

RABBI ELYADA GOLDWICHT
Founder, Semichas Chaver Program
Rav Kehillat Lev Ra'anana

The Mirror of the Stick: How Yaakov's Sheep Reveal the Secret to Personal Growth

Deep down, every single one of us desires to live a life of meaning and continuous spiritual growth. Yet, throughout our journey, we inevitably face spiritual setbacks. When we make mistakes, the accompanying feelings of guilt and shame often trap us in a rut, leaving us feeling stuck and unable to move forward.

How do we break free from spiritual setbacks and pick ourselves up?

THE CRYPTIC DEAL WITH LAVAN

The answer is hidden within a section of Parshat Vayeitzei that is often glossed over. The Torah spends nearly fifty verses detailing Yaakov's complex livestock arrangement with Lavan. Yaakov agrees to keep only the discolored sheep, those that are striped (*akudim*), dotted (*nekudim*), or speckled (*v'vrudim*).

This raises an obvious question: Why does the eternal Torah devote so much space to Yaakov's sheep? What life-changing lesson were the Avot passing down to us through their chosen profession of serving as a shepherd?

TWO FLAWED APPROACHES TO OUR FLAWS

When dealing with personal flaws, humans typically fall into one of two extreme traps:

- **The White Sheep (Whitewashing):** Pretending to be perfect. Like Lavan, whose name literally means "white", these individuals overcompensate externally to project a flawless facade while concealing internal corruption.
- **The Black Sheep (Giving Up):** Identifying completely with the negative. These individuals highlight their flaws as excuses never to change, declaring, *"This is just who I am, and I can never improve."*

Both approaches completely stall growth. You cannot fix what you pretend doesn't exist, nor can you repair what you believe is hopelessly broken.

THE SECRET OF THE SPECKLED SHEEP

Yaakov rejected both the pure white and pure black sheep, choosing instead the spotted and speckled flock. These sheep represent a Jew committed to growth: someone who honestly acknowledges their imperfections but refuses to let those flaws define who they are.

- ***Akudim* (Stripes):** Consistent habits or ingrained patterns that need work.
- ***Nekudim* (Small Dots):** Daily minor slip-ups, such as small white lies or

distractions during davening.

- ***V'vrudim* (Speckles):** Major character challenges like anger or jealousy that periodically surface.

How do we turn the black and white sheep, those who resist growth, into striped, spotted, and speckled sheep willing to change? And how do we convince ourselves that we, too, can change?

To transform the flock, Yaakov placed peeled wooden sticks before the sheep. He stripped away the dark outer bark, revealing the pure white wood beneath. Each stick served as a mirror, conveying a powerful message: At your core, your *neshama* is pure and holy. Your flaws and sins are merely an outer layer of bark. They are not who you are, and they can be peeled away.

BELIEVING IN YOUR INNER LIGHT

Children are often afraid of the dark, but adults are frequently afraid of the light. Admitting that our essence is pure white is scary because it brings responsibility, it demands that we rise up and fulfill our true potential.

Rav Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin taught a revolutionary principle: Just as a person must believe in Hashem, he must also believe in himself, in the untainted, divine core within his soul. Sin is never your true identity; it is merely an external distraction.

When we stop whitewashing our mistakes and stop declaring ourselves failures, we unlock the secret of Yaakov's sheep. By seeing the pure white core within ourselves while actively working on our spots, speckles and stripes, we can break free from any rut and return home to Hashem! ■

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