

DID AN ARAMAEAN (TRY TO) KILL OUR FATHER?

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The holiday of Pesach, in addition to celebrating the Exodus of a group of Hebrew slaves from bondage in Egypt and their transformation from a clan into a nation, also marked the beginning of the barley harvest in Israel, which in turn signaled the beginning of the annual First Fruits (*bikkurim*) cycle, when the Jerusalem Temple still stood.¹

Deuteronomy 26:5 commands the People of Israel to bring the First Fruits of each harvest of the Land of Israel's Seven Species (*Shiv'at ha-Minim*) to the Temple as an offering and, together with the Kohen receiving the goods, to recite a formulaic text of thanksgiving that quickly summarizes the ancestral narrative of the People of Israel's miraculous emergence as a sovereign nation living on its own land. This recitation begins with the words "*Arami ovéd avi ...*"

The connection between Pesach and the beginning of the First Fruits cycle may partly explain why this same recitation is quoted in the *Haggadah*, the text of the Passover Seder. But what do its opening words mean?

Sifrei 301 explains that this phrase should be understood as "An Aramaean (sought to) kill my father," referring to the ostensibly homicidal intentions that Lavan the Aramaean harbored towards his own nephew and son-in-law, Jacob, the common ancestor of the Tribes of Israel. The midrash also informs us that the verse is formulated as it is (without the word "sought to" or "intended to"), since Lavan is suspected of wanting to kill Yaakov when he ran after him (Genesis 31 : 22-28), it is as if he had done so. This approach is followed by Rashi, and became popularized through being chosen by Rashi as the way to interpret this ambiguous phrase.²

This approach was followed by the early Bible translators as well. Targum Onkelos translated the verse into Aramaic as explicitly stating that "Lavan the Aramaean sought to annihilate the father" (*Lavan Arama'ah ba'a le-ovada yat abba*). Several centuries later, Rav Saadia Gaon also included explicit mention of Lavan in his classical Arabic translation of the Torah, the

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Tafsir Rasa’g, stating: *Lavan al-Armani kāda anna yubīd abi*, meaning that Lavan “almost” brought about the unnamed patriarch’s destruction.³

This understanding of the phrase became the mainstream interpretation of the verse in the Rabbinic tradition, and is how the verse was integrated into the Pesach Haggada as well, where it is used to summarize events leading the ancestors of the Israelite nation to seek refuge in Egypt, and miraculously leave Egypt as freed slaves a few generations later: “[...] Lavan sought to uproot the entirety” – to eliminate Israel completely – “as it is said, ‘*Arami ovéd āvi*’ [...]” Jewish families have read this interpretation during the Pass-over Seder for untold generations.

Other rabbinic interpretations of the verse read this phrase quite differently, however, and are no less part of Jewish tradition. Ibn Ezra, one of the great Jewish sages of Golden Age Islamic Spain, was adamant: “If ‘*Arami*’ were referring to Lavan, the text would say ‘*ma’avīd*’ or ‘*me’abbéd*,’” both being transitive verbs meaning roughly: to eliminate, annihilate, destroy, cause to perish, render non-existent, to lose, instead of the intransitive verb *ovéd*, whose meanings would then be closer to: to be destroyed, to perish oneself, to be lost. Ibn Ezra continues: “And also what would be the point of saying ‘Lavan sought to eliminate my father, and he went down to Egypt’, while Lavan did not cause [Jacob] to go down to Egypt? It is more likely that the ‘*Aramaeen*’ is Jacob [himself], as if the scripture is saying that when ‘my father’ was in Aram he was *ovéd*, meaning poor, without assets, as in *Give beer unto an ovéd*, (Proverbs 31:6), and the evidence is [in the words that follow:] ‘Let him drink and forget his poverty.’ So here it is: the ‘*Arami ovéd*’ is ‘my father’, and the meaning is that I did not [then] inherit the Land from my father since he was poor when he came to Aram [...]”

Sforno and Rashbam similarly reject the idea that the *Arami* in question is Lavan. “For Jacob was for a while an *Arami ovéd*, as he had no house of fixed residence,” states Sforno. Rashbam, Rashi’s grandson, makes the linguistic point even clearer, though proposing another identification for the *Arami* in question: “Abraham was an Aramaean, he was a wanderer [*ovéd*] and exile from the Land of Aram. [...] The words *ovéd* and *to’éh* [wanderer, wandering] have the same meaning.”

Looking more closely at its *alef-bet-dalet* root, it would indeed seem that interpreting *ovéd* as simply “poor”, as per Ibn Ezra, would miss the mark.

The ancient Semitic root stretches deeply into abstract concepts and associations, and seems to carry the basic meaning of “non-existence”, or of being beyond the horizon, as in the Arabic word for “never” - ‘*ábadan*’.⁴ The same Semitic root appears in the (modern) Hebrew word for “to commit suicide”, *lehit’abbéd* – meaning to make oneself non-existent, to take oneself out of the visible world, hence Ibn Ezra’s proposal of *le’abbéd*, meaning to make something or someone *else* non-existent. Similarly, *ovéd* can also mean “not having” something, or not having it within reach, as in the phrase *ovéd ‘etzót*, which appears in Deuteronomy 32:28, and means literally “having no counsel” or “devoid of counsel”. (Today, *ovéd ‘etzót* is understood to mean something like “not knowing what to do”, “not knowing where to turn”.) This sense of the word, “not having”, is then presumably part of what inspired Ibn Ezra to interpret *ovéd* as meaning primarily “poor, without assets”.

However, *le’abbéd* is normally understood in Hebrew as simply meaning “to lose” something, and the word *ovéd / ávád* as “to be lost” – of unknown whereabouts, no longer present. It is apparently from this meaning that *oved* came also to mean “wandering”. At several points in the Bible, the word *ovéd* is paralleled with *nidáh* (outcast), and seems therefore to mean “homeless” or “wanderer”, most famously in Isaiah 27:13, speaking of the exiled Children of Israel: *And the ovädím in the Land of Ashur shall come, and the outcasts who are in the Land of Egypt...*, or in Ezekiel 34:16: *And I will seek the ovédet, and I will bring back the outcast (nidáhat)*. In Psalms 119:95 the connection between *ovéd / ávád* and wandering is made explicit: *Ta’iti ke-séh ovéd, I wandered like an erring sheep*, which Rashbam quoted as evidence of his assertion that *ovéd* is a synonym of *to’éh*.

Many have therefore translated the verse as saying “My father was a wandering Aramaean”, or something similar. This way of understanding the text is attested already from nearly 2300 years ago, in the Septuagint. The Septuagint translates the verse similarly to the much later readings of Ibn Ezra, Sforno and Rashbam, and renders *Arami ovéd avi* as “*Syrian ‘apébalen ‘o patér mou*” – “My father abandoned Syria” – with “my father” clearly marked as the subject of the sentence (by being in the nominative case: ‘*o patér mou*), and Syria (Aram) marked as an object of the verb (by being in the accusative case, with the *-an* suffix). The Septuagint would thus support Rashbam’s identification of the patriarch in question as Abraham, who was

born in Northern Mesopotamia (the area called in Hebrew *Arám-Naharáyim* – “Aramaea of the Two Rivers” or *Paddán-Arám*) and left the region to establish his lineage in the future Land of Israel.

The verse remains unclear. Even if we understand the Aramaean mentioned as wandering and referring to Jacob, it is strange to call him an Aramaean, since his family was already living in Israel for generations (both he and his father were born there), and the Canaanite-Hebrew language was his language, as shown at the bilingual naming of the monument marking the truce and border between him and Lavan: the pile of stones was called *Gal’éd* in Jacob’s Hebrew and *Yegár-Sâhadûthâ* in Lavan’s Aramaic (Genesis 31:45-54), both meaning “Mound of Witness.” The incident seems to clearly indicate that Ya’aqov is *not* Aramaean; the Aramaean language and identity were already foreign to him despite his long years in Lavan’s service, and with this truce he swore off any further claims in Lavan’s (Aramaean) territory. As Lavan declared (in verse 31:52): *This mound is a witness, and this standing stone (matzēvâh) is a witness, that I shall not pass this mound to you, and you shall not pass this mound nor this standing stone to me, for harm.*

Considering Jacob’s Mesopotamian-born grandfather Avraham to be the wandering Aramaean, as Rashbam does (and apparently the Septuagint), is also an imperfect solution in light of the rest of the verse, since it is clearly Jacob, not Abraham, who went down to Egypt and became the father of the Israelite nation. It could be that the text is speaking figuratively, saying “my father” when the intended meaning is “our ancestors”, who were Aramaean-origin Semitic semi-nomads driven by famine to seek refuge as foreigners in Egypt, and were reduced to slavery before they regained their freedom and realized their destiny of becoming a sovereign nation in their own right, on their own land.

Though such use of the word “*âvi*”, “my father”, would seem to be unique in the Torah, it would fit within the logic of the figurative use of first- and second-person speech seen elsewhere. The person addressed is commanded to identify personally with the narrative: The Edomite is my own brother and I myself was a stranger in the Egyptian’s land (Deut. 23:8); I myself was a slave in Egypt (Deut. 16:16) and “I” myself left Egypt (Ex. 13:8), so it stands to reason that “my father” was a wandering Aramaean. Figurative use of the image of the father of the person addressed is also seen in the words of the

prophet Ezekiel, who tells the people of Jerusalem and Judah twice, *The Amorite is your father and your mother is a Hittite* (verses 16:3 and 16:45). As these verses are once in the singular (16:3) and once in the plural (16:45), I as the person being addressed am being told about *my* and *our* father and mother; the identification urged is both individual and collective.

Just as the Torah often reminds the People of Israel to be kind to strangers who have been forced by circumstances to seek refuge in the Land of Israel, *since you were strangers [gerim] in the Land of Egypt* (Leviticus 19: 34 being one example), in these instances as well there is clearly a pedagogical message, and the use of very personal speech – addressing the person addressed himself and his immediate family – is the tool used to convey that message and drill it in. It is worth remembering when coming across the phrase *Arami ovéd avi* that, though we may have learned to understand it as urging us to guard the memory of a foreigner who threatened the ancestor of the Jewish people with violence, it may actually be reminding us that the founder and namesake of the nation was himself once a wanderer, and a foreigner, even before becoming a refugee in Egypt. And for that reason as well to be all the more thankful for the fruits of our labor and the blessings of living as a free people in our own Land – the double symbol of the Seven Species whose First Fruits were brought to the Temple in ancient times – not out of the memory of ancestral fear, but out of humility and gratitude.

The Haggadah, together with some of the pillars of Jewish tradition (Onkelos, Saadia, Rashi), is nonetheless wary, and though optimistic (reassuring us that in every generation Divine Providence will save the People of Israel from destruction), seemingly knows that parting entirely with inherited fears may be a luxury Jacob's descendants cannot afford.

NOTES

1. Traditions differ as to precisely when, but around Pesach the *Hanafat ha-'Omer* ("Waving of the [Barley] Sheaf") ceremony would take place, beginning the 49-day countdown to the holiday of Shavuot, today still commemorated with Sefirat ha-'Omer. Though traditionally the presentation of the *bikkurim* on Shavuot is associated with the wheat harvest (Exodus 34:22, Mishnah *Bikkurim* 1:3), barley is included among the Seven Species (*Shiv'at ha-Minim*) whose First Fruits were to be brought to the Temple (Deuteronomy 8:8). So the *Hanafat ha-'Omer* ceremony, using a sheaf of barley at the time of the barley harvest, could be considered as an unofficial start of the yearly *bikkurim* cycle.

2. Furthermore, As pointed out by Amsterdam-based scholar, researcher and *ba'al-koreh* Dr. Michael Bloemendal, the Masoretic cantillation marks (*ta'amei ha-mikra*), which also function as an ancient punctuation system, support or reflect this reading, isolating *Arami* and melding *ovéd ávi* into one semantic unit.

3. Lavan is called here an Armenian instead of an Aramaean, perhaps by virtue of a later scribe accidentally inserting a letter *nun*, though this could also fit in with the Saadia's custom of identifying ancient proper nouns with parallels in his day. For instance, Pitom and Raamses, the administrative cities built by the Children of Israel for Pharaoh (Exodus 1:11), are identified by Saadia with Fayyūm and 'Ain ash-Shams (Heliopolis).

4. The same word is paradoxically also the basis of the Arabic phrase for "for eternity", *lal-'abad*, stretching beyond the horizon. This is less surprising when we bear in mind that in classical Arabic the word '*abadan*, like *jamais* in French, needs a negating word to really mean "never".

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