

Compiled by Rabbi Sarah Bassin

Deuteronomy 26:5

*V'aniti v'amarti lifnei YHVH Eloheicha "arami oved avi, v'yered
mithraymah v'yagar sham bimeitay me'at yayihi sham l'goy
gadol, atzum v'rav."*

וְעָנִיתָ וְאָמַרְתָּ לִפְנֵי יְיָ אֱלֹהֶיךָ אַרַמִי אֹבֵד אָבִי
וַיֵּרֶד מִצְרַיִם וַיֵּגֶר שָׁם בְּמִיתַי מֵעֵט, וַיְהִי שָׁם לְגוֹי
גָּדוֹל, עֲצוּם וָרַב.

You shall then recite as follows before your God יְיָ: **אַרַמִי אֹבֵד אָבִי** He went down to Egypt with meager numbers and sojourned there; but there he became a great and very populous nation.

- Why do you think THIS verse is the recitation for bringing the first fruits offering at the Temple?

Let's Break It Down:

אָבֵד(v) heb

1. perish, vanish, go astray, be destroyed
 1. (Qal)
 1. perish, die, be exterminated
 2. perish, vanish (fig.)
 3. be lost, strayed
 2. (Piel)
 1. to destroy, kill, cause to perish, to give up (as lost), exterminate
 2. to blot out, do away with, cause to vanish, (fig.)
 3. cause to stray, lose
 3. (Hiphil)
 1. to destroy, put to death

Ibn Ezra

It thus appears to me that the term Aramean refers to Jacob. Scripture, as it were, reads, when my father was in Aram he was "perishing." That is, he was poor, he had no money. Similarly *oved* (perish) in *Give strong drink unto him that is ready to perish* (Prov. 31:6). *Let him drink, and forget his poverty* (Prov. 31:7) is proof. The meaning of our phrase thus is, a perishing Aramean was my father. Its import is, I did not inherit the land from my father, for my father was poor when he came to Aram. He was also a stranger in Egypt. He was few in number. He then became a large nation. You O Lord took us out of slavery and gave us a good land.

D'var Acher (Another Interpretation)

An Aramean wanted to destroy my ancestor... Since Laban (Jacob's father-in-law) did not actually succeed in doing evil to our father Jacob, we must derive his intentions from his words. He himself admitted, "It is in my power to do harm to you" ([Genesis 31:29](#)), and this shows his evil intention. Laban wanted to root out the whole, to kill the mother and child when he says "The daughters are mine and their children are mine, and the flocks are mine, and all that you see is mine" ([Genesis 31:43](#)), that is, they should be mine, if God had not prevented me. —*Isaac ben Judah Abarbanel (1437-1508), Portuguese philosopher and scholar, from his commentary on the Haggadah, 1496*

D'var Acher

An Aramean wanted to destroy my parenthood... When Laban said, "The daughters are mine and their children are mine, and the flocks are mine," he wanted them to still be his and be called by his name. In this, he wanted to destroy Jacob's fatherhood, that is, his title of "father." In truth [Rachel and Leah] had said "Are we not as strangers to him (i.e., to our father, Laban)?" that is, Laban no longer had the title of "father" over them. –*Rav Tzadok haKohen of Lublin (1823-1900), Polish Hassidic Tzaddik, Sefer Dover Tzedek*

D'var Acher

Why does the Haggadah consider Laban worse than Pharaoh? Jacob and his sons went down to Egypt because Joseph was already there. Joseph had been sold by his brothers into Egypt because his brothers had envied the way their father favored their youngest brother, who was born in Jacob's old age. Joseph was born in Jacob's old age because Rachel's marriage had been delayed. Rachel's marriage had been delayed because Laban tricked Jacob by giving him Leah rather than Rachel as a wife. Had Jacob married Rachel first, Joseph would have been the firstborn and his brothers wouldn't have envied him and wouldn't have sold him into slavery. If he had not been sold into slavery, Jacob and his sons would not have gone down to Egypt. If they had not gone down to Egypt, their descendants would not have been enslaved under Pharaoh. We learn from all this that if it had not been for the act of deceit of Laban, there would not have been a Pharaoh as we know him. –*R. Azriel Hildesheimer (1820-1899)*

- What are the spiritual differences of focusing the meaning of this phrase on those who wished us harm vs on the experience of wandering and poverty? Does it matter?

Rabbi Rachel Adelman, Ph.D.

The possession of the land is contingent on a period of oppression and exile. Unlike the Athenians, we emerge as a people from a common ancestor (the "wandering Aramean") who has no claim to the land other than God's conditional promise that undergirds the terms of the covenant at Sinai: "Now, then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples, for the land is mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation..." ([Exodus 19:5-6](#))

Obeying the Divine will as a condition of chosenness for this purpose is reiterated in this week's Torah reading, in the prelude to the renewal of the covenant in the plains of Moab: "Today, Adonai has obtained your agreement: to be God's treasured people, as God promised you, and to keep God's commandments" ([Deuteronomy 26:17](#)). The land is a tenuous gift that is conditional upon loyalty to the covenant, and exile is a collective consequence for transgression.

But there is another dimension to this promise. Schooled as "strangers in a land not their own," descendants of the wandering Aramean, the way we tell our history serves as the basis for a higher ethic, as it says throughout the Torah: "You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt". It is precisely the consciousness of being alien (with its concomitant sensitivity to the other) that ironically grants the right to dwell in the land.