

With Lavan, I lived. (32:5)

Rashi interprets the phrase, *Im Lavan garti*, “With Lavan, I lived,” as a profound message to Eisav. The word *garti* has the same letters (hence, the same *gematria*, numerical value) as *taryag*, 613 (*mitzvos*). Yaakov intimated to Eisav, “I do not fear your influence on me. I lived for years with the wicked Lavan; yet, I did not learn from his evil ways. I still was able to observe all *taryag mitzvos*. Yaakov seems to be making two statements: A) I observed the entire Torah, B) I did not learn from Lavan’s evil ways. Is this not obvious? If one observes the entire Torah, clearly he is not a student of Lavan. The disciples of Lavan do not observe the Torah, and those who adhere to the Torah are not influenced by Lavan!

Horav Zaidel Epstein, zl, derives from here that it is possible for one to be fully Torah observant, yet remain a *talmid*, student, of Lavan. The two are not necessarily inconsistent with one another. Obviously, this must be explained, since a Torah observant Jew cannot possibly be an adherent of Lavan’s values and principles – or can he? The *Mashgiach* explains this based upon a well-known principle expounded by *Ramban* in his commentary to *Parashas Kedoshim* (*Vayikra* 19:2), in which he explains the concept of *Kedoshim tiheyu*, “You shall be holy.” What is the meaning of holiness? How is our concept of holiness different from that understood by general world society? *Ramban* contends that holiness is not limited to the observance of any specific category of *mitzvos* or to the fulfillment of any particular set of activities or deeds; rather, it is an exhortation that one’s approach to life and living be governed by moderation, especially in those areas of human endeavor which are permissible. The *Ramban*’s phrase assailing such behavior has been immortalized: *Naval birshus haTorah*; “A degenerate with the permission of the Torah.” Such a person executes the technical demands of a *mitzvah*, including the minutae, yet surrenders himself to self-indulgence, gluttony, and licentious behavior. Although not committing a specific prohibition, his behavior is not Torah-oriented. A Jew must go beyond his practical obedience; he must be *kadeish atzmecha b’mutar lach*, “Sanctify himself/yourself in what is permissible,” thus achieving the level of *kedushah*, holiness.

Lavan lived for *olam hazeh*, this world, with its materialistic and physical pleasures. He clung to them passionately. Yaakov *Avinu* could have been influenced by his behavior, to the extent that he could “placate” total *mitzvah* performance while achieving those worldly pleasures that were not distinctly incongruous with Torah dictate. We derive a powerful lesson to incorporate into our lives: One should not assume that by studying Torah and observing *mitzvos* -- even studying diligently and observing every aspect of the *mitzvos* -- he is home free. He must accompany his spiritual devotion with an abrogation of *olam hazeh*, dedicating himself to a life in which physical pleasure -- unless dedicated for a lofty, spiritual purpose -- is not his life’s focus, nor is materialism his guiding light. Torah and *mitzvos* mean spirituality. Materialism and physicality are present to help, not to lead.