

**This Dvar Torah is Dedicated  
By Mendy and Ita Klein  
In honor of Rabbi Yitzi Hurwitz, for the  
continued inspiration you provide for us all**

**Are Physical Possessions Good or Bad?**

In this week's Parsha, Vayishlach, Yaakov sends angels to his brother, Esav. Part of the message they were to tell him was, "I sojourned [*garti*] with Lavan."<sup>1</sup> Rashi<sup>2</sup> gives two explanations on the word, '*garti*.' First, that it is like the word, '*ger*,' which means 'stranger,' because the whole time he lived by Lavan, he was like a stranger. Second, that Yaakov was hinting to Esav that during his sojourn with Lavan, he kept the 613 Mitzvos, as the numerical value of the word *garti* is 613.

What is the connection between the homiletical explanation, that Yaakov kept the 613 Mitzvos, with the simple meaning of the verse, that he sojourned at Lavan's? Why was it important for Yaakov to let Esav know that he kept the 613 Mitzvos? And finally, what lesson are we meant to learn from this?

Yaakov's descent to Charan, where he lived with Lavan, is the descent of the Neshama into the world, and on a broader perspective, the descent of the Jewish People into exile. Your Neshama descends to accomplish a mission, to refine your body and the world around you into a dwelling for Hashem.<sup>3</sup> When you do this, you have completed your part of the mission. When we complete our missions collectively, Hashem will dwell openly in this world, and Moshiach will be here.

Yaakov is teaching us the correct approach to succeed in our mission.

Rashi's first explanation is that *garti* comes from *ger*, a stranger. When you are home, everything has to be just right, but when you are traveling on

the way, things don't have to be perfect; you make due with what is available, because it is not so important.<sup>4</sup>

Lavan and Esav symbolize physical needs, wants, and pleasures. The question is, are you at home by Lavan – i.e., are your physical needs, wants and pleasures most important? – or are you a stranger, simply traveling through Lavan's place, meaning that the spiritual is most important and the physical is not so important?

Yaakov was saying that he was like a stranger traveling through Lavan's place. The physical was not so important to him; his focus was on the spiritual. Therefore, he was successful in his mission.

To prove that he was successful, Yaakov says, "I acquired cattle, donkeys, sheep..."<sup>5</sup> This seems to contradict what was said before, that the physical was not important to Yaakov. So, was it important or not?

There are different approaches one can have to the world. One approach is that the physical is all that is important, and success is measured by how many things you have. This is Lavan and Esav's approach.

A second approach is that only the spiritual is important. In this approach, all physical gains are shunned.

Then, there is Yaakov's approach: Making the spiritual most important, but recognizing that everything in the world has a spiritual purpose. In other words, the physical becomes important for the spiritual reason it exists. So, the physical isn't bad at all, it just has to be harnessed and used for its G-dly purpose. When it is just physical, it is negative; but when it is viewed through spiritual lenses, it is positive.

<sup>1</sup> Bereishis, 32:5.

<sup>2</sup> Rashi to Bereishis, 32:5.

<sup>3</sup> "*Dira Bitachtonim*," Midrash Tanchuma, Nasso 16; Bechukosai 3. Bereishis Rabba, end of chap. 3. Bamidbar Rabba, chap. 13, par. 6. Tanya, chap. 36.

<sup>4</sup> See *Lekutei Dibburim*, vol. 2, *likut* 11, p. 214, the story of the Maggid of Mezrich.

<sup>5</sup> Bereishis, 32:6.

This will help us understand a strange thing in the Midrash. On the verse, “I acquired cattle, donkeys, sheep,” etc., the Midrash<sup>6</sup> says that the word “donkey” refers to King Moshiach, as it says about Moshiach that he will be “a pauper, riding on a donkey.”<sup>7</sup> How does this fit in with what Yaakov was saying?

Because Yaakov was saying that he did his part to bring Moshiach.

In order for Moshiach to come, we have to make this world into a dwelling place for Hashem. We have to take ownership of it and refine it. This is done through Torah and Mitzvos and by using your possessions to serve Hashem. Conveying that he kept the 613 Mitzvos even while at Lavan’s, Yaakov was saying that he did this work.

From this perspective, the more you acquire doing your mission – meaning, the more of the physical world you refine – the more successful you become. And that is what Yaakov is telling Esav: “See how much I accomplished. I have acquired the spiritual essence of all these things, now they are realizing their G-dly purpose. I have done my part to bring Moshiach.”

By sending these messages, Yaakov was hinting to Esav, “I have completed my mission despite all the difficulties of living in exile, with Lavan. Did you do the same?”

The angels returned to Yaakov with the answer, “We came to your brother to Esav.”<sup>8</sup> You were hoping that he would be like a brother, that he would be the same as you, but he is still Esav.<sup>9</sup> He still only sees the physical world as important, he has not done his part.

The lesson here is for everyone, at every time and in every place, no matter the situation. A Jew must do his best to refine himself and his part of the world, making it into a home for Hashem, and

readying it for the Redemption. This is true even if the world around him doesn’t seem to be going in the same direction, and others don’t seem to be doing their part, and maybe they are even acting as a Lavan or an Esav. Don’t think that it is a waste, because *you* are still bringing the Redemption closer. And being that we are meant to think of the world as always holding in a balance,<sup>10</sup> perhaps it will be your next effort that will tip the scales and usher in the Redemption. This is how powerful the effort of a single individual can be.

The key to accomplishing your part is treating the spiritual as most important, and allowing the physical to follow, using it for its G-dly purposes.<sup>11</sup>

May our efforts to make this world into a home for Hashem succeed, and usher in the coming of Moshiach. May it happen soon. The time has come.

<sup>6</sup> Bereishis Rabba, chap. 75, par. 6.

<sup>7</sup> Zachariah, 9:9.

<sup>8</sup> Bereishis, 32:7.

<sup>9</sup> See Rashi to Bereishis 32:7, 12.

<sup>10</sup> See Talmud, Kiddushin, 40b.

<sup>11</sup> *Lekutei Sichos*, vol. 1, pp. 68–70.