

Pesach

Arami Oved Avi. Pshat and Drash.

Yes - this is the boring bit! We all begin the Seder with intense anticipation and feelings of excitement. We make Kiddush, drink the first cup, Carpas, Afikoman hunting ensues, then Mah Nishtana from our ever so sweet nephew, and then we begin Maggid, listening to Divrei Torah, asking, discussing. It's great! But by the time we reach "Tzei Ulemad," we've frequently had Devar Torah overload – we're thinking about the meal..."How many pages to *Dayyenu*?"

Well, my task here is to enlighten one corner of the Haggada that is pretty strange for any of you adherents of P'shat, and hopefully to encourage just a little more attention to this fascinating passage of the Seder.

Chavruta Study

1. Look at the parsha of Arami Oved Avi in Devarim 26:1-10. What is the farmer trying to express with the statements that he pronounces at the Mikdash?
2. Arami Oved Avi. See Rashi, Rashbam, Ibn Ezra.
3. Why does the Haggada read this phrase differently?

THE ORIGINS OF THE SEDER.

The origins of the Seder may be found in the Mishna. The closing Chapter of Massechet Pesachim¹ outlines the bare bones of the Seder that we know and love. There we read:

"They pour out the Second cup.

It is now that the son asks, 'Why is this night different...²'

And the father teaches the son according to the son's intelligence and aptitude.

He begins with the negative and ends with the positive. And engages in a Drash of Arami Oved Avi until the entire Parsha is complete."

So here we have the skeleton of our Maggid. It begins with questions. The father then responds. The story is to be told beginning with the negative³ – the slavery and harsh beginning of Jewish History – and to end with the positive –

¹ <http://www.vbm-torah.org/pesach/pes63-aw.htm> for a literary analysis of the Chapter.

² At this point the entire Ma Nishtana is written out, with differences appropriate to Temple times.

³ The Talmud disputes the precise identity of this "negative to positive" narrative. One view sees the story to be told as one of national freedom from oppression. The other opinion wants to tell a more religious story of the transition from pre-Abrahamic paganism to the monotheistic beliefs of the Israelite nation. In practice our Haggada incorporates both opinions.

the freedom, the sense of Godliness that Am Yisrael discover as their identity. This night tells an optimistic narrative – from bad to good – "and they all lived happily ever after"

But then, we have a few enigmatic words from the Mishna: "And [the father – the teacher] engages in a Drash of Arami Oved Avi until the entire Parsha is complete." What is "Arami Oved Avi? Why does it have a place in our Seder? Why are we asked to use the medium of "Drash?"

Let us understand what is happening here.

THE BASICS

Arami Oved Avi is probably the most concise description on the Torah of the enslavement-Exodus drama⁴. It may be found in Devarim 26:4-8 (and if you are unfamiliar with it, I strongly recommend glancing at the entire Chapter there to gain some context.) The Parsha of Arami Oved Avi is taken from the First Fruits ceremony in which an Israelite farmer would present the first fruits (of the 7 species of Eretz Yisrael) to the Temple. This presentation was accompanied by a formal verbal declaration. The declaration took the following form:

'A wandering Aramean was my father, and he went down into Egypt, and sojourned there, few in number; and he became there a nation, great, mighty, and populous. [6](#) And the Egyptians dealt ill with us, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage. [7](#) And we cried unto HaShem, the G-d of our fathers, and HaShem heard our voice, and saw our affliction, and our toil, and our oppression. [8](#) And HaShem brought us forth out of Egypt with a mighty hand, and with an outstretched arm, and with great terribleness, and with signs, and with wonders. [9](#) And He hath brought us into this place, and hath given us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. [10](#) And now, behold, I have brought the first of the fruit of the land, which Thou, O HaShem, hast given me.' (Devarim 5-10)

So that is the text. More about that in a second. Let us just discuss what we do with that text in the Haggada. What we actually do is to take each phrase and try to discover some deeper meaning, either an assumption or an intention, or even a hint or a Biblical paralleled phrase that might shed some light upon the story at hand, the story of the Exodus. This process of digging under and between and around the words is the process we know as "Drash" or Midrash – a Rabbinic study methodology that aims to uncover and discover allusions, subtexts, implications and assumptions in any and every passage of the Bible.

⁴ For an excellent presentation as to why we choose this particular parsha to tell the story of the Exodus, see Rav Shaviv's article - <http://www.vbm-torah.org/pesach/ys-hag.htm> on the VBM.

What does the Haggada do with this passage? Here is a sample:

"And he went down to Egypt" forced by Divine decree. "And he sojourned there" - this teaches that our father Jacob did not go down to Egypt to settle, but only to live there temporarily. Thus it is said, "They said to Pharaoh, We have come to sojourn in the land, for there is no pasture for your servants' flocks because the hunger is severe in the land of Canaan; and now, please, let your servants dwell in the land of Goshen."

"Few in number" as it is said: "Your fathers went down to Egypt with seventy persons, and now, the Lord, your G-d, has made you as numerous as the stars of heaven."

"And he became there a nation" this teaches that Israel was distinctive there.

"Great, mighty," as it is said: "And the children of Israel were fruitful and increased abundantly, and multiplied and became very, very mighty, and the land became filled with them."

The opening phrases for each paragraph come from verse 5. The Haggada takes each phrase of verse 5, and scrutinises it, commenting upon its hidden assumptions. This is the process of Drash. By this method, we emphasise that our tenure in Egypt was supposed to be temporary even though it became permanent, that Israelites were "distinct" in Egypt, and many other fascinating points. (More about this in our "further study" section at the end of this article.)

THE PESHAT OF "ARAMI OVED AVI"

What I would like to comment upon however is the manner in which the author of the Drash here masterfully manipulates this Torah passage and harnesses it to the aim at hand, namely, the Exodus story. Let me elaborate and explain.

The Parsha in Devarim 26 describes a farmer bringing his first fruits to the Mikdash. There, he recites Arami Oved Avi. What is the thrust, the purpose, the message of this declaration? Spend a minute or two looking at the passage above, and I think it will become clear.

The entire declaration revolves around the issues of homelessness and homecoming. Let us explain. The farmer arrives with his basket of fruits at the Temple. He presents his fruits to the Kohein and then makes a rather bizarre statement:

"I declare this day before the Lord God that I have come to the land that the Lord swore to our fathers to assign to us." (26:3)

Who is this man? He is a farmer who might have been born and raised in Eretz Yisrael. He might have never left the country all his life. His family have owned the tribal inheritance for centuries, and yet, he stands at the Mikdash and declares: I have come to the land! What sort of a statement is this?

I think that the next paragraph Arami Oved Avi enlightens us. It begins with the story of A "wandering Aramean," that our ancestors were homeless. And it takes us through the fate of how their lack of home, lead them to Egypt where indeed the nation expanded greatly, but was enslaved harshly. The people cry to God, God saves them, and then:

"He brought to this place, and has given us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And now, behold, I have brought the first of the fruit of the land, which You, O HaShem, have given me."

In other words, Thank You God for giving me a land that I can call my own, that I can farm, that I can build. We were homeless for so long, and oppressed, but now we have a place to call our own, all because of You Hashem.

WHO IS THE "WANDERING ARAMEAN"?

We are all familiar with the explanation of this phrase in the Haggada. The Haggada translates it as "An Aramean – Lavan – (sought to) destroy my father (Yaakov)." Is this the correct reading? After all, we have translated it thus far as, "My father was a wandering Aramean."

And which of our "fathers" might have been a wandering Aramean?"

"Our father Abraham originated from Aram⁵. He wandered in a state of exile from Aram, as it states: 'Go forth from your land'⁶" (Rashbam)

"Were the 'Aramean' referring to Lavan, the Hebrew would have to read "maavid." Or "me'abed" (and not oved.) Moreover (in the context of the parsha in Devarim) what logic would there be in the statement, 'Lavan wanted to kill my father, and he went down to Egypt?' Lavan had no hand in causing Yaakov to descend to Egypt! Rather, we should suggest that the Aramean is Yaakov, and the verses meaning is this. That when Yaakov was in Aram, he was an "oved" i.e. poor, penniless – proofs from Mishlei 31:6,7 – and the point here is that I did not inherit the land from my father (Yaakov) for he was poverty stricken when he came to Aram. He was even a stranger in Egypt ..." (Ibn Ezra)

Both the Rashbam and the Ibn Ezra weave this phrase very naturally into the Parsha in Devarim, both grammatically and thematically. Again, the theme of the parsha is homelessness, and homecoming. Rashbam says that the Aramean is Avraham, who wandered from his birthplace Aram. In that case, Arami Oved Avi transcribes Jewish History from the moment that Abraham leaves his original home⁷ and is promised the Land of

⁵ See Bereshit 12:4-5 Avraham sets out from Haran to Canaan. Later in 27:43 and 28:2 Haran and (Padan-) Aram are synonyms for the region in which Lavan resided. So it would appear that Aram and Haran are the same place. Similarly, in 24:20, Rivka is described as originating from Aram Naharayim.

⁶ Bereshit 12:1

⁷ Some might find it strange that Avraham rather than Yaakov be the Aramean. After all, it was Yaakov who initiated the Egyptian exile, taking the family down during the years of famine. Indeed the opening lines of Shemot testify to this.

Two points are worth making here.

First, the notion of beginning the Exodus story with Avraham (rather than Yaakov who actually went down to Egypt thereby starting the Galut) is clear in many places in Tanach. See Joshua 24:2, pesukim quoted in

Israel, until the moment in which the promise is fulfilled, and his progeny settle therein.

The Ibn Ezra makes two points. First, he proves the grammatical impossibility of the Haggada's reading. He then suggests that the Aramean is Yaakov, who dwelt with Lavan in Aram. The intention, once again, is to stress how our forefathers had no land, and therefore, that the Land of Israel is a gift only by virtue of God to Am Yisrael.

But our basic thesis is reinforced. The Parsha in Devarim is about being a wanderer and then achieving a permanent home. That is the central message. God is praised and thanked for his role in granting the Jewish People a permanent abode.

THE DRASH OF ARAMI OVED AVI

But the Haggada reads it differently. And I would like to spend some time thinking about what the Baal Hahaggada was thinking about when he reworked this passage. Here is the Hagadda's version:

Go forth and learn what Lavan the Aramean wanted to do to our father Jacob. Pharaoh had issued a decree against the male children only, but Lavan wanted to uproot everything - as it is said: "The Aramean wished to destroy my father; and he went down to Egypt and sojourned there, few in number; and he became there a nation - great and mighty and numerous."

Now it is true that in the Torah, Lavan is the only person to be described as "HaArami."⁸ Lavan is THE biblical Aramean with a capital 'A.' And yet, let us ask ourselves, did Lavan ever seek to "uproot everything?" Even if we can deflect the grammatical discomfort of the Ibn Ezra, where do we read that Lavan wanted to destroy Yaakov in some way? Yes, he switched his wages, his daughters. Lavan wasn't particularly nice to Yaakov. But was he that bad? How do we justify the Hagadda's Midrashic reading?

We shall make an attempt to support this Midrash and our thesis shall be simple. Lavan didn't want to destroy Yaakov by killing him. Rather, he sought to keep Yaakov in Aram Why? He didn't want his daughters or his grandchildren to leave. He wanted to make more money out of Yaakov, the master-shepherd. Maybe there are other factors here, but the bottom line is that Lavan tried to prevent Yaakov's departure. And what effect would that have had? Had Yaakov raised his family in Lavan's home, very soon they would have become subsumed within the wider "House of Lavan" and in time, would have entirely lost their identity as "the House of Abraham." The legacy of Avraham would have been lost forever. And the result would have been that would have been no Jewish Nation. Let us substantiate these claims.

LEAVING LAVAN

the Haggada, which begins the Exodus story with Avraham. Likewise Nechemia 9:715.

Second, since Devarim 26 is focused upon Eretz Yisrael, we should note that it is to Avraham that the promises of Eretz Yisrael are made at every stage. See Bereshit 12:7; 13:14-18; 15: 7, 18; 17:7-8. See also 26:3. The centrality of Avraham in God's promises of the Land cannot be over stressed. Hence Avraham's appearance in a parsha that spotlights the theme of Eretz Yisrael is more than natural.

⁸ Bereshit 25:10; 28:5; 31:20,24.

"After Rachel had borne Joseph, Yaakov said to Lavan, 'Give me my wives and my children, for whom I served you, that I may go ...' (30:25-6)

Yaakov has a family. Even Rachel, his favourite wife has borne a child. He has twelve children. It is time to go home.

But Lavan persuades him to stay. He offers him a higher salary, a chance to get rich and Yaakov agrees. He remains there for quite a while, another six years, and at the end of this period he has amassed a large herd:

"Lavan's sons were saying, 'Jacob has taken all that was our father's and from that which was our father's he has built up all this wealth.' Jacob also saw that Lavan's manner towards him was not as it had been in the past. Then the Lord said to Jacob, 'Return to the land of your fathers where you were born and I will be with you.'" (31:1-2)

Yaakov consults with his wives, who encourage him that now is the time to leave. And without hesitation, the family mount camels and leave with all their livestock, to return to Canaan.

"On the third day⁹, Lavan was told that Yaakov had fled. So he took his kinsmen with him and pursued him a distance of seven days, catching up with him in the hill country of Gilead. God appeared to Lavan the Aramean in a dream by night and said to him, 'Beware of attempting anything with Yaakov¹⁰, good or bad.' ... Lavan caught up with Yaakov And said, 'What did you mean by sneaking off, and carrying off my daughters like prisoners of war ... you didn't let me kiss my sons and my daughters...'"

What follows in an exceptionally strained discussion between Yaakov and Lavan in which accusations are made by Lavan and Yaakov. At the end of the conversation, Yaakov protests his integrity and honesty:

"41 These twenty years have I been in thy house: I served thee fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for thy flock; and you have changed my wages ten times. Were it not that the God of my father, the God of Abraham, and the Fear of Isaac, had been on my side, surely now you would have sent me away empty handed.... And Lavan answered and said to Jacob: 'The daughters are my daughters, and the children are my children, and the flocks are my flocks, and all that you see is mine."

The entire narrative revolves around a single argument. To whom do the women, children, livestock belong: Yaakov or Lavan¹¹?

⁹ The parallel to Yetziat Mitzrayim is amplified by the Midrash, see Rashi to Shemot 14:4 where he suggests that Pharaoh was informed on the 3rd day of Israel's escape, and on the 7th day they catch up with them. See more in note 11.

¹⁰ This phrase and also 31:29 that give us an impression that Lavan was planning or considering something a little more insidious than a peace covenant. This might be a further source, or support for the view that suggests that Lavan's true intentions were to kill Yaakov.

¹¹ There would appear to be many connection points between the stories of Lavan and the Exodus. Both are stories of "escape" from enslavement of sort. Both are headed to Eretz Yisrael. Both involve the "survival" of the minority group who are under threat by the host majority group. In addition, many phrases in Bereshit 31 are echoed in Yetziat Mitzrayim. The roots BaRaCh, RaDaPH, he chase, God's night-time intervention and the meeting in the morning. This point brings me to one

Lavan sees everything as his: Yaakov has no right to leave. He has no rights to his children. They are Lavan's sons and Lavan's daughters¹². Lavan wants Yaakov to stay. By leaving, Yaakov is stealing, betraying Lavan. Lavan expects Yaakov to remain forever in Aram.

But does Yaakov have no right to carve out his own future, to develop his own independent identity? We all know the implications of Lavan's plan, of Yaakov remaining in Aram. If they stay in Aram, they will most definitely be subsumed into the greater "House of Lavan." Yaakov's children will indeed be Lavan's children. That will be their primary identity. They will not, be the children of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. They will grow up in Aram, develop Aramean accents, Aramean mores, and the command of "Lech Lecha" will be reversed. If Yaakov remains in Aram, there will be no Bnei Yisrael (literally, children of Israel i.e. Yaakov.) We are talking about the end of Jewish History before it has even begun!

Of course, God did not let that happen. Yaakov did not let that happen. But it might have happened. "Lavan sought to uproot everything?" Yes, everything! If Lavan had succeeded, then Am Yisrael would never have come into existence.

BACK TO THE HAGGADA.

The Haggada does much more than rework the phrase "Arami Oved Avi." It also curtails the parsha and entirely omits the last two verses of the Bikkurim statement. It erases the lines that deal with Eretz Yisrael. And this is with good reason. You see, the Haggada, manipulates Devarim 26 with tremendous skill, in order to harness it to the purpose of Seder Night – the retelling of the story of Yetziat Mitzrayim.

Thus far, we have suggested that the declaration of Devarim 26 is about "Homelessness and Homecoming." But that is not the story of Seder Night. Seder night is about survival, freedom, God's might, the reversal of fortunes, the end of persecution.

The Haggada reworks Devarim 26 in a number of ways. First, it simply curtails the parsha, ending not with the entry into the Land, but rather with God's mighty hand of salvation. So this is a story of divine redemption.

But if the theme is Persecution and Redemption, then the p'shat of the opening phrase – Arami Oved Avi - that deals with homelessness is also sorely out of place! The Midrash re-reads, or reinterprets this phrase. In the eyes of the Midrash, it is not about a homeless ancestor, rather, it is about the dangers that have befallen the Jewish nation from Time immemorial. This is a story of the survival of the Jews, of persecution and salvation.

Into this framework, Arami Oved Avi fits perfectly in its Midrashic guise, that Lavan was even more insidious than Pharaoh. After all, Pharaoh sought to enslave, persecute, and even kill the Jewish people. But Lavan tried to prevent

the Jewish people from even coming into existence. Pharaoh tried to persecute us. Lavan tried to assimilate us.

In this context, note also the following drashot:

"And he sojourned there" - this teaches that our father Jacob did not go down to Egypt to settle, but only to live there temporarily....

"And he became there a nation" this teaches that Israel was distinctive there.

Note that both of these paragraphs touch upon the issues in Yaakov's sojourn with Lavan, issues of survival and distinctiveness. When we go into exile, is it a periodic visit, or are we moving away on a permanent basis. This is precisely the issue that Yaakov struggled with against Lavan. Furthermore, how does one become a "nation"? How does a small minority remain "distinct" whether in Mesopotamia or in Egypt? These are questions that go to the heart of survival as a people in Exile.

And now, the Haggada's "Drash" comes into its true focus. In order to have the phrase "*arami oved avi*" enlighten us on Seder night, it needs to be reshaped and understood in the perspective of the Exodus drama. It is about the attempted annihilation of the Jewish people. Arami – that Biblical personality known as Arami is now the character we know as Lavan. It is interesting that we don't even know Lavan's intentions in wanting Yaakov to stay. Maybe they were perfectly innocent! Maybe Lavan just wanted his daughters and grandchildren close at hand, didn't want to break up the family. And yet, we know that the act of remaining in Aram was a mistake that would have prevented the creation of the Jewish People, it would have undermined covenantal history, for the Children of Israel would never have come into being as a nation! Indeed, "Lavan sought to uproot everything!"

Have a meaningful Seder and a Chag Sameach!

of the more fascinating parallels between the. Two stories. Both here and in Shemot, there is a struggle over the children and even the animals! See Shemot 10:9-11: "We will all go, young and old: we must go with our sons and daughters, our flocks and herds..."

¹² Even at the very end of the story, after Lavan has agreed to separate from Yaakov, Lavan still insists that these are HIS daughters and HIS children. See 31:55.