inner growth

This is **not** about Jew vs. non-Jew.

You can have a non-Jew living a deeply human life of morality and compassion.

You can have a Jew living purely an animal life.

The point is:

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When you recognize *what mode* someone is living in,
you stop being confused about how to relate to them.

You don't imitate them.

You don't let their behavior define your own.

You don't descend into barking, braying, or tantruming because they are.

And you don't let surrounding culture — even when it's everywhere — quietly rewrite your definition of "normal."

May Hashem bless us to see clearly:

- To recognize when we are slipping into animal-mode
- To choose to live as **humans with neshamot**
- To be influenced by the Yaakovs in our lives, not the Lavans
- And to keep our families, our roads, and our souls safe.

Shabbat Table Discussion Questions

1. **Where do you most feel the "American excess" seeping into your life or home?**
(Food, shopping, phones, vacations, kids' expectations...)
2. **Who in your environment is a "Yaakov" — a person whose presence should influence you upward?**
Do you let them?
3. **Can you identify a time when you treated someone living fully in "animal-mode" as if they were a moral compass — and got hurt? What did you learn?**

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4. **In what area of your life are you currently living on “instinct” rather than in a conscious, chosen, human way?**
5. **How can you build one small habit between Pesach and Shavuot (or between now and Shavuot) that moves you from barley (animal) to wheat (human)?**
6. **What practical rule can you adopt — like the Berkowitz zero-tolerance rule for drinking and driving — that will keep your “animal side” from taking over in moments of weakness?**
