



# Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY

## Today's Torah

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### Shabbat Ki Tavo

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**By: Rabbi Gail Labovitz**  
Professor, Rabbinic Studies  
Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies  
American Jewish University

Passover (and Purim) and Shavuot Jews

Torah Reading: Deuteronomy 26:1-29:8

Haftarah Reading: Isaiah 60:1-22

Since the high holidays and Sukkot will be upon us soon, let's talk this week about springtime holidays... No, really – as you'll see in a moment I'm actually quite serious about this.

One of the most familiar verses of this week's parashah is famous for the way in which it has long been creatively (mis)quoted in Jewish liturgy, that is, in a crucial ceremony of the Jewish calendar. In (transliterated) Hebrew it reads:

"Arami oved avi" (Deut. 26:5)

I leave it untranslated for the moment because it is not a simple set of words to translate, but more significantly because how one translates it relates to the context in which one says it. It is made up of only three words, two nouns (Arami, avi) and a form of the Hebrew verb "a.v.d." "Arami" – Aramean, "avi" – my father. Presumably, one of these nouns must be the (grammatical) subject of this sentence, while the other

might be the object. As for “oved,” this word could function here as either the verb (what was done) or as a kind of adjective, as “to be” in the present tense (e.g., “is” and “are”) does not have distinct forms in biblical Hebrew and is almost always implied by the context and content of the sentence. And one more complication: this root “a.v.d.” has multiple meanings. It can have the sense of “to perish, be ruined, be destroyed,” and also “to be loss, strayed.”

If this phrase rings a bell for you, it is likely because you heard this past spring – and many springs before that, at a Passover seder. In that context, it is most commonly translated as “An Aramean sought to destroy my father.” According to the traditional Passover haggadah, this Aramean is Lavan, the father is our patriarch Jacob, and this is the introduction to the story of the descent of Jacob and his family to Egypt, the enslavement of their descendants there, and the ultimate redemption of the Israelites from slavery by God. We read and discuss this passage at the seder in order to fulfill the obligation of Maggid, the retelling of our history and the reasons we observe Passover.

But in fact, I am a being a bit disingenuous above in saying this passage is famous for the liturgical use to which it has been put, as if it were not a liturgical text to begin with. In fact, Deut. 26 is all about a pair of ceremonies that were to take place once the Israelites entered the Land of Israel (“Ki tavo el ha-aretz,” the opening and naming words of our parashah). The first of these was the bringing of first fruits:

“When you enter the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a heritage, and you possess it and settle in it, you shall take some of every first fruit of the soil, which you harvest from the land that the Lord your God is giving you, put it in a basket and go to the place where the Lord your God will choose to establish His name.” (Deut. 26:1-2)

As we learn elsewhere in Torah, Num. 28:26, this took place not at Passover, but seven weeks later, at Shavuot, the Feast of Weeks, which is also referred to as “the day of first fruits.” Pilgrims coming to the Sanctuary for the holiday also brought this offering with them. Verse 5, then, is the opening of a ritual declaration made by the bringer of the fruits, and Etz Hayim here translates it as “My father was a fugitive Aramean.” Perhaps this father is still Jacob, who was the one to take the beginnings of the Israelite people to Egypt. Or perhaps it is Abraham, who came from Aram Naharaim (Etz Hayim suggests “Aram alongside the River”).

Yet though it is (nearly, as I’ll explain in a moment) the same passage, the context into which it is placed can make a rather significant difference. In the Passover seder, the passage is recited, and further interpreted, as a story of the journey from oppression to liberation: we were slaves, and God freed us. The recitation culminates with v. 8: “The Lord freed us from Egypt by a mighty hand, by an outstretched arm and awesome power, and by signs and portents.” The “signs and portents” are then interpreted as a veiled reference to the ten plagues, and that is where the seder turns next.

While our oppression as slaves is part of the formula even in its original context, here the focus is subtly different, and the journey is one from rootlessness and being aliens in someone else’s land to autonomy and groundedness (both literary and metaphorical) as a nation. In fact, the historical declaration as it appears in Deut. and as it was meant to be said on Shavuot has an additional line (v. 9; and see also the similar statement in v. 3) that does not appear in the seder: “He (God) brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.” And where this leads is to v. 10: “Wherefore I now bring the first fruits of the soil which You, O Lord, have given me.” In its original context, the message of the declaration is: we have arrived where we were meant to be, and we must give thanks for our bounty.

The Israeli writer Yossi Klein Halevi has posited that there are two types of Jews related to two Jewish holidays, one we’ve already discussed, and yet another spring holiday, Purim:

Jewish history speaks to our generation in the voice of two biblical commands to remember. The first voice commands us to remember that we were strangers in the land of Egypt, and the message of that command is: “Don’t be brutal.” The second voice commands us to remember how the tribe of

Amalek attacked us without provocation while we were wandering in the desert, and the message of that command is: “Don’t be naive.”

...

“Passover Jews” are motivated by empathy with the oppressed; “Purim Jews” are motivated by alertness to threat.

Now it just so happens that the command to remember Amalek is actually immediately juxtaposed to the first fruits ritual and declaration we have been discussing so far; it is Deut. 24:17-19, the final words of last week’s parashah. Which suggests that perhaps we need to add a third type of Jew – the Shavuot Jew – to the other two; and/or we might reconsider what it might mean to be a Passover Jew in contrast to a Shavuot Jew rather than in contrast to a Purim Jew.

There is much the Jew on Passover and the Jew on Shavuot share. Most significantly, Deut. 25:8-10 stress what God has done for God’s people: rescued us from Egypt and slavery, brought us to the Land, gave us the bounty of the Land. At the heart of our festivals, and our religious consciousness more generally, should always be our awareness of God’s role in the world and our lives. What we have and what we have experienced should be met with humility and gratitude rather than selfishness and self-satisfaction. Indeed, this might be something the Passover Jew and the Shavuot Jews share differently than the Purim Jew, in that the book of Esther is famously the one book of the Tanakh in which God’s presence and hand are hidden, the one book in which God’s name does not appear.

And yet... Halevi sees in the Passover Jew the call for justice for the oppressed: we know what it is to have been oppressed and so we are the ones in a place of power we should never become oppressors ourselves, when we can protest oppression and take up the cause of the oppressed, we must. And he is not wrong. But when the Passover Jew stands next to the Shavuot Jew, she looks a bit different to me.

The Passover Jew is redeemed from slavery, but still must go into the wilderness. She has been redeemed up to a point, but threats still abound, and she knows she is still in need of, and must seek, God’s protection. Also, the Passover Jew is bound up in the paradox of triumphantly listing the plagues that finally defeated the Egyptians while also pouring out drops of wine to mourn lives lost even among our enemies. The Passover Jew knows trauma, and is certainly allowed to celebrate its overthrow, but is challenged to seek compassion and justice nonetheless.

The Shavuot Jew, on the other hand, has arrived, in every sense of that word. She has a Land of her own in which she lives comfortably, and her needs are well met. What threatens her is complacency, smugness, and unwarranted self-congratulation. The challenge of the Shavuot Jew is not to forget that he too still needs God’s protection – in fact, that all that he has must be credited to God’s gifts and love.

And finally, what Halevi observes about his two types of Jews is true even for our three:

Both are essential; one without the other creates an unbalanced Jewish personality, a distortion of Jewish history and values.

We all have to find, and embrace, our inner Passover Jew with her sense of justice, our inner Purim Jew who is vigilant on behalf the welfare of the people – and our inner Shavuot Jew who is full of gratitude and wonder at the blessings we experience.

And with that, I return us all to our regular scheduled fall holidays about to be in progress... Shabbat shalom and shanah tovah u’metukah!

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**Rabbi Gail Labovitz, PhD**, is Professor of Rabbinic Literature and former Chair of the Department of Rabbinics for the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies. She also enjoys serving as the Ziegler School’s faculty advisor for “InterSem,” a dialogue program for students training for religious leadership at Jewish and Christian seminaries around the Los Angeles area. Dr. Labovitz formerly taught at the Jewish Theological

Seminary of America (JTS) and the Academy for Jewish Religion in New York. Prior to joining the faculty at AJU, Dr. Labovitz worked as the Senior Research Analyst in Judaism for the Feminist Sexual Ethics Project at Brandeis University, and as the Coordinator for the Jewish Women's Research Group, a project of the Women's Studies Program at JTS. Rabbi Labovitz is also preparing a teshuva (rabbinic responsum) for consideration by the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly on whether a person who is unable to fast for medical reasons may nonetheless serve as a leader of communal prayer on Yom Kippur.

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Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies  
American Jewish University  
15600 Mulholland Drive  
Bel Air, CA 90077  
310-440-1218  
[www.aju.edu/ziegler](http://www.aju.edu/ziegler)

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