

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

Parshas Ki Tavo

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וְעִנִּיתָ וְאָמַרְתָּ לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲרָמִי אֹבֵד אָבִי וַיֵּרֵד מִצְרַיִם וְגו'.

*You shall answer and say before Hashem, your God, "The Aramean sought to destroy my father, and he went down to Egypt"*¹

BACKGROUND

The bringing of *bikkurim* (first fruits) to the Beis Hamikdash is accompanied by the recital of a number of verses that recap our formative history in brief. The opening words of this recital, well-known to us from Seder Night, are: "אֲרָמִי אֹבֵד אָבִי וַיֵּרֵד מִצְרַיִם" – the Aramean [Lavan] sought to destroy my father [Yaakov], and he [Yaakov] went down to Egypt."

Many commentators raise a basic question on these words. If one did not know better, he would conclude from this account that when Lavan tried to kill Yaakov, this *caused Yaakov* to go down to Egypt. In reality, as we know, there was no causal relationship at all between these two events. Lavan's attempt to kill Yaakov ended in failure; Yaakov then returned to the land of Canaan where, years later tensions erupted among his sons, resulting in Yosef being sold to Egypt where, more years later, he rose to power and oversaw the management of the years of famine – all of which led Yaakov to go down to Egypt! Why, then, are these two things mentioned next to each other in the verse?²

ENTER THE VILNA GAON

An absolutely fascinating answer to this question is offered by the Vilna Gaon. A theme, which runs through Chumash Bereishis is the concept of "מעשה אבות סימן לבנים" – the deeds of the fathers are a sign for the children." This idea states that the significant events which will be experienced by the Jewish people on a national level have already been pre-experienced by their ancestors on a personal level. The meaning behind this idea is explained by the Ramban³ in the following way. We see throughout the Chumash and Prophets that prophecies regarding certain events are often accompanied and initiated by a symbolic act. That act serves as a catalyst to harness the spiritual energy for that event, actualize the prophecy and allow it to be realized in the physical world. The existence and history of the Jewish people is itself a miracle, and thus the micro-experiences in the lives of the fathers serve as the trigger

1 Devarim 26:5.

2 See e.g. Commentaries of Abarbanel and Netziv *ibid*.

3 Bereishis 12:6

acts for the actualization of that miracle. As we can appreciate, a national experience of the magnitude of the exile to and redemption from Egypt can certainly be expected to be represented on a *maaseh avos* level.

The Vilna Gaon writes:⁴

‘Yaakov’s experiences in Lavan’s house parallel those of Israel in Egypt, as it is said: The deeds of the fathers are a sign for their children.

- ▷ *Initially, Yaakov went onto exile, and subsequently emerged with great wealth.*
- ▷ *He amassed his wealth through the use of staves of wood,⁵ analogous to Moshe’s staff.*
- ▷ *Yaakov ran away from Lavan, as did the Jews from Egypt.*
- ▷ *The Jews were originally meant to go for only three days; and similarly, Lavan was told on the third day that Yaakov had run away.*
- ▷ *Additionally, Lavan caught up with Yaakov on the seventh day, as it was later on in Egypt.⁶*

And it is for this reason that the section which we expound upon while recounting the Exodus begins with the words אַרְמֵי אֲבִד אָבִי – [Lavan] the Aramean sought to destroy my father (Devarim 26:5).’

In other words, according to the Vilna Gaon, the relationship between the opening phrase “אַרְמֵי אֲבִד אָבִי” and the subsequent phrases is not that it represents “chapter one” of our formative history, with the phrases that follow representing the ensuing chapters that took place in Egypt. Rather, this opening phrase is an **encapsulation** – on a *maaseh avos* level – of the entire Egypt experience, with all the phrases that follow describing the events as they unfolded there on a *siman le’banim* level!

Truly, a unique situation in chumash!

THE MEANING OF “אַרְמֵי אֲבִד אָבִי”

The explanation we have provided for the words “אַרְמֵי אֲבִד אָבִי”, namely, that it refers to Lavan’s attempt to destroy Yaakov, is found in Rashi who in turn, bases it on Chazal. This interpretation on a level of pshat is strongly contested by the Ibn Ezra. The basis of his problem is that the grammatical form of the word “אַבִּד” is intransitive – i.e., it denotes someone who himself is being lost, not that he is trying to lose (= destroy) someone else. Therefore, the Ibn Ezra maintains that the pshat meaning of this phrase is, “My father [Yaakov] was a lost Aramean,” referring to the fact that Yaakov was never settled or respected while he was in Aram.

The Maharal in his commentary Gur Aryeh reacts very strongly to the Ibn Ezra’s explanation. Firstly, he says that whatever pshat difficulty the Ibn Ezra may have perceived with Chazal’s explanation, his own suggestion is simply impossible. The only time a person will ever be referred to by the Torah in terms of a place is if that was either a) the place he was born or b) the place he eventually settled in. Given that Yaakov was neither born nor settled in Aram, there is no way the Torah would refer to him as an Aramean!

With regards to the Ibn Ezra’s objection that the word “אַבִּד” is intransitive, the Maharal explains as

4 Commentary to Tikunei Zohar chap. 3

5 See Bereishis 30:37-43

6 We should note that when the verse states that Yaakov was originally given a small number of sheep by Lavan, and then succeeded in increasing their number to a vast amount, the Midrash (Bereishis Rabbah 70:11) comments that initially Lavan gave Yaakov seventy sheep, and Yaakov increased that number to six hundred thousand. This is a clear parallel to the profusion of the Jewish people from the time they arrived in Egypt until the time they left, and corroborates the words of the Vilna Gaon regarding Yaakov’s stay in Lavan’s house.

follows. Let us consider:

- ▷ On the one hand, the verse does not describe Lavan *intending* to do something, but of *doing it*; for even though he was unable to carry out his plans, he is accredited with his intended evil deed as if actually did it.⁷
- ▷ On the other hand, he did not succeed.

How is this blend of “virtual deed” and “actual non-deed” to be communicated? The answer is: by the word “אָבִד”.

- ▷ On the one hand, it is written as something that happened, reflecting the first idea whereby Lavan is reckoned as having committed that crime.
- ▷ On the other hand, it is written as an intransitive word, denoting his inability to actually “reach” Yaakov and bring about his demise!⁸

RASHBAM’S APPROACH

In case we were wondering whether there any other approaches among the commentators to the phrase “אָרַמִי אָבִד אָבִי”, the answer is: yes, there is a third approach. The Rashbam explains that the reference is to Avraham, who came from Aram to the land of Canaan, but was not able to settle there uninterruptedly, for he was periodically forced to wander to other countries due to famine etc. For Rashbam, the words read “My father [Avraham] the Aramean was forced to wander”. We note that the Rashbam is close in basic approach to the Ibn Ezra in explaining the word “אָבִד” as referring to the father who was lost. Having said that, by explaining that the reference to Avraham, the Rashbam is not subject to the Maharal’s question about him being called “an Aramean,” for Avraham was indeed born in the region of Aram.

And so we see that meaning of this opening phrase is hotly contested by the commentators, with every word being scrutinized from numerous angles.

COLLABORATIONS

Let us return for a moment to the Vilna Gaon, who identified Yaakov’s experiences with Lavan as the *maaseh avos* for the Egypt experience. This statement is most intriguing, for it happens to be that the Midrash has actually already identified an entirely different episode as the *maaseh avos*. When Avraham first arrives in the land of Canaan, he finds that there is a famine there, and he journeys down to Egypt. Regarding that journey the Midrash comments:⁹

אתה מוצא כל מה שאירע לאברם אירע לבניו

‘You will find that everything which is written regarding Avraham, is written regarding his descendants.’

The Midrash then proceeds to list parallel experiences between the two stories. Among them are:

- ▷ Avraham left the Land of Israel for Egypt due to famine, and so did his children.
- ▷ Avraham felt that his life was in danger there, though they would spare Sarah. The Egyptians decreed that the male children should be thrown into the Nile, while the females were allowed to live.
- ▷ Pharaoh was punished with plagues for wronging Avraham, and so too a later Pharaoh was

7 Mentioned in Rashi loc. cit.

8 See Gur Aryeh there for another explanation.

9 Bereishis Rabbah 40:6

- ▷ punished with plagues for wronging the Jewish people.
▷ Avraham left Egypt with great wealth, and so did his descendants.

This puts us in a rather unusual situation, to say the least. The Vilna Gaon is well aware that the Midrash has *already identified* the *maaseh avos* for the Egyptian exile as the experiences of Avraham there. Indeed, it is within the context of Avraham's descent that we are first introduced to the concept of *maaseh avos*! That being the case, why would he see a need to identify a different experience of the fathers as the *maaseh avos*?

It seems that the Vilna Gaon is introducing us to a major idea regarding the concept of *maaseh avos*. Certain chapters in the history of the Jewish people are so significant that they are the product of the deeds of *more than one father*! Such a chapter is our exile in Egypt. Both Avraham and Yaakov contributed towards what became a *composite maaseh avos* for that era in our history. Indeed, when we consider the various experiences of the two *avos*, we will see that there are certain *maaseh avos* components which exist in one, but not the other. For example:

1. Location: Avraham journeyed down to Egypt; Yaakov fled to Aram.
2. Servitude: Yaakov worked for Lavan; Avraham did not work for Pharaoh.
3. Punishment: Pharaoh suffered plagues for his treatment of Sarah; Lavan did not endure any punishment for his maltreatment of Yaakov.
4. Departure: Avraham was told by Pharaoh to leave; Yaakov ran away from Lavan. Actually, both of these components existed within the experience of the children. Originally they were prevailed upon to leave, and subsequently it was discovered that they had 'run away' by not returning after three days.

CONCLUSION: A FITTING INTRODUCTION

This discussion may shed light on another question. As we have seen, there are no less than three different interpretations of the opening phrase "אַרְמִי אֶבֶד אֲבִי".

1. Haggadah and Rashj: Lavan tried to destroy my father Yaakov.
2. Ibn Ezra: My father Yaakov was a lost Aramean.
3. Rashbam: My father Avraham was a wandering Aramean.

As we consider these various interpretations, we ourselves are forced to wonder: Why did the verse not *name* 'the Aramean' in the verse? Why did it use a term which can be understood as a reference to any one of three different people?

In cases like this we should appreciate that if the Torah could easily have specified, and nonetheless chose to not to, it is specifically *in order* to keep the matter open to more than one possibility.¹⁰ In our case, if Hashem chose not to point out who the Aramean was, it was in order to allow for more than one interpretation of these words. The question is: Why?

In order to answer this question, let us remind ourselves that according to the Vilna Gaon, this phrase represents the *maaseh avos* for the Egypt experience. Having discovered that this pre-experience was actually shared between the exile experiences of both Avraham and Yaakov, we well understand that this phrase is left open to be able to refer to *both* of those *avos*!

10 Heard from my uncle, Rav Yehuda Copperman zt"l.