

Then Lavan spoke up and said to Yaakov, “The daughters are my daughters, the children are my children and the flock is my flock, and all that you see is mine.” (31:43)

Lavan came at Yaakov with a list of purported accusations, claiming that Yaakov had deceived him and was taking his daughters from him as if they were his captives. The man’s arrogance is staggering. He presented himself to Yaakov as if he were the injured party and Yaakov *Avinu*, the aggressor, an accusation which could not be further from the truth. When Yaakov replied, exposing Lavan’s untruths, Lavan attacked with his real feelings: everything belongs to me. So what? Does this mean he could violate Yaakov’s rights, mistreat, lie to and steal from him? How does Lavan’s response mitigate Yaakov’s remonstrance to him?

The *Brisker Rav, zl*, quoted a comment he heard from the saintly *Chafetz Chaim*. Lavan retorted, “Who are you to accuse me? You are not a *baal davar*, a worthy opponent, someone whom I must consider as a person. Everything that you see is mine. You have nothing: you are nothing!” The sage likened this perspective to the status of the Jews in Poland. They were viewed as nothing (less even than parasites). Thus, the anti-Semitic gentiles treated them any way they wanted. He supported this with a personal observation. The *Chafetz Chaim* had a passion to spend his twilight years in *Eretz Yisrael*. To leave Poland, however, he required an exit visa. When he applied at the government office, he was informed that he must present either a birth certificate or two witnesses to attest to his birth (date). He asked how could he produce a birth certificate or witnesses for an event that would make these men close to one hundred years old. In any normal country/situation, the government would have acquiesced on this demand out of deference to a man of his advanced years – what could he do? Nothing! Just learn Torah and perform acts of loving-kindness, so that the merit of these deeds would protect him.

This was the miserable status of Jews throughout Eastern Europe for centuries. Today, we call it anti-Semitism. In order to be “anti” and to hate, one must view the Jew as a worthy opponent, someone of stature, “worthy” of loathing, only because he is different than you. This, however, would demand a semblance of intelligence on the part of the anti-Semite. He would consider the Jew a threat, due to his moral, spiritual and cognitive superiority. If you cannot join them, hate them. This has been the prevalent attitude in contemporary times. Reviled, hounded, persecuted all because of envy, resulting from bigotry, narrowmindedness and lack of self-esteem.

What we suffered in Europe, however, was in many ways worse. In Europe we were viewed as nothing, non-entities, as trash and treated as such. Is it any wonder that, with the advent of the French Revolution and the tearing down of the ghetto walls, so many of our brothers and sisters just “lost it” and reneged everything. Finally, they were viewed as human beings, as equals. With a dearth of Jewish pride to restrain them and a thirst for acceptance, Judaism, to their misconception, was the hindrance. If the barometer for Jewish self-esteem is the goy’s opinion of us, then we are in a very sad state. It may be argued that it is better (for one’s ego) to be reviled for a

misconceived reason, such as being a threat to one's life of abandon and moral turpitude, than to be disdained, disregarded and condescended to, because he is viewed as a non-entity, not even worthy of hatred.