

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of  
Sh'muel Chayim *ben Moshe Reuvein a"h*  
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his *neshamah*

## Question of Identity

## PARSHAS KI SAVO 5778

This week's *parshah* contains the familiar passage (*Devarim 26:5-8*), which forms a central part of the Seder on Pesach night. As the Mishnah states (*Pesachim 10:4*):

וְדוֹרֵשׁ מֵאַרְמֵי אוֹבֵד אָבִי, עַד שְׂיִגְמוֹר כָּל הַפְּרָשָׁה כְּלָהּ.

“One expounds upon the section that begins, ‘*Arami oveid avi*’ and continues with the remainder of that section (which discusses Ya’akov’s descent to Mitzrayim and all of the events that unfolded there for the Jewish people, from the slavery to the redemption).”

In previous articles, we discussed the issue of the connection of this initial *passuk* with the Seder and the overall narrative of the Haggadah. But there is one basic matter that yet deserves further examination: simply put, what exactly does this *passuk* mean?

### Early Exile

In its fuller version, the *passuk* states: ...אֲרָמִי אֹבֵד אָבִי וַיֵּרַד מִצְרַיִם. The phrase “*va’yeired Mitzraymah*” translates simply enough as “he went down to Egypt.” It is the first three words – “*Arami oveid avi*” – that pose more of a challenge. Taken individually, we know that “*Arami*” means (literally) “an Aramean”; “*oveid*,” from the root-word אֹבֵד, has something to do with “lost”; and “*avi*,” of course, means “my father” – “An Aramean / lost / my father, and ‘he’ went down to Egypt.” The obvious question is how to understand this phrase. The commentators offer various approaches, a number of them quite intriguing.

One of the issues requiring elucidation is the simple matter of the subject – who is this “Aramean” that the *passuk* is talking about? The continuation of the verse that speaks of the descent to Mitzrayim appears to be referring to Ya’akov Avinu, who did lead his family into that exile: וַיָּבֹאוּ מִצְרַיִם יַעֲקֹב וְכָל־זֶרְעוֹ אִתּוֹ – “And they came to Egypt – Ya’akov and all of his offspring with him” (*Bereishis 46:6*). In any event, the Ibn Ezra understands that the beginning of the *passuk* features Ya’akov, as well. He is “*avi* – my forefather,” who was referred to as an “Aramean” for his extended sojourn in that country at the house of his (wicked, conniving, and dangerous) father-in-law, Lavan. Regarding the term “*oveid*,” the Ibn Ezra notes the occurrence of this word in other places in Tanach, where it actually means “poor,” as in: וְשִׁתָּהּ וַיִּשְׁכַּח רִישׁוֹ ... תִּנְרָשְׁכָר לְאוֹבֵד – “Give spirits to the ‘*oveid*’... let him drink, and he will forget his poverty” (*Mishlei 31:6,7*). In short, then, the Ibn Ezra renders “*Arami oveid avi*” as, “My forefather was a poor Aramean,” a reference to the fact that he initially arrived penniless at Lavan’s house.

The Rashbam explains the *passuk* in a related fashion, but identifies “*avi*” as Avraham Avinu, who originated from the land of Aram (modern-day Iraq). He also explains “*oveid*” slightly differently than the Ibn Ezra, translating it as “wanderer,” as we find in the verse (*Yirmiyah 50:6*): צֹאן אֲבָדוֹת הֵיוּ עִמִּי רְעִיָהֶם הִתְעוּם – “My nation were as wandering sheep, whose shepherds led them astray.” (As an aside, it appears that this phrase – “*tzon ovdos*” – is the “source” for the popular expression “lost sheep.”) And so the Rashbam understands the *passuk* as referring to the early wanderings of the first patriarch, whose offspring eventually settled in Mitzrayim.

## Sinister Subject

Now, the simple intimation of the Haggadah itself is that the subject of this verse is actually Lavan. This we see from the manner in which the Haggadah introduces the passage: **צא ולמד מה בקש לָבָן הָאַרְמִי לעשות ליעקב אבינו, שפָּרְעָה לא גִזַּר אֶלָּא על הזָּכְרִים וְלָבָן בִּקֵּשׁ לַעֲקוֹר אֶת הַכֹּל, שְׁנֵאֲמַר אַרְמִי אֲבִד אָבִי** – “Go and learn what **Lavan the Aramean** sought to do to Ya’akov Avinu. For Pharaoh’s death decree applied only to the Jewish males, whereas Lavan sought to uproot everyone, as it says: ‘*Arami oveid avi.*’” It appears that the Haggadah’s rendering of the *passuk* is: “(Lavan the) Aramean sought to make my forefather go lost.” And, indeed, Rashi (in Chumash) explains the *passuk* in this fashion.

R’ Ya’akov Kamenetsky provides an interesting addendum to this approach. He wonders why it is that the Torah here didn’t mention Lavan by name – why refer to him simply as “an Aramean”? He explains that, in truth, Lavan wasn’t the only enemy of Ya’akov in Aram; in fact, all of Lavan’s fellow citizens were likewise aligned against Ya’akov and invested in his downfall. This we see from the fact that they apparently participated in the deceitful ordeal regarding Ya’akov’s marriage. (Lavan tricked Ya’akov into thinking he was marrying Lavan’s daughter Rachel, when in fact, it turned out to be Le’ah.) How was the whole matter kept from Ya’akov, if not for the fact that all the locals were in on the plot? Thus, all the Arameans knew, but purposely withheld the pertinent information from Ya’akov. This is why the Torah refers merely to “an Aramean.” It really did not matter which one it was; they were all aiming for the shared goal of “*oveid avi*” (*Talelei Oros*).

Thus far, we have seen a number of different possibilities as to the identity of the “Arami”: Avraham, Ya’akov, Lavan, or even the “average Joe” Aramean. The Chasam Sofer (*Toras Moshe*) offers yet another approach, based on a revealing teaching of Chazal. The *medrashim* actually identify Lavan as Bilaam, the wicked gentile prophet notorious for his (failed) attempts to curse Yisrael.

In any event, Chazal also inform us that Bilaam played a significant part in crafting the plan to enslave Yisrael in Mitzrayim, where he served in the capacity of Pharaoh’s advisor. This, then, accounts for the linkage appearing in our *passuk*: **אַרְמִי אֲבִד אָבִי וַיֵּרֵד מִצְרַיִמָּה** – “The Aramean sought to destroy my father, and he went down to Mitzrayim.” What is the connection? The Chasam Sofer thus explains that Lavan wanted to wipe out Ya’akov already in Aram, but was obviously unsuccessful. Nonetheless, this Aramean did not give up; in the guise of Bilaam, he eventually made his way southward – “*Va’yeired Mitzraymah*” (i.e., he, Bilaam, went to Egypt) – where he continued hatching plots to persecute the Jewish People. But thankfully, this attempt to defeat them also met with failure, as the familiar passage concludes: **וַיִּשְׁמַע ד’ אֶת-קוֹלֵנוּ... וַיּוֹצֵאֵנוּ ד’ מִמִּצְרַיִם בְּיַד חֲזָקָה וּבְזֵרַע נְטִיָּה וּבְמִרְאָה גְדֹל וּבְאֹתוֹת וּבְמִפְתֵּיִם** – “And Hashem heard our voice... And Hashem took us out of Mitzrayim – with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, amidst a great awe and with signs and wonders.”

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