

Coming to the Temple with his basket of first fruits, the Torah provides the pilgrim a script of what to say beginning with these three words: **אָבִי אֲבָד אֲרָמִי** - *My father was a wandering Aramean*. It's not clear to which father the pilgrim is referring. None of the three patriarchs are ever referred to as **Arameans**, despite the fact that Aram features prominently in their stories: Abraham originates from there. He migrates to Canaan and leaves his brother Nahor there. Nahor's granddaughter Rebekah is born there, and from there she will be brought to Canaan to be Isaac's wife. Rebekah sends Jacob back there to stay with her brother, Lavan, and there he marries Lavan's daughters. From there he journeys back to Canaan. Are the Patriarchs **Arameans**? Well, technically yes, but saying that phrase would be like an Ashkenazi Jew saying, *My father was a wandering Eastern European*, without specifying whether if he was from Poland, Russia, Lithuania, Galicia, Ukraine, or any other part of Eastern European Jewish civilization. The purpose of the first fruits declaration was to enable the pilgrim to compress history into an easily recitable liturgy and locate himself within the people's master story from its nuclear origins until this very moment. He is saying: *Once upon a time, my ancestors were pastoral nomads or fugitives, like Abraham and Jacob. But now we live rooted in our own land and are able to farm our fields and harvest our orchards*. This is the *peshat*, the plain sense of the text as understood by many medieval commentators such as Sforno and Bekhor Shor. But if we recognize these words from the traditional Haggadah, we might be more familiar with the *derash*, the rabbinic interpretation of this text, with its deeper meaning. There, the **Aramean** is identified as **Lavan** who the Torah specifically refers to as: **לָבָן הָאֲרָמִי** - *Lavan the Aramean*. The Haggadah says:

**צֵא וְלָמַד מֶה בָּקַשׁ לָבָן הָאֲרָמִי לַעֲשׂוֹת לִיעֲקֹב אֲבִינוּ: שִׁפְרָעָה לֹא גָזַר אֱלֹהִים עַל הַזְּכָרִים וְלָבָן בָּקַשׁ לַעֲקֹר אֶת-הַכֹּל. שְׁנֵאמַר: אֲרָמִי אֲבָד אֲבִי.**

*Go and learn what Lavan the Aramean sought to do to our father Jacob: Pharaoh condemned only the boys to death, but Lavan sought to uproot everything, as it is written: "An Aramean sought to destroy my father."*

Let's compare the plain sense (*peshat*) with the interpretation of the Haggadah (*derash*):

	<b>אֲרָמִי-Arami</b>	<b>אֲבָד-Oved</b>	<b>אָבִי-Avi</b>
<b>Peshat</b>	The generic term for someone who comes from the region of Aram.	A wanderer or a fugitive. Or one that is in peril.	My father: Abraham or Jacob.
<b>Derash</b>	Lavan is the <b>Aramean</b> .	Tried to oppress, or destroy.	My father, Jacob.
<b>Peshat</b>	My father wandered from the region of Aram, at the direction of God who set in motion all of the events of their lives.		
<b>Derash</b>	Lavan sought to oppress Jacob.		

According to the *peshat*, the pilgrim's declaration, **אֲרָמִי אֲבָד**, is an origin story that recalls the Israel's deep past. It summons the memory of God telling a landless Abraham to leave his birthplace and travel to the land in which this pilgrim, Abraham's distant descendant, now lives and harvests. It summons the memory of Jacob's landlessness, when he travels between Canaan, Aram and Egypt. In contrast, according to the *derash* in the Haggadah, this is an origin story that starts with Jacob in the household of **לָבָן הָאֲרָמִי** - *Lavan ha-Arami, Lavan the Aramean*. The rabbis make a clever pun on his name: they call him, **לָבָן הָרָמַי** - *Lavan ha-Ramai-Lavan the Deceiver*. We recall that he substituted Leah for Rachel. But they are saying that he was also an **אֲבָד-oved**, an *oppressor*! Was he? He may have been manipulative and duplicitous, but he certainly wasn't cruel. Or was he? Let's read the story closely. When Joseph is born, Jacob's 14 years of service to Lavan are over. Then:

**וַיְהִי כַּאֲשֶׁר יָלְדָה רָחֵל אֶת יוֹסֵף וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב אֶל לָבָן שְׁלַחְנִי וְאַלְכֶּה אֶל מְקוֹמִי וְלֹא-רָצִי...וְעַתָּה מְתִי אַעֲשֶׂה גַם אֲנֹכִי לְבֵיתִי.**

*Now it was, once Rachel had borne Joseph, that Jacob said to Lavan: Send me free, that I may go back to my place, to my land...When may I do something for my household? (Gen. 30:25, 27)*

Jacob has been a subordinate to Lavan for all of these years. He created a large family but now he wants to go back to Canaan and be his own boss and manage his own household. It was time. But Lavan, who prospered enormously because of Jacob's work, doesn't want to let Jacob go so easily. He says to him, *Tell me what you want as a salary and I will give it to you, so that you will stay*. Jacob capitulates and decides to stay. He asks Lavan to give him all the second-rate animals as his wages, those that are speckled, spotted and striped, in order to breed a uniquely identifiable herd. Lavan agrees to this, and Jacob remains under Lavan's control for another six years during which Jacob prospered and got even more entrenched. It was at this point that God told him, *Enough. Time to return to Canaan*. Lavan's *oppression* was loading Jacob up with more and more responsibilities, curtailing his independence, and making it more difficult for him to break out on his own. When the rabbis say that Lavan *sought to uproot*

*everything*, what they mean is that Lavan wanted to thwart Jacob's desire for independence. Had Lavan persisted, there would be no people of Israel and Jacob's family would have faded into the Aramean landscape. In this reading, the pilgrim who arrives at the Temple with his basket of first fruits, is not recalling his ancestors' landlessness, but rather, a specific moment in the life of his founding-father Jacob, in which Jacob declared independence from his malevolent, cunning and dastardly father-in-law, *Lavan the Aramean - Lavan the Deceiver*. *Lavan tried to con my father, Jacob, into staying with him forever. But my father declared his independence*

**and broke away from him.** Without that decisive moment of independence, there would be no land of Israel, no basket of first fruits, and no pilgrims to bring it.

**וַיֵּרֶד מִצְרָיִם-he went down to Egypt.** The Haggadah adds: **וַיֵּרֶד מִצְרָיִם-עַל פִּי הַדְּבָר** **compelled by what had been spoken.** That refers to what was **spoken** between God and Abraham at the Covenant of the Pieces, (Gen. 15):

**וַיֹּאמֶר לְאַבְרָם יָדַע תְּדַע כִּי גֵר יִהְיֶה נְרָעָה בְּאֶרֶץ לֹא לָהֶם וַעֲבָדוּם וַעֲנִוּ אֹתָם אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת שָׁנָה. (בר' טו:יג)**

**And he said to Avram: Know, yes, know that your seed will be sojourners in a land not theirs; they will put them in servitude and afflict them for four hundred years.** (Gen. 15:13)

In this reading, Jacob goes down to Egypt, not because he wants to see Joseph before he dies, but because it is all part of the larger plan that God disclosed to Abraham.

**וַיֵּגֶר-וְהָיָה שָׁם** **and he sojourned there.** The Haggadah adds: **מִלְמַד שֶׁלֹּא יָרַד וַעֲקֹב אֲבִינוּ לְהִשְׁתַּקֵּעַ בְּמִצְרַיִם אֲלֵא לְגוֹר שָׁם.**

**From this, learn that our father Jacob went down not to become entrenched in Egypt but only to reside there temporarily.** And here, in the Haggadah's elaboration of the story, the subtext of the descent to Egypt is the same as the subtext of the Jacob/Lavan story. Jacob wanted to stay with Lavan only **temporarily**, but after entrenching himself with him for a longer period of time and amassing a lot of wealth which would have anchored him there, God instructed Jacob to leave. Similarly, Jacob and his family had only intended to reside in Egypt **temporarily** in order to ride out the famine. But at Joseph's urging they ended up staying there longer than they expected, and they became numerous and were entrenched there and anchored by their success. Generations later, when Joseph faded from living memory and Pharaoh saw the Israelites as a threat to his stability, he began to oppress them. The Israelites would only have their independence and freedom after a long enslavement, that God would terminate with the Exodus.

**וַיֹּצִיאֵנוּ ה' מִמִּצְרַיִם... וַיְבָאֵנוּ אֶל הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה** **and God took us out from Egypt... and he brought us to this place.** This is the center of the declaration. The past history flows into the present moment. But more importantly, there is an important subtext here: **Egypt** is the place where we were tormented, oppressed, and enslaved. **This place**, the place where the pilgrim now stands, is a place of total freedom. **This place**, i.e. the Temple, is everything opposite from **Egypt**. **In Egypt we were subservient to a tyrannical human despot. In the Temple we are servants of God. In Egypt we were enslaved. In Jerusalem we are free. Coming out of Egypt required the exertion of God's power through miraculous intervention. Coming into the land depended on human initiative and military success under God's watchful protection. The land was indeed a gift.**

**וְהָיָה אֶרֶץ זָבַת חֶלֶב וּדְבַשׁ-a land flowing with milk and honey.** Like many other biblical phrases which are set to music, it's almost impossible to read this verse without hearing the hora melody and tom-toms that accompany it. Written by Eliyahu Gamliel (1926-2013) in 1952 as a composition exercise, it spread quickly and is today one of the most

recognizable Israeli folk-melodies.



According to Prof. Jeffrey Tigay (JPS Commentary) it is a favorite phrase in the bible for describing the fertility of the Land of Israel. But biblical botanist and Israel Prize Laureate, Nogah Hareuveni (1924-2007), offers a fascinating alternative view:

**The phrase: a land flowing with milk and honey, describes uncultivated areas covered with wild vegetation and a profusion of flowers. It was a positive and alluring description to the**



**Israelites while they were still shepherds. However, after they settled the land of Israel by clearing the milk and honey areas for cultivation, the same phrase became a frightening description associated with the destruction of productive farmland.** Thus, when the pilgrim makes his declaration, he is saying that God brought us into **a land flowing with milk and honey**, that is, **an uncultivated land, teeming with natural wild vegetation** enabling a people comprised mainly of pastoral nomads to pasture their flocks like their ancestors. **וְעַתָּה - But now**, after several generations of living in the land, cultivating the fields and sewing them with wheat and barley, building the terraces for vineyards, planting orchards for olives, pomegranates, figs and dates, **now, הִנֵּה הָיָה הַבְּאֵתִי אֶת רִאשִׁית פְּרִי הָאֲדָמָה** **here I have brought the first of the fruits of the soil, אֲשֶׁר נָתַתָּה לִּי ה'** **that God has given me.** This is the wisdom and drama of the first fruits declaration. It locates the pilgrim in the arc of a larger and tightly compressed story, that starts with the origins of the people and culminates in this very moment. It is a story of liberation from human oppression but also of divine-human partnership. The pilgrim is not only grateful to God who **created the fruit of the earth, the trees and the vines**, but **who also gave us life, sustained us and enabled us to reach this day.** **SHABBAT SHALOM!**

**TODAY IS DAY 351. WE PRAY FOR THE RELEASE OF THE HOSTAGES. MAY GOD PROTECT AND SHIELD ISRAEL FROM THE TERROR OUT OF LEBANON. שבת שלום!**