

Ki Tavo, this week's parashah, opens at the end of Chapter 26 of Deuteronomy with the law of the declaration of the first fruits, the *bikkurim*, which we are commanded to bring each year with a special declaration.

The parashah continues with a description of the blessings and the curses that will reign upon the people depending on whether we do or do not follow the *mitzvot*. But I am interested in the mitzvah of the first fruits, and what we are instructed to recite when we bring them. I have commented in the past that Torah very rarely legislates speech. But Chapter 26, starting at verse 5 says:

You shall then recite this before Hashem your God: "*Arami oveid Avi.*"

Because of an ambiguity in the syntax, that line can be translated either, "An Aramean was the destroyer of my father, or "my father was a fugitive Aramean."

Who is this Aramean? Well, if you translate it the first way, as the subject of the clause and the oppressor, as many commentators do and the traditional Haggadah does, the Aramean is Laban, the foremother Rebecca's brother, and Jacob's uncle and father-in-law, who tricked Jacob into laboring for him for decades in order to marry his daughter. According to the other translation, "my father was a fugitive Aramean", the Aramean is Jacob himself, based on the verses that follow:

He went down to Egypt with meager numbers and sojourned there; but there he became a great and very populous nation. The Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us; they gave us hard labor. We cried to Hashem, the God of our fathers, and Hashem heard our plea and saw our plight, our misery, and our oppression. Hashem freed us from Egypt by a mighty hand, by an outstretched arm and awesome power, and by signs and portents. God brought us to this place

and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So I now bring the first fruits of the soil which You, Hashem, have given me (26:5-10).”

Whether we understand this declaration to begin by invoking an ancestor fleeing from a destructive Aramean, or himself being a wandering Aramean, the text opens with a narrative of vulnerability, and takes us on a trajectory towards empowerment and self-determination.

Though you may be familiar with these words from the Haggadah, this is their origin: as we celebrate and share the abundance of a successful harvest, we say them. In one of Rabbi Shai Held’s commentaries on this parashah, he writes: “The more the memory of landless wandering begins to fade, the more likely it is that Israel will take God’s gifts for granted. And so Moses introduces liturgy designed to combat ingratitude and forgetfulness.”

Over and over again, the parshiyot of Deuteronomy express concern that as we become comfortably settled, our very well-being will make us not only ungrateful but entitled. We will take for granted our gifts. We will assume that we have them because we somehow intrinsically deserve them - and that way lies not only complacency, but an implicit assumption in the moral validity of the status quo - if I deserve what I have, then other who do not have, existing in the same moral universe as myself, must deserve their lot, as well.

So this liturgy reminds us that it is not just our own virtue and industry that we can credit with our well-being, that there is no moral virtue to the status quo.

*Arami oveid avi.*

Rabbi Steve Nathan wrote for Reconstructing Judaism, “One can read the dual interpretation of “my father was a wandering Aramean” and “my father was

oppressed by an Aramean.” In either reading, our history is one of wandering and oppression that ultimately ended in triumph. Yet in order to avoid the temptation to become haughty and self-satisfied, we must always remember our origins.”

I realized yesterday possible translation of the text, which *no commentator that I know of has ever offered*, is “My father was an oppressive Aramean.” I know this is startling. Yesterday I even called my mother, who has authored Hebrew grammar textbooks, to confirm that this was a valid translation. She said that the Haggadah’s translation - and Aramean oppressed my father - is a bit belabored, but that “My father was a destructive Aramean” is no more farfetched. It’s all a question of whether you translate *oveid* as a participle or an adjective, either of which is plausible.

But grammar nerding aside, of course, why would any commentator want to translate the line in that way - nothing in the narrative we tell about our history suggests that we oppressed others before going down into Egypt. But more to the point, how very uncomfortable to tell a story that might cast ourselves as oppressors!

But it is precisely because of that moral ambiguity that I so appreciate the vague syntax of the opening line. Were our ancestors oppressed, oppressors, or morally neutral wanderers? The honest answer, if we are willing to look at the whole span of history that leads us to be Jews sitting in Temple Beth Israel in Oregon today, is probably “yes. All of the above.” So the text reminds us that whether we were descended from oppressed, from oppressors, or more likely from both, we redeem the history through telling the story and owning it as part of the trajectory that got us to this moment.

In June, I read an article in the Atlantic, “The Birth of the New Aristocracy,” that functioned for me how I imagine the passage should have functioned for my ancestors. It debunks the pervasive myth that good education, good jobs, and other goods are deserved, rather than stemming from very specific policies that raise some of us and push some of us down. It was a wake-up call for me about the ways that my own efforts to go to a good school, get a good job and buy a house has the effect of invisibly reinforcing an oppressive reality for many. And it offered some policy suggestions going forward I highly recommend the read.

And what does Torah instruct us to do with our morally ambiguous history and present? The next verses make it clear. As Rabbi Held, again, writes:

Deuteronomy instructs the pilgrim to enjoy the bounty God has given him “together with the Levite and the stranger in your midst” (26:11)—and this is immediately followed by the requirement for the pilgrim to share a tenth of his yield with “the Levite, the stranger, the orphan, and the widow, that they may eat in your settlements, and be sated” (28:12).”

So we take our complicated history, the oppression our ancestors endured, the oppression that our ancestors wrought, and we acknowledge it. We say it out loud. We note that our current situation does not exist in a vacuum, but as the accumulation of narrative, of merits and sins. We have the history we have. And this text gives a very particular instruction - don’t take our blessings for granted. As best as possible, tell the truth of how we came to have blessings, how little any of it hinges on our own particular merit. And then, the best expression of gratitude is to share the abundance, with those who are not so blessed, but whom we must remember are no less worthy.