

I sojourned with Lavan and have lingered until now. (32:5)

The numerical equivalent of “h,rd”, “*garti*” is 613, or dhr., *taryag*, which is the number of *mitzvos* the Jew is commanded to observe. Thus, the *Midrash* interprets Yaakov’s words to mean, “Although I have sojourned with Lavan, I have observed the 613 *mitzvos*, and I have not learned from his evil ways.” Yaakov was affirming his righteousness, despite his exposure to Eisav’s evil environment.

We can derive an important lesson from this *pasuk*. Yaakov *Avinu* stated emphatically that he had observed all 613 *mitzvos*. Yet, he also asserts that he had not been influenced by Lavan’s evil ways. Is it not understood that if he had observed all the *mitzvos*, he could not have fallen under Lavan’s evil influence? We see from here that one can be observant and still fall prey to harmful environmental influences. Yaakov exemplified religious observance. He was so committed to serving Hashem that Lavan’s antagonistic ways had no influence over him.

Horav Ovadia Yosef, Shlita, cites a parable from the **Ben Ish Chai** to render a novel interpretation of this *Midrash*. Once, the *yetzer tov*, good inclination, and the *yetzer hora*, evil inclination, met. The *yetzer hora* said to the *yetzer tov*, “Why should we always be at odds with one another? Let us lay down our arms and make peace. I will give you the list of my ‘clients,’ and you will give me the list of yours.”

The *yetzer tov* had a great *tzaddik* under his influence. He was a great scholar who devoted most of his day to poring through *Torah* and its commentaries. According to the deal, the *yetzer tov* was to give over all his clients, and this sublime Jew was to be included. As usual, our *tzaddik* sat at night and studied until the wee hours of the morning. According to the agreement, the *yetzer hora* could now attempt to sway this person over to his side. He convinced the *tzaddik* to take a break and go outside to get some fresh air. Once he went outside, he started walking. He ended up in the seedier part of town in front of a tavern. Out of curiosity, he entered the tavern and found a group of men sitting around a table playing cards. In front of these men were drinks and pastries, but, due to their total focus on the game, they ignored the “refreshments.” The *tzaddik* stayed awhile, observing the players in the game before finally leaving for home.

When the *tzaddik* returned home, he immediately sat himself down on the floor and began to cry hysterically. The sounds of his weeping were so loud and intense that they woke up his family. His wife came running to him. “What is wrong? Why are you crying so?” He told her, “Until tonight I thought I was ‘gold’; I thought I was observant to the extreme. Now I see I am no more than ‘copper.’ My commitment is not as intense as it should be.” He continued to relate to her his sojourn into the city and what he had seen at the tavern. “Do you know that those men never looked up from their cards? They ignored their food; that’s how engrossed they were in their game. I cannot say that! When I study *Torah*, my mind ‘wanders,’ and I get hungry. I am not studying diligently enough! From now on, I will apply myself better to the *Torah*!”

When the *yetzer tov* met the *yetzer hora* the next day, the *yetzer hora* asked to rescind their agreement. “Not only was I unsuccessful in swaying the *tzaddik* away from *Torah* study. In fact, he became more committed to it!”

We now understand Yaakov’s statement: “I observed *taryag mitzvos*, but “regrettably” I did not learn from Lavan’s ways. I did not apply myself to *Torah* as Lavan applies himself to his evil practices.” He was determined to the point of self-sacrifice to carry out his diabolical schemes. If there is anything we can learn from the “Lavans,” of this world, it is their dedication to evil.