

ARAMI OVED AVI (DEUT. 26:5): PESHAT AND DERASH

RAYMOND APPLE

A pilgrim who came to the Temple with his first fruits recited a declaration recorded at the beginning of Deuteronomy 26, central to which is a phrase from verse 5, *arami oved avi* – three apparently simple words, but what trouble they caused for the scholar and, indeed, for anyone who encountered them in the Passover *Haggadah*! People familiar with Hebrew grammar might wonder why the translation of these words seems so forced.

Here is the Jewish Publication Society (NJPS) translation of the declaration:

When you enter the land . . . you shall take some of every first fruit of the soil . . . [and] put it in a basket . . . The priest shall take the basket from your hand and set it down in front of the altar of the Lord your God. You shall then recite as follows before the Lord your God: 'My father was a fugitive Aramean. He went down to Egypt with meager numbers and sojourned there; but there he became a great and very populous nation' (Deut. 26:1-5).

The New English Bible (NEB) translates the relevant phrase in a similar way: *My father was a homeless Aramean*. These and other similar versions agree that the father, whoever he might be, was nomadic and an Aramean.¹ They utilize the *peshat*, the straightforward grammatical and contextual interpretation of this phrase.

In the *Haggadah*, however, the passage is understood in quite a different way: "Go out and learn what Laban the Aramean sought to do to Jacob our father: Pharaoh decreed [death] only on the males but Laban sought to destroy everyone, as it is said: *An Aramean sought to destroy my father, and he went down to Egypt; he dwelt there few in number, and became there a nation, great, mighty and numerous.*" Here the Aramean is a villain who tried to annihilate the Jewish people. This way of interpreting *arami oved avi* exemplifies *derash*, the metaphorical interpretation.

THE PESHAT OF THE VERSE

The *peshat* renders the phrase along the lines of *A wandering Aramean was my father*. *Oved* is a simple *pa'al* verbal form of the root *aleph-bet-dalet*, which has many shades of meaning, such as "to be lost." In Leviticus 5:22, for example, the noun *avedah* means a lost object; and in Psalm 119:176, *seh oved* is a lost sheep that has wandered away from the flock. Other possibilities include "perishing" or "being doomed" (Ps. 1:6, 2:12), "nomadic" or "migratory", even "fugitive" (Jer. 50:6). Despite their different nuances, the general impression is one of hardship and dislocation. In our verse, the father is also described as an Aramean, Aram being a name for all or part of Syria. Why did the father leave Aram? The Septuagint regards Aram as a stage in the family's migration: *My father abandoned [i.e., moved away from] Aram*.

Even so, we are left with the question of who is meant by "my father", and why it is relevant that he is called an Aramean, i.e., a Syrian. The context of the verse recounts the various travails, from Aram to Egypt, which finally led the Hebrews to enter the *land flowing with milk and honey* (Deut. 26:9). It presumes that Jacob is the "father" in the verse, since it was he who brought the family to Egypt. In origin, however, Jacob was not an Aramean, although he had lived there (Gen. 28). Hosea 12:13 states that *Jacob had to flee to the land of Aram; there Israel served for a wife, for a wife he had to guard [sheep]*. While some (e.g., Rashbam) think the father was Abraham, a migrant who – due to his origins – could be considered an Aramean, most of the *pashtanim* (*peshat* interpreters) understand that "father" here denotes Jacob. An Akkadian root, *abatu*, connected with the Hebrew *aleph-bet-dalet*, means "to flee." Jacob's whole life was one of flight – from his brother Esau (Hos. 12:13), from his father-in-law Laban, and from famine. The *Sifrei* suggests that Jacob fled to Aram with the intention of getting lost or disappearing, presumably so that his brother Esau would not find him.

But why use circumlocutions like "my father" and "Aramean" when one could say plainly that Jacob was a nomad (fugitive, migrant, or whatever other term describes his unfortunate state)? Why doesn't our text simply say "Jacob" or "Our father Jacob"? One answer may be that this declaration is written in poetic style, that it is liturgical rhetoric rather than unadorned prose. Martin Buber notes that the phrase *arami oved avi* is alliterative, containing a "thrice recurring guttural sound" forming a phrase easy to learn by heart.²

Benno Jacob, a German Jewish commentator, offers an approach to the term "Aramean" that does not rely on understanding the verse as poetic. He views *arami* as a technical term for an occupational category. Just as *kena'ani*, "Canaanite", denotes a merchant (Prov. 31:24) and *yishmaelite*, "Ishmaelite", means a caravan trader (Gen. 37:25), so does *arami* stand for a shepherd.³ Whether the merchant actually lived in Canaan or the shepherd in Aram is irrelevant. Hence our verse expects a person to declare, when he brought his basket of firstfruits, that *My father [Jacob] was a wandering (nomadic, fugitive, migrant) shepherd*. Beginning in a small way, Jacob and his family grew and prospered, and could now afford a costly offering to the Sanctuary.

Ibn Ezra explains that, in context, the verses recited when bringing the firstfruits emphasize that in the past the Israelites wandered from place to place, from Aram to Egypt, with no land of their own. Now, by contrast, the Israelites are in their own land, producing fruit. Martin Buber notes that "of all the prayers of the first-fruits in the world that I know there is only one in which, in contrast to all the others, God is glorified for His gift of land to the worshipper." That is the simple, contextual, understanding of this verse.⁴

THE DERASH OF THE VERSE

The *derash* tradition adopts a different approach. It retains the idea of Jacob as "my father", but considers the Aramean to be Laban, who *did* live in Aram and who is in fact called an Aramean (Gen. 25:20, 31:20). There may also be a play on words here, using *arami* in two senses – as both *arami*, "an Aramean", and *rama'i*, "a deceiver", since Laban cheated Jacob (*Genesis Rabbah* 70:19). In this interpretation, *arami* personifies the Israelite peoples's bitter enemy.

The problem is the word *oved*. The Latin Vulgate translates *arami oved avi* as *An Aramean persecuted my father*. Rabbinic exegetes (e.g., Rashi) take *oved* to be a transitive verb, from a root meaning "to destroy": Laban *destroyed* Jacob (or at least *sought to*). Ibn Ezra objects that such a rendering is ungrammatical; if the text meant this, it would have used a *hiph'il* or *pi'el* form of the verb such as *ma'avid* or *me'abbed*. The *derash* also affects the sense of the story by implying that it was Laban, not Jacob, who went down

to Egypt. Ibn Ezra prefers the *peshat*, *My father – Jacob – was a wandering Aramean*. Sforno and Hizkuni also prefer the grammatical *peshat*.

Although our text deals with past history, the vowels of *oved* appear to indicate the present tense. However, its form denotes continuous action: it was not just once that Laban sought to ruin Jacob – he mounted a constant campaign to undermine and harm him. In his book *Gur Aryeh*, the Maharal (Rabbi Judah Loew) of Prague affirms that *oved* denotes "a destroyer"; Laban's constant hard-hearted ambition, never achieved, was to destroy Jacob. The Maharal also argues, in defense of Rashi and against Ibn Ezra, that there are times when an apparently intransitive verb like *oved* can have a transitive sense, as in Deuteronomy 32:28. These explanations are not really needed, however, since the *derash* is never overly concerned with grammar and context, its aim being to impart a lesson.

The midrashic interpretation found in *Sifrei* was incorporated in the Passover *Haggadah*. It cites the Egyptian attempt to drown the Hebrew male infants and argues that Laban was worse than Pharaoh: "Pharaoh only issued his edict against the males, but Laban [by targeting Jacob and his future family] sought to destroy everyone." In this view, the verse should be translated, "An Aramean would have destroyed my father." No such destruction actually occurred, despite Laban's threat, *It is in my power to harm you* (Gen. 31:29). *Targum Onkelos* inserts the word *ba'a*, "sought" (to destroy) and the *Haggadah* similarly writes *bikkesh*. As between two hostile forces, Pharaoh and Laban, the Rabbis do not whitewash Pharaoh but decide that Laban was worse.

This interpretation was chosen for inclusion in the *Haggadah* because the theme there is not firstfruits or land ownership, the original context of these verses, but the assurance that throughout history God saves Israel from wicked designs. The immediate context of this verse in the *Haggadah* is the famous *Ve-hi she-amedah* proclamation, recalling how "in every generation our enemies rise up to destroy us, but the Holy One, blessed be He, delivers us from their hands." That theme is also noted by Rashi in his commentary to this verse, just before quoting the aforementioned *Sifrei*.

Why do the Rabbis think so badly of Laban when Pharaoh was no less a villain? R. Menahem Kasher offers an explanation: But for Laban's trickery, Jacob would have attained his wish to marry Rachel, not Leah. Joseph would

have been the firstborn; Leah's children would not have been born to Jacob, and no jealousy would have been aimed at Joseph., Furthermore Joseph would not have ended up in Egypt, Jacob's family would not have gone there, and there would have been no new *king who knew not Joseph* (Ex. 1:8). It was actually Laban, not Pharaoh, who initiated the oppression.⁵ Mahara! explains that the "new king over Egypt" oppressed the Hebrews because he feared that they would multiply and rebel (Ex. 1:9-10), whereas Laban hated Jacob for no good reason. Both of these approaches fit in with the theme of the *midrash*, emphasizing the villainy of our enemies.

Louis Finkelstein traces the midrashic interpretation of Laban as the destroying Aramean back to the period of Alexander the Great, with Pharaoh as the symbol of Egypt and Laban that of Aram.⁶ Caught between the Ptolemies and Seleucids, the Jews had no real love for either, but Egypt was relatively benevolent while the Seleucids were far more repressive. By deciding to stigmatize Laban, the Rabbis indicated a preference for Egypt. E. D. Goldschmidt argues in his *Haggadah* that Finkelstein's argument relies on debatable manuscript variants and is not entirely sustainable.⁷ In reality, the particular historical context of this *midrash* is beside the point; above all, the message that it conveys is that the Israelites are constantly persecuted by enemies and rescued by God.

We have seen that the two approaches to Deuteronomy 26:5, those of *peshat* and *derash*, each have a different agenda. Each understands the verse in a different context, leading to completely different interpretations and messages.

NOTES

1. *The New American Bible: Revised Edition* (NABRE) has *My father was a refugee Aramaean*. *The New Revised Standard Version* and the *New International Version* use the word "wandering."
2. M. Buber, *On Zion: The History of an Idea* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1997) p. 7.
3. Cited by Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Devarim (Deuteronomy)*, trans. Aryeh Newman (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, 1980) p. 273. Another example of the same phenomenon could be Esther 2:15, where Esther's father's name, *Avi-hayil*, could be a title denoting "captain of the host," i.e., "military commander."
4. Buber, *On Zion*, p. 3.
5. Menahem Kasher, *Haggadah Shelemah* (Jerusalem: Torah Shelemah Institute, 1967) p. 125.

6. Louis Finkelstein, "Pre-Maccabean Documents in the Passover Haggadah," *The Harvard Theological Review*, vol. 35:4 (October 1942) p. 292.
7. E. D. Goldschmidt, *Haggadah shel Pesah: Its Sources and History* (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1960) pp. 16 and 40.