

Laban Pursues Jacob

31: 22-42

DIG: What was Laban's fear regarding the household gods? Why did Laban sing a different tune once he confronted Jacob? Why does Ya'akov react the way he does? How did Jacob inadvertently put Rachel's life in danger?

REFLECT: Are you blameless in all your business dealings? How do you react when you have been accused unjustly?

Laban was busy shearing sheep and the festivities that went along with that annual event. For shepherds, it was the busiest time of the year. **On the third day** after he had left, Laban was told that Jacob (Hebrew: Ya'akov) had fled (31:22). This three day separation was Laban's own choosing, and I am sure he realized this when he heard that Jacob had fled. That made Laban and his sons furious, but they could not just drop everything and leave because that might cost him more money. So by the time they were ready to leave, probably another couple days had passed.

Taking his sons with him, Laban pushed hard for seven days. No doubt he brought with him a considerable force. Covering over forty miles a day, they intended to bring back the fugitives by force if necessary. They were angry, determined, and they were not going to let Jacob take their flocks to Canaan. If he resisted, his blood would be on his own hands. They finally caught up with him in the hill country of Gilead (31:23). Jacob had also pitched his tent there when Laban overtook him. Knowing that Jacob and his wives and children couldn't escape, and being very tired, Laban and his sons camped there, too (31:25). If there was going to be a confrontation the next day, they needed their rest.

But Laban had to deal with someone who was more powerful than Jacob. That night, God came to Laban the Aramean in a dream! Twenty years earlier at Bethel, ADONAI, God promised Jacob that He would be with him, that He would watch over him and bring him back to the Promised Land of Canaan (28:15). Laban got the unmistakable message that he was not to harm Ya'akov in any way, or prevent him from continuing on his journey. Although he didn't have a personal relationship with ADONAI, Laban knew enough about Him to do what He said. And God told him, "Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad" *in other words, be careful what you say and do* (31:24). Earlier God also came to Abimelech in a dream one night and warned him that he was as good as dead if he touched Sarah (20:3). That is probably the same message that Laban got here. Do not touch the LORD's anointed (First Samuel 24:6-7 KJ).

Early the next morning, **Laban** and **his** relatives overwhelmed the camp of **Ya'akov** and **his** family. As **they** rode into camp, you could cut the tension with a knife. **Laban** was frustrated and angry because **he** wanted to harm **Jacob**, and **Laban's** sons were desperate for **Jacob's** flocks. But **Ya'akov** was confident that **God** would fulfill **His** promises to **him**.

When **Laban** finally met **Jacob** face to face he launched into a hypocritical tirade and said to him: **What have you done? You've deceived me, and you've carried off my daughters like prisoners of war. Why did you run off secretly and hide from me? Why didn't you tell me, so I could send you away with joy and singing to the music of tambourines and harps? You didn't even let me kiss my grandchildren and my daughters' goodbye. You have done a foolish thing (31:26-28).** Everybody there knew **he** was lying. **Laban** didn't care about **his** daughters before, and **he** certainly didn't care about them now. The real reason **he** came after **Jacob** was to harm **him** and get **his** flocks and herds back.

Laban tells **Ya'akov** that **he** had the power to harm **him**, and doubtless would have, but for the warning from **God** the previous night. **But last night the God of your father** said to me: **Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad.** Unable to harm **him**, **Laban** self-righteously charges **Jacob** with the theft of **his** household gods. **Now you have gone off because you longed to return to your father's house. But why did you steal my gods (31:29-30)?** **Laban** believes that **Ya'akov** will come back some day to claim **his** property by producing these **household gods**, but **Jacob** has no knowledge of **them**.

Before answering **Laban's** charge of the theft of **the household gods** **Jacob**, wanted to tell **Laban** and everyone else exactly *why* **he** had left so suddenly and secretly. **Laban** had asked the question and, even though **Jacob** knew that **Laban** knew the real answer already, all the others did not. So **he** confessed: **I was afraid to tell you I was leaving, because I thought you would take your daughters away from me by force (31:31).** If that were the case, **Jacob** would certainly have fought and blood would have been shed. In **his** mind, that was a real possibility. So it was far better for **him** to take **his** family and possessions and slip away quietly.

As far as **the household gods** were concerned, **Jacob** had no idea what **Laban** was talking about. In fact, the very thought made **him** angry. **But if you find anyone who has your gods, that person shall not live.** The Code of Hammurabi said that stealing **household gods** was punishable by death. **In the presence of our relatives, see for yourself whether there is anything of yours here with me; and if so, take it.** Now **Ya'akov** did not know that **Rachel** had stolen the gods and hid them inside her camel's saddle. So **Laban** started searching; **he** went into **Jacob's** tent and into **Leah's** tent and into the tent of the two

maidservants, but he found nothing. After he came out of Leah's tent, there was one last tent to search, and he entered Rachel's tent (31:32-33).

Now Rachel had taken the household gods and put them inside her camel's saddle and was sitting on them. Because of Jacob's vow, her life was then in danger. There was no reason to believe that Laban would execute his own daughter, but he was becoming more and more unstable. Laban searched through everything in the tent but found nothing (31:34). The only place left to search was the camel's saddle upon which Rachel was sitting.

There can be no doubt that she was afraid for herself and her husband. At this point if she confessed, there was no telling what her father might do. No, her best strategy was to do exactly what she did. But the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. Rachel said to her father, "Don't be angry, my lord, that I cannot stand up in your presence; I'm having my period." This was the local custom. She said she was in pain and discomfort and could not rise. Therefore, in the last analysis, Laban was deceived by local custom, just as he had deceived Jacob by local custom (29:26). God allowed her plan to succeed because Jacob was innocent of all wrongdoing. If found, Laban would have accused Ya'akov of stealing and lying even though he knew Jacob was innocent. So he searched but could not find the household gods (31:35). Jacob got a lot more confident at that point.

Ya'akov, who had suffered for so many years at the hands of Laban, was angry and finally blew his top. He defended himself by asking: What is my crime? What sin have I committed that you hunt me down? Now that you have searched through all my goods, what have you found that belongs to your household? Put it here in front of your relatives and mine, and let them judge between the two of us (31:36-37). Of course Laban produces nothing because he had no evidence. He could only stand there in embarrassed silence.

Once having begun his impassioned protest, Jacob could hardly restrain himself. He had waited so long to express his resentment at Laban's treatment, and now he had to get it completely off his chest.⁴⁹⁵ He continued: I have been with you for twenty years now. Your sheep and goats have not miscarried, which frequently happened to careless shepherds, neither have I eaten rams from your flocks, which was a common sin among shepherds at that time, but because Jacob was an honest man, he never did it (31:38).

I did not bring you animals torn by wild beasts. The common practice was that if a wild beast killed a shepherd's animal, he could bring the carcass of the animal to the owner to show that he was not at fault, and the owner would bear the loss. But Jacob never did that; instead, he bore the loss himself from his own flocks. And you demanded payment from me for whatever was stolen by day or night (31:39).

This was what I had to endure: The heat consumed me in the daytime and the cold at night, and sleep fled from my eyes (31:40). This was no mama's boy. Earlier, when **Jacob** was described as **staying among the tents (25:27)**, this meant that **he** had gone into the family business of being a shepherd, unlike **his** brother Esau. What is being described here are the difficulties of the life of a shepherd.

According to the Code of Hammurabi, any charge of negligence could be challenged in court. Shepherds gave a receipt of animals they took to the owner, and they were supposed to return the animals with a reasonable increase. They were allowed to use some for food. However, they were not responsible for those animals killed by wild beasts or lightning. But any loss due to carelessness had to be repaid ten times over. This shows that **Ya'akov** didn't even demand **his** rights that **he** could have claimed under the legal system at that time. **He** was an honest man who was beyond **rebuke**.

It was like this for the twenty years I was in your household. I worked for you fourteen years for your two daughters and six years for your flocks, and despite all of this, you changed my wages ten times (31:41). At every turn, **Laban** proved **himself** to be untrustworthy.

Ya'akov appealed to **God** just as **Laban** had done earlier (31:29). Speaking to **Laban** he said: **If the God of my father, the God of Abraham, had not been with me, and had the fear of the God of Isaac not been with you, you would surely have sent me away the way I came to you, empty-handed. But God has seen my hardship and the toil of my hands, and last night he rebuked you (31:42).** Therefore, in the eyes of **God**, who was the **Israelite in whom there** was much **guile** (John 1:47 KJ)? In **God's** estimation, it was **Laban!** Although **Jacob** was beyond **rebuke**, **God** had rebuked **Laban** the night before.