

Was Laban Really Worse than Pharaoh?

Avi Garelick, Principal, Rebecca and Israel Ivry Prozdor High School, JTS



שְׁפָרְעָה לֹא גָזַר אֶלָּא עַל הַזְּכָרִים, וְלִבְנֵי בִקְשׁ לַעֲקֹר אֶת־הַכֹּל

“For Pharaoh only decreed against the male babies—but Laban sought to uproot it all.”

According to the Passover Haggadah, Laban, Jacob’s father-in-law, is the archvillain of Jewish history, even more dangerous than the Pharaoh who enslaved the people of Israel and launched a campaign of male infanticide. Yet, after this provocative comparison, the Haggadah leaves the rest as an exercise for the reader. Laban “sought to uproot it all,” but how? What makes Laban so dangerous?

Laban, like Pharaoh, was a slave master. According to some traditional views, Jacob himself was his slave. Rabbi Yehuda ben Eliezer, a 12th–13th century Tosafist, wrote a commentary in which he cites the opinion of Rabbi Jacob of Orleans (12th century) that Jacob was equivalent to the Hebrew slave of the Covenant Code in Parashat Mishpatim (Exod. 21:2–6). For these Tosafists, this legal template helps explain why Laban, after 20 years of Jacob’s labor, sees himself as entitled to his family and all his work: “The daughters are my daughters, the sons are my sons, the flocks are my flocks—all that you see is mine” (Gen. 31:43). This might seem like an outrageous tantrum, but according to these Tosafists, Laban was using the power of the law to his advantage: “If [the Hebrew slave] came by himself, he shall go out by himself . . . If his master should give him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall be her master’s, and he shall go out by himself” (Exod. 21:3–4).

This perspective on Laban and Jacob’s relationship is possible because of the wide lexical range of the root עבד in Biblical Hebrew, which can mean slavery as well as remunerated labor. Thus, at the beginning of Jacob’s stay in Aram, when he says “I will serve (e’evadekhah) seven years

for Rachel your younger daughter” (Gen. 29:18), his proposal could entail any number of possible arrangements of power and ownership. If Laban was a slave master, he had a total right of ownership over Jacob’s life and family.

Whether or not we accept the Tosafist tradition of Jacob’s slavery, Laban is certainly guilty of mistreating his own daughters. Even in a patriarchal society, where he was entitled to strong rights of ownership over his daughters’ sexuality, Laban abused his power. As Rachel and Leah complain to Jacob: “Why, we have been counted by him as strangers, for he has sold us, and he has wholly consumed our money” (Gen. 31:15). They clearly feel used by their own father. As the scholar and translator Robert Alter explains in his commentary on the verse, a bride-price in those times would customarily have been shared by a father with his daughter, thus improving her position and the position of her new family. Laban, in contrast, “has evidently pocketed all the fruits of Jacob’s fourteen years of labor. His daughters thus see themselves reduced to chattel by their father, not married off but rather sold for profit, as though they were not his flesh and blood.” For Laban, the efforts of his daughters and their maidservants to bear and raise a family of their own are all on his behalf and for his benefit. When they seek their independence, he chases them down. If it weren’t for divine intervention, Laban may indeed have uprooted it all.

Ultimately, Laban was more dangerous than Pharaoh because his power and abuse was born of familial relations. He combined a slave master’s ruthlessness with a patriarch’s sense of aggrieved entitlement. Indeed, sometimes the greatest villains are those closest to you, who see your growth in terms of their own advantage, and your independence as a threat.

The Importance of Being Humble

Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, Director
of Israel Programs, JTS

With the threat of fratricide hanging over his head and in light of his parents' wish, Jacob makes a quick exit from Beersheba and heads toward Haran, where he will presumably find a loving and loyal wife. As Jacob's journey ensues, a cryptic episode unfolds at the beginning of our parashah. Torah narrates, "Jacob left Beersheba and went to Haran. He came upon a certain place and stopped there for the night, for the sun had set" ([Gen. 28:10-11](#)). Jacob prepares his makeshift bed in the wilderness and dreams of angels ascending and descending a mystical ladder. Gordon Wenham writes,

Other biblical stories of travelers overtaken by nightfall tell of them being put up for the night by people living in the area. That Jacob is forced to bed down under the stars may suggest his distance from human habitation, or his estrangement, or simply affirm that providence overruled the traditional custom of finding lodging in someone's house. (Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis*, 221)

Is there another perspective on Jacob's wilderness encampment?

[Genesis Rabbah 68:10](#), a collection of midrash on the book of Genesis, relates,

"For the sun had set"—read that God extinguished the sun; that is, God caused the sun to set prematurely, so that God might speak with Jacob in privacy. God's action may be understood by the parable of the king's admirer who visited him occasionally. The king would command, "Extinguish the lamps, extinguish the candles and lanterns—for I wish to speak with my friend in secret."

While Wenham spells out a *query* of the circumstances under which Jacob falls into his deep sleep, the midrash hints at a deep and insightful *answer*: shelter is not provided for the patriarch because God wishes to be the one to protect and communicate with Jacob. According to *Genesis Rabbah*, God is setting the stage for a personal tête-à-tête with Jacob—a meeting that can only unfold under the curtain of secrecy and darkness. Indeed, the midrash goes even deeper: it speaks to the closeness and intimacy of the relationship between God and Jacob. The message being communicated to the servant must be delivered in the confines of a closed space, and so a sacred place and appointed time are chosen for the revelation that Jacob receives. The setting is the wilderness. Stripped of distraction, here Jacob can now focus on the divine.

So too is the case with us. To encounter God and sanctity in our lives, we must remove ourselves from the daily routine—to visit a sick friend or relative, to make time for learning or to show our solidarity with Israel. Removing ourselves from routine is not an inconvenience. It is an indispensable step toward encountering the Image of God.

This piece was originally published in 2012.