

Ki Tavo: “The enigmatic phrase: *Arami oved avi*”

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Our sidrah opens with the instruction to the desert Israelites that, when they enter the land, they are to make an annual pilgrimage to the central sanctuary – as yet unnamed, but referred to as ‘the place that He will choose’ – and to bring the first fruits of their harvest as a token of thanks to God for the land’s bounty. The importance of this ceremony may be gauged by the fact that it was already referred to twice earlier in the Torah (Ex. 23:19 and 34:26).

This was the highlight of the festival of Shavuot and provides an added rationale for the Counting of the Omer which links it back to the festival of Pesach. Pesach celebrated the Exodus from Egypt; Shavuot, as a celebration of the land of Israel, clarified that the objective of Pesach was not mere physical liberation, but rather the acquisition of an entirely new spiritual perspective for which life in Israel was pivotal.

Living in Israel allowed the Israelites the freedom to celebrate every aspect of life and to consecrate their every activity to the service of God. Hence, as soon as they left Egypt, they counted the days to the Giving of the Torah to demonstrate that they appreciated that connection.

The presentation of the first fruits to the ministering priest was accompanied by a prescribed liturgical formula. No similar formula was prescribed, however, for recitation at the Temple on either Pesach or Sukkot since their commemorations relate to the Exodus experience rather than to life in Israel.

After the priest has placed the basket down before the altar, the Torah provides for the landowner to make the following declaration:

“*Arami oved avi* – My father was a fugitive Aramean [or ‘the Aramean sought to destroy my father’]. He went down to Egypt with meagre numbers and

sojourned there; but there he became a great and very populous nation. The Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us; they imposed heavy labour upon us. We cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our plea and saw our plight, our misery, and our oppression. The Lord freed us from Egypt by a mighty hand, by an outstretched arm and awesome power, and by signs and portents. He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. Wherefore I now bring the first fruits of the soil which You, O Lord, have given me” (Deut. 26:5-10).

Note that this instruction was issued long before the Israelites entered the land and were able to cultivate it and enjoy its yield. Yet the following sentence contains a give-away word that says everything about the qualities that the Torah wished our people to embody:

And you shall enjoy, together with the Levite and the stranger in your midst, (*v'ha-ger*) all the bounty that the Lord your God has bestowed upon you and your household (v.11).

The economic policies of all the nations of antiquity were geared toward generating wealth exclusively for the benefit of their own citizens, as reflected in the famous quote of Adam Smith: 'It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages.'

In the description of how the Israelite nation should enjoy its harvests, however, 'the stranger in your midst' has an equal cause for celebration with the Levites, one of Israel's highest echelons. Note also that this is not a one-off concession, but rather one of as many as thirty-six times in which the Torah exhorts us to welcome, protect, and support the stranger. Charitableness is, not surprisingly, embedded within the Jewish tradition and the Jewish heart.

THE ENIGMATIC PHRASE *ARAMI OVED AVI*

I have dealt, in previous ‘Torah Thoughts’ on this sidrah, with aspects of this declaration, as well as with the particular difficulty of discerning the precise sense of the phrase *Arami oved avi*.¹ Briefly, if ‘the Aramean’ refers to Laban, it is difficult to explain how he may be said to have ‘sought to destroy my father [Jacob]’ who lived to a ripe old age and of whom there is no reference to his having physically attacked Jacob!² Furthermore, as pointed out by Abraham ibn Ezra,³ the Hebrew verb *oved* is not transitive, so cannot take a direct object. It cannot mean, therefore, ‘destroyed [or ‘sought to destroy’] my father!’ Hence his rendering, ‘An impoverished Aramean was my father,’ or, according to others, ‘A wandering Aramean.’ Jacob was so called because, when he fled his parental home, he sojourned in Aram, Mesopotamia.

As we well know, this landowners’ declaration is quoted in our Pesach Haggadah. In that context, it invites the question of why, on the night(s) we focus on the wickedness of Pharaoh, the authors of the Haggadah have included a passage that paints Laban in even blacker colours by implying that, by comparison, Pharaoh wasn’t so bad at all. After all, he “only” decreed the death of the males, whereas Laban ‘wished to destroy everyone!’

THE FINKELSTEIN THEORY

It does, indeed, seem incomprehensible unless we understand it as a typical example of Midrashic propaganda. The early Talmudic sages frequently employed Midrash as a vehicle to disseminate their views on political issues of the day. Hence, they would

superimpose upon the biblical canvas ideas and issues that could in no way be regarded as authentic “history,” but that enabled them to reinterpret the biblical events as reflecting the concerns of their own Talmudic era, and its stresses and strains.

This explanation of the Midrashic method might surprise those who have not been introduced to it, and who might assume that it is not in line with the traditional approach. Let me quote, therefore, from the celebrated author of the *Torah Temimah*, Rav Baruch Ha-Levi Epstein (1860-1941):

We have already written several times in this work regarding Midrashic interpretations of this kind that it was never the intention of our sages of blessed memory to offer their interpretations as the literal meaning of the text; for the true meaning of the text can never be divorced from its literal sense. But our sages, in their holy purpose, sought to link every one of their traditionally inherited traditions to particular phrases of the Torah so that they may serve as an aid to memorising those traditions. This was because it was halachically forbidden (in Talmudic times) to write down teachings that had been handed down orally. However, the nature of memory is such that if one has a particular phrase to serve as a link to a thought, it remains embedded in the memory.⁴

Thus, if the Torah text was used merely as a hook to ensure that later Midrashic ideas were remembered, it should come as no surprise that, conversely, the latter should have been created to convey messages of contemporary significance to Jewish communities.

In that spirit, Professor Louis Finkelstein brilliantly demonstrated the political backcloth and rationale for the creation of this Midrashic contrast between Pharaoh and Laban.⁵ He traced it back to the period following the death of Alexander the Great (323 BCE)

and the division of his Middle Eastern conquests between his generals, Ptolemy and Seleucus. The Ptolemaic dynasty ruled Egypt; the Seleucids established themselves in Syria and Mesopotamia. Both sides had designs on Judea, the strategic buffer between the two countries. Hence, it changed hands several times, bringing the devastation of war and poverty each time to its hapless population. In 301 BCE Judea finally fell to Ptolemy I of Egypt, and, over the next hundred years, his descendants managed to repulse several Seleucid attempts to wrest control of it from them.

Finkelstein attributes the *Arami oved avi* composition to that period of Ptolemaic, Egyptian rule of Judea. Its Midrashic author, living under that rule, wished to ingratiate the Jews with their conquerors and demonstrate their loyalty to Egypt and their antipathy to the latter's enemies, the Aramean Seleucids.

The way he chose to demonstrate their loyalty was to play down the wickedness of the Egyptians in Jewish tradition, with its implication that Jewry could readily come to terms with Egypt, a situation that, by implication, could never happen in relation to their shared enemy, the Seleucid Syrians, as symbolized by Laban.

The author of this polemical Midrash chose therefore to reinterpret the simple, grammatical meaning of the phrase *Arami oved avi* ("A wandering Aramean was my father") since that would have identified Jacob as an Aramean, that is, a Seleucid Syrian. He was thus constrained to explain it in the sense that "The Aramean [Laban] *sought to destroy* my father."⁶

NOTES

1. See www.rabbijeffrey.co.uk >Torah Thoughts > *Ki Tavo*, 15th September, 2022, pp. 5-6, and Torah Thoughts < *Ki Tavo*, 26th August 2021.
2. See Gen. chs. 29-31.
3. See Ibn Ezra: Commentary on Deut. 26:5.
4. See Baruch Ha-Levi Epstein, *Torah Temimah*, Commentary to Deut. 28:47, sec. 30.
5. See Louis Finkelstein, “The Oldest Midrash: Pre-Rabbinic Ideals and Teachings in the Passover Haggadah,” *Harvard Theological Review* 31, 1938: p. 291.
6. Our section ‘The Finkelstein Theory’ is excerpted from my book, *1001 Questions & Answers on Pesach*, Jason Aronson Inc. 1996 (reprinted by Vallentine Mitchell, 2008), pp.132-133.

Shabbat shalom,

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