Arami Oved Avi: Uncovering the Interpretation Hidden in the Mishnah

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Introduction[1]

The book of Deuteronomy instructs that the following declaration is to be made when the first fruits are brought: ארמי אבד אבי וירד מצרימה... (Deut. 26:5). It is widely assumed that the Tannaim and

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Amoraim uniformly understood *arami* here as a reference to Lavan, and that the alternative understanding, "my father was a homeless/wandering/lost[2] Aramean," originated in the time of the Rishonim.

This article will conduct a close analysis of *Mishnah Pesaḥim* 10:4 and will reveal that this Tannaitic source already understood *arami oved avi* to mean "my father was a homeless/wandering/lost Aramean."[3] The Rishonim who later offered this interpretation were not offering a new one, but were resurrecting what was a mainstream interpretation in the time of the Tannaim.[4]

I. An Ancient Jewish Interpretation: The Subject of the Phrase is *Arami* and the Reference is to Lavan Seeking to Destroy Jacob

The interpretation of *arami oved avi* as a reference to Lavan seeking to destroy Jacob is an ancient one. It is recorded in early Jewish sources such as *Targum Onkelos*,[5] *Sifre Deuteronomy*,[6] *Midrash Tanḥuma,*[7] and the *haggadah*.[8]

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[2] Other widely proposed interpretations are: "perishing," "ready to perish," "persecuted," "poor," and "fugitive." See Part II.

[3] This point has already been made by Tabory and Henshke in the articles (in Hebrew) cited above. The present article expands the analysis.

[4] The widespread assumption that the Tannaim and Amoraim uniformly understood *arami* in Deut. 26:5 to be a reference to Lavan is also incorrect, because another interpretation of *arami oved avi* is included as the first one in *Sifre Deuteronomy* (see below). See also the discussion below of a passage in *Sefer Pitron Torah*. Also, the Pseudo-Jonathan Targum to Deut. 26:5 roughly parallels the *Sifre Deuteronomy* passage. The Septuagint had translated: "my father abandoned Syria."

[5] Comm. to 26:5: לבן ארמאה בעא לאובדא ית אבא. (Another version has לאבדא, instead of לאובדא.)
    Onkelos lived in the 2nd century, but a widespread view is that the translation known by his name did not reach its final form until the 3rd century (*EJ* 4:844). It is also possible that changes occurred in the text after that. Our earliest manuscripts of Targum Onkelos are from medieval times, although there are quotations and references to Onkelos in earlier sources.

The traditional reading in the Pseudo-Jonathan Targum to Deut. 26:5 will be mentioned below. But the Neofiti manuscript of this Targum follows Targum Onkelos: לבן ארמייה סבר למובדה לאבונן יעקב.

6   It is the second of what seems to be two different interpretations expressed here. See *Sifre Deut*., sec. 301: מלמד שלא ירד יעקב לארם אלא לאובד, ומעלה על לבן הארמי כאלו איבדו. The meaning of the first interpretation is unclear. (There are some variants in its text as well. For example, some texts read לאבד מן העולם.) For some attempts at understanding it, see, e.g., Tabory, p. 105, n. 29, and p. 106, and Yeshayahu Maori, *Targum ha-Peshiteta la-Torah ve-ha-Parshanut ha-Yehudit ha-Kedumah* (1995), p. 275. R. David Zevi Hoffmann speculated that the second interpretation was a later addition by someone attempting to reconcile the passage with the interpretation of Onkelos and the *haggadah*. See Hoffmann, ed., *Midrash Tannaim* (1909), p. 172, n. 5.

There is a parallel to the passage in the *Sifre Deut.* at *Midrash Tannaim*, p. 172. Regarding this work, see below, n. 22. The Pseudo-Jonathan Targum to Deut. 26:5 roughly parallels the *Sifre Deut.* passage, even though Lavan's name is not mentioned: לארם נהריא נחת אבונן יעקב... ובעא לאובדותיה.

7   *Midrash Tanḥuma, Ekev*, sec. 3: ואחרי כן בקש להרגו שנאמר ארמי אבד אבי. (See also Buber's edition, *Ekev*, sec. 5, p. 18.) The identification of the *arami* of Deut. 26:5 with Lavan is also found at *Mishnat R. Eliezer*, p. 163 (ed. Enelow), *Aggadat Bereshit*, sec. 53, and *Midrash Tehillim*, sec. 30. (In this last source, it is brought down in the name of R. Neḥemiah.) See also the Pseudo-Jonathan Targum to Num. 31:8 and I Chr. 1:43. See also the passage at J. Pe'ah 1:1 (16b) that interprets Obadiah, verses 9-10 and Steiner, p. 136, n. 60. Finally, R. Nathan b. Jehiel (11th century) in his *Arukh*, entry: ארם, quotes a passage from an unknown *Yelammedenu* on Genesis that identifies the *arami* of Deut. 26:5 with Lavan.

8   צא ולמד מה בקש לבן הארמי לעשות ליעקב אבינו שפרעה לא גזר אלא על הזכרים ולבן בקש לעקר את הכל, שנאמר ארמי... This section is generally found in the earliest *haggadot*. See, *e.g.,* Kasher, pp. 46-47, Safrai, pp. 271, 287, Rovner (2000) p. 374, and Rovner (2004) pp. 83, 91. Almost certainly, it was composed as a continuation of the *ve-hi she-amdah* section, and did **not** originate as part of any section of *derashot* on Deut. 26. See, e.g., Goldschmidt, pp. 38-39.

Scholars have frequently assumed that most of the *derashot* on Deut. 26 now included in the *seder* ritual were Tannaitic in origin. But Rovner, in his 2004 article, provided evidence for a late Babylonian origin of many. For example, the two earliest *haggadot* from the Genizah (the fragment published by Rovner in 2000, and what Safrai calls "the Greenstone fragment," both of which reflect the Palestinian ritual) include the *ve-hi she-amdah* and *tze u-lemad* sections, but do not include many of the tradition-

An additional allusion to this interpretation is perhaps found in the commentary of the church father Jerome (4ᵗʰ century). Jerome translates *arami oved avi* as *Syrus persequebatur patrem meum* (=a Syrian pursued my father). It is possible that Jerome is not alluding to Lavan here, or that he is alluding to Lavan and came up with this translation on his own. But the influence of Jerome's Jewish teachers on other portions of his commentary has long been noted,[9] and it has been suggested that this is another such instance.[10]

The antiquity of the Lavan interpretation is also evidenced by the masoretic accents. According to most authorities, the *pashta, zakef, katon* sequence on *arami oved avi* was formulated in accordance with the Lavan interpretation.[11]

In the period of the later Geonim and early Rishonim, both R. Saadiah Gaon[12] (d. 942) and Rashi (d. 1105) follow the Lavan interpretation in their commentaries to Deut. 26:5.

al *derashot* on Deut. 26. See Safrai, p. 287, and Rovner (2000), pp. 373-374. Rovner's view is followed in *The Schechter Haggadah* (2009), eds. Joshua Kulp, David Golinkin, and David Harel, pp. 215–221.

It has long been observed that some of the language in the *tze u-lemad* section of the *haggadah* (שפרעה לא גזר אלא על הזכרים) seems to be borrowed from *Sotah* 12a.

9   See, e.g., EJ 9:1377, and Jay Braverman, *Jerome's Commentary on Daniel: A Study of Comparative Jewish and Christian Interpretations of the Hebrew Bible* (1978), p. 6.

10   Goldschmidt, p. 35.

11   See, e.g., Goldschmidt, p. 34, Simcha Kogut, *Ha-Mikra Bein Taamim le-Parshanut* (1994), p. 65, Steiner, p. 131, n. 21, and A.M. Silbermann and M. Rosenbaum, eds., *Pentateuch,* Deut. (1934), p. 223. The accents seem to divide the three words into the sections *arami* and *oved avi*. According to the approach described in Part II, the words should be divided into the sections *arami oved* and *avi*. (There are those who believe that the accents support the approach described in Part II. See, e.g., the comm. of R. Samson Raphael Hirsch on Deut. 26:5.)

12   לבן הארמי קרוב היה לאבד את אבי (ed. Y. Kafah, p. 181, translation from the Arabic).

II. Many Rishonim Take an Alternative Approach: The Subject of the Phrase is *Avi*

In the period of the Rishonim, commentaries that emphasized plain-sense interpretation and grammar pointed out that the verb אבד is always intransitive when it is in the *kal* construct.[13] Thus, *oved*, if it is being used as a *kal* verb at Deut. 26:5, cannot mean that Lavan was destroying or seeking to destroy one of our forefathers. Rather, the entire phrase should be looked at differently. The subject is *avi*, and *arami oved* is a description of *avi*. The meaning of the phrase is "my father was a homeless/wandering/lost Aramean."[14]

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[13] An intransitive verb does not act on an object. See, e.g., the use of the verb אבד in the *kal* in the *Shema* (Deut 11:17): "*va-avadetem meherah...*" This is not a statement that we will destroy someone quickly; it is a statement that we will lose our land quickly. Aside from Deut. 26:5, *oved* (with and without the *vav* as the second letter) is found ten other times in *Tanakh* (Num. 24:20 and 24:24, Deut. 32:28, Ps. 31:13 and 119:176, Job 4:11, 29:13, and 31:19, Ecc. 7:15, and Prov 31:6). In none of these cases is it used as a transitive verb. It is only in the *piel* and *hifil* tenses that the root אבד means destroy. (As examples, the *piel* third person present is *meabed* and third person past is *ibed*.) Fundamentally, the root אבד means to lose something. But when used in the *piel* and in the *hifil*, it refers to causing someone else to lose something.

Reading *oved* as the transitive present tense *kal*, "is destroying," had always been difficult in the context. The context seemed to require a statement about the past.

Some have suggested that Biblical Hebrew had a *poel* construct in which *oved* could be transitive. On such suggestions, see, e.g., Tabory, p. 102, n. 23, and Steiner, pp. 133–135. Nehama Leibowitz cites approvingly Maharal's suggestion that *oved* is used as a noun here: an Aramean was the destroyer of my father. (But she still prefers the approach of Part II.) See her *Studies in Devarim* (trans. by Aryeh Newman, 1980), p. 271, and see Maharal, *Gur Aryeh*, comm. to Deut. 26:5, and *Gevurot Hashem*, ch. 54.

Of course, contextually it made little sense for there to be a reference to Lavan in *mikra bikurim*. These verses were intended to provide only a capsule summary of the origin of the Israelites.

[14] It is usually thought that the first authorities to propose this explanation were R. Abraham Ibn Ezra and Rashbam. Steiner, p. 128 points out that it was proposed a generation earlier by R. Judah Ibn Balam in his com-

These rabbinic commentaries did not agree on whether "my father" was a reference to Abraham or to Jacob. For example, Rashbam[15] and R. Joseph Bekhor Shor identified "my father" with Abraham, while R. Judah Ibn Balam, R. Abraham Ibn Ezra, and R. David Kimchi identified "my father" with Jacob.[16] (An alternative

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mentaries (composed in Arabic) to Deut. 26:5 and Hoshea 12:13. (Much of the literature on this explanation is collected and summarized by Steiner, pp. 127–130.) As I will argue in the text, this explanation is implicit in *Mishnah Pesaḥim* 10:4. It is also probably the view of R. Shimon b. Yoḥai. See below, n. 22.

Additional midrashic material on *mikra bikurim* has come to light in recent decades in a work known as *Sefer Pitron Torah*, edited in the 9th or 10th century, and published in 1978 by Ephraim Urbach. This work includes midrashic material from Tannaitic, Amoraic and Geonic times. According to Menachem Yitzchak Kahana, *Sifre Zuta Devarim* (2002), pp. 33–36, the *derashot* on *mikra bikurim* included in this work probably reflect Tannaitic material. (Rovner disagrees. See Rovner, 2004, pp. 115-20, and especially, p. 118, n. 130.) The explication on *arami oved avi* here is: לארם ירד אבי וכבר היה אביד שם. See Kahana, p. 415. As Kahana observes, this seems to reflect a form of our explanation. (The actual reading in the second-to-last word is אביך, but the proposed emendation by Urbach and Kahana to אביד seems reasonable.) See also Kahana's comments on the words גולה ומטורף in this same passage.

Steiner refers, p. 131, n. 24, to two interpretations reported by the 10th century Karaite Biblical commentator Yefet ben Eli. In these, אבד is intransitive, but ארמי is still identified as Lavan.

15 Aside from his comments on Deut. 26:5, see also his comments on Gen. 20:13 (כאשר התעו אתי).

16 Steiner, pp. 128-29. Also, Maimonides believed that the reference was to Jacob. See his *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*, positive commandment, #132.

Arami fits Abraham better than Jacob. The land of Aram may or may not have been the area that Abraham originated from, but it was the one that he identified with as his homeland. See Gen. 24:10. (Eliezer goes to *Aram Naharayim* to find a wife for Isaac.) See also Naḥmanides to Gen. 11:28 and 12:1. (Compare the view of Rashi. See, e.g., his comments to Gen. 12:1.) The term *arami* does not seem consistent with the Biblical description of Jacob (see, e.g., Gen. 31:20 and 47), even though Jacob served Lavan in Aram for 20 years (Gen. 31:38). The continuation of Deut. 26:5, *va-yered-mitzraymah va-yagar sham bi-metei meat va-yehi sham le-goy gadol atzum ra-rav*, fits Jacob better than Abraham.

approach is to view "my father" as combining the forefathers into one composite figure.[17])

III. The View of the Above Rishonim Was the View of the *Mishnah*

Mishnah Pesaḥim 10:4 includes the following statement:[18]

Regarding the precise meaning of the word *oved* here, widely suggested interpretations are: homeless, wandering, lost, perishing, ready to perish, persecuted, and poor. See, e.g., the commentaries of Ibn Balam, Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, Radak (*Sefer ha-Shorashim*), Seforno, Bekhor Shor, R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, and S.R. Driver, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Deuteronomy* (3rd ed., 1965), p. 289. See Steiner, pp. 128-29. See also Jer. 50:6. In most instances in *Tanakh*, the meaning of *oved* seems to be "perishing" or "poor." At Psalms 119:176, the meaning seems to be "wandering." At Deut. 32:28, the meaning seems to be "lacking." At Numb. 24:20 and 24:24, the meaning seems to be "destroyed." Akkadian parallels suggest a nuance of "fugitive" or "refugee." See Steiner, p. 128, n. 6, and Hayim ben Yosef Tawil, *An Akkadian Lexical Companion for Biblical Hebrew* (2009), p. 2. In *Papyrus Anastasi* I, from the 13th century BCE, the verb אבד is found in a Canaanite sentence that some believe to be a close parallel to Psalms 119:176. Steiner, p. 128, n. 6.

[17] See similarly the use of אבי at Ex. 15:2, and of אביך at Ex. 3:6. As stated by the 19th-century Italian Bible commentator Samuel David Luzzatto (comm. to Deut. 26:5): אבי: <u>כולל כל האבות כאחד</u> שהיו תועים מגוי אל גוי והראשון בא מארם... Luzzatto points out that this approach is alluded to in the Rashbam as well. Even though the Rashbam begins with a statement that *arami* refers to Abraham, Rashbam concludes with the following statement: מארץ נכריה באו <u>אבותינו</u> לארץ הזאת. Moses Mendelssohn, in his *Biur*, had taken such an approach earlier than Luzzatto. See Steiner, p. 129. Steiner suggests (p. 130) that the referent of *avi* can be expanded to include Jacob's sons as well (e.g., all but one were born in Aram of Aramean mothers).

Philo (1st century BCE) also offered an interpretation based on a composite approach, even though he translated *oved* differently. Philo translated: "the **leaders** of our nation renounced Syria." See his *Special Laws* II, XXXV, 216. (Philo's translation was based on that of the Septuagint. See above, n. 4.)

[18] In the *mishnah*, this passage is preceded by: 1) *ve-im ein daat ba-ben, aviv melamdo*, 2) the *mah nishtannah* section, and 3) *u-le-fi daato shel ben, aviv melamdo*. Most likely, *mah nishtannah* was only what the child who lacks

מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח ודורש מ"ארמי אובד אבי" עד שהוא גומר
את כל הפרשה.[19]

The Talmud records an Amoraic dispute about the meaning of
the word גנות (=disgrace, shame) here:[20]

מאי בגנות רב אמר מתחלה עובדי עבודה זרה היו אבותינו [ושמואל]
אמר עבדים היינו.

Neither opinion seems to consider the *arami oved avi* section
(Deut. 26:5 and the verses that follow) as relating to the *genut* re-
ferred to in the *mishnah*.[21]

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understanding was taught to ask. See, e.g., Richard Steiner, "On the Orig-
inal Structure and Meaning of *Mah Nishtannah* and the History of Its Re-
interpretation," *JSIJ* 7 (2008), pp. 26 and 33–36. (It was only in the post-
Talmudic period that *mah nishtannah* began to be treated as a mandated
piece of liturgy.) *Maṯḥil be-genut...kol ha-parshah* seems to be the answer in
the *seder* ritual. It can be argued that it too was addressed only to the child
who lacks understanding, but one does not have to take this approach.

The correct text in the *mishnah* of what follows is not רבן גמליאל היה אומר,
but רבן גמליאל אומר. Steiner, p. 34, n. 123, Safrai, pp. 35, 279, and 288, and
Kasher, p. 128 (note to line 1). These words signal a disagreement with
the previous statement, i.e., a different answer is now being provided.

[19] Even though many texts continue with the word *kulah*, this word is al-
most certainly a later addition. See, e.g., Safrai, p. 33. It is not found in
the similar passage at *Mishnah Bikurim* 3:6. See below, n. 29.

[20] The standard printed Talmud (*Pes.* 116a) lists the disputants here as Rav
and (in brackets) Samuel. Kasher (p. 22) points out that different dispu-
tants are named in some Rishonim and manuscripts. There is no Amoraic
discussion of the *shevaḥ* of the *mishnah*.

[21] Of course, the above Amoraic statements are very unclear. Is each refer-
ring to the beginning of a *derashah* that was known at their time, similar
or identical to the ones we recite today? Is each merely stating an idea or
minimum words that need to be expressed? Is each referring exclusively
or primarily to a verse? In the Jerusalem Talmud (*Pes.* 10:5), the second
statement is not brought at all, and Rav's statement is a citation to Joshua
24:2-3. In light of this, it is possible to understand the first statement in
the Babylonian Talmud (assuming it was made by Rav) as a reference to
Joshua 24:2-3. No matter how the first statement is understood, it is hard
to connect it to Deut. 26:5 and the verses that follow. If Samuel's state-
ment is referring to a verse, the most likely candidate is Deut. 6:21: ואמרת
לבנך עבדים היינו... Of course, it is possible that Samuel was referring to

But what if we would consider the *mishnah* on our own? The *mishnah* instructs one to begin with an exposition of *genut* and end with one of *shevaḥ*. It then refers immediately to Deut. 26:5-9, a section that can easily be understood (as will be explained below) as beginning with *genut*[22] and ending with *shevaḥ*. This can be mere coincidence, but much more likely the adjacency suggests that Deut. 26:5-9 is the *genut-shevaḥ* section referred to.[23] Moreover, to

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Deut. 26:6 and its surrounding verses, but the phrase עבדים היינו does not appear in these verses.

[22] Two passages elsewhere in rabbinic literature, in the name of the Tanna R. Shimon b. Yoḥai, label the section that begins with Deut. 26:5 as a section of *genut*:

1) *Midrash Tannaim*, p. 172: וענית ואמרת... ר' שמעון בן יוחאי אומר שבחו של אדם אומרו בקול נמוך גניו אדם אומרו בקול גבוה. See also, p. 175. (וענית means "you shall say with a raised voice.") Only a small portion of *Midrash Tannaim* has been recovered. For further discussion of this work, see EJ 11:1518-19, EJ (2d. ed.) 13:793-94, and Rovner (2004), p. 79. Despite its title, the work may not be Tannaitic.

2) *Sotah* 32b: תניא רשב"י אומר אדם אומר שבחו בקול נמוך וגנותו בקול רם, שבחו בקול נמוך מן וידוי המעשר גנותו בקול רם ממקרא ביכורים. (Admittedly, the subsequent discussion at Sotah 32b reinterprets or emends גנותו to צערו.)

Probably, R. Shimon b. Yoḥai would agree that this section should be considered one of both *genut* and *shevaḥ*. He called it a section of *genut* only because he was making a point relating to the first part of the section.

[23] A rabbinic figure in modern times who took the position that the verses from Deut. 26 constituted the *genut* and the *shevaḥ* of the *mishnah* was R. David Zevi Hoffmann. He took this position in his *Melammed Leho'il* (published posthumously, 1926-32), vol. 3, sec. 65, and in various other places. (See Tabory, p. 97, n. 2 for the references.) Hoffmann argued that even Rav and Samuel understood that the verses from Deut. 26 constituted the *genut* and *shevaḥ* of the *mishnah*. He suggests that they gave new interpretations of *genut* because the *genut* and *shevaḥ* of the *mishnah* had to be reinterpreted when the original *shevaḥ*, verse 26:9, was no longer appropriate for recital.

Long before Hoffmann, Ibn Balam had taken the position that the verses from Deut. 26 constituted the *genut* and the *shevaḥ* of the *mishnah*, Isaac Abrabanel took this position as well, at least in one place. See the comments in his *Tzeli Eish* commentary on the *haggadah*, quoted in Abraham Aderet, "*Arami Oved Avi*," *Alei Siach* 12-14 (1982), p. 76. The Maharal took this position in his *Gur Aryeh* comm. to Deut. 26:5 and in his *Gevurot Hashem*, ch. 54. In the modern period, scholars who have taken

follow the alternative interpretation is to view the *mishnah* as providing a *genut-shevaḥ* instruction that is very vague.

Deut. 26:5-9 reads:

ה. וענית ואמרת לפני ה׳ אלקיך ארמי אבד אבי וירד מצרימה ויגר שם במתי מעט ויהי שם לגוי גדול עצום ורב.

ו. וירעו אתנו המצרים ויענונו ויתנו עלינו עבדה קשה.

ז. ונצעק אל ה׳ אלקי אבתינו וישמע ה׳ את קלנו וירא את ענינו ואת עמלנו ואת לחצנו.

ח. ויוצאנו ה׳ ממצרים ביד חזקה ובזרע נטויה ובמרא גדל ובאתות ובמפתים.

ט. ויבאנו אל המקום הזה ויתן לנו את הארץ הזאת ארץ זבת חלב ודבש.

A very reasonable approach to understanding the *mishnah* is that the *genut* referred to focuses on the phrase *arami oved avi* and the *shevaḥ* referred to focuses on verse 9.[24] This *shevaḥ* can be either the implicit praise of our ancestors for becoming worthy of being given the land,[25] or the praise of God for giving it to them. **A *genut***

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this position include Goldschmidt, p. 14, Henshke, pp. 33–39, Tabory, *Pesaḥ Dorot* (1996) pp. 356-59, Steiner, p. 33 (2008 article), Kahana, pp. 417 and 423, and Samuel Tobias Lachs, "Two Related Arameans," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 17 (1986), p. 65. (But others, such as Safrai, p. 32 and Kulp, Golinkin and Harel, p. 214, disagree. David Halivni disagrees as well. See below, n. 31.)

The *Seder R. Amram Gaon* (p. 113, ed. Goldschmidt) includes a statement that the verses from Deut. 26 constitute the *genut*. This statement would appear to be based on the statement of R. Shimon b. Yoḥai quoted above, and on an overly literal reading of the statement. See above, n. 22, last paragraph.

Since the Talmud nowhere discusses what the *shevaḥ* was, rabbinic authorities were free to take the position that the verses from Deut. 26 constituted the *shevaḥ*. Some who do are cited by Kasher, pp. 30–32 and Henshke, p. 36, n. 11. This also seems to be the position taken by the Rambam. See his *Hilkhot Ḥametz u-Matzah* 7:4, and Henshke, *ibid*. (As pointed out by Henshke, Kasher mischaracterizes the view of the Rambam in his *Haggadah Shelemah*, p. 30. Kasher's quote of Rambam here ends too soon.)

24   Scholars who take this approach include Henshke, pp. 37–39, Tabory, p. 106 and *Pesaḥ Dorot*, p. 358, and Kahana, p. 423.

25   Alternatively, being described as a people who live in their own land is probably enough to be considered a *shevaḥ*, since it contrasts with the

of "my father was a homeless/wandering/lost Aramean" con-
trasts perfectly with this *shevaḥ*. Moreover, a statement that
"Lavan was trying to destroy my father" does not, on the simplest
level, amount to a *genut*; it is merely a statement about an attempt
to make our ancestor into a victim.[26] Thus, the *mishnah* itself is im-
plicitly adopting the "my father was a homeless/wandering/lost
Aramean" understanding of *arami oved avi.*

Of course, it is possible to view the *genut* and *shevaḥ* of the
mishnah differently. One can argue that being ill-treated, afflicted
and put to hard work in Egypt is the *genut*, and being taken out
(and brought to Israel) is the *shevaḥ*. But in this interpretation, the
genut does not begin until the sixteenth word וירעו.[27] Moreover,
verse 6 only describes what the Egyptians did to us; it does not call

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previous *genut* (no matter how defined). One does not have to rely on the
idea of implicit praise.

26   If the *shevaḥ* is not a praise of God but of the Israelites, it implies some
kind of a change in status. There is no such change if "Lavan was trying
to destroy my father" is the *genut*.
     Of course, it is a reproach or embarrassment on some level to have been
weak enough to be a potential victim. But this is not the simplest implica-
tion of the term *genut*. Henshke, pp. 37-38.
     We can now understand Rashi's unusual comment at *Sotah* 32b. Here, the
Talmud refers to *mikra bikurim* as *genut*, and Rashi explains the *genut* as
the confession that our father Lavan was a *rasha*. This is a very strange in-
terpretation, since Lavan was not the ancestor of several of the tribes.
Why did not Rashi write that the *genut* was that Lavan tried to destroy
Jacob? As Henshke suggests (p. 38), Rashi understood that this would not
be a *genut* in the simplest meaning of the term. Rashi had to find a *genut*
within his approach that the Aramean was Lavan.
     Even if Lavan's attempting to destroy Jacob could be considered a *genut*,
for the *mishnah* to have decided to commence an exposition at the *seder*
with a reference to Lavan, seems farfetched. The purpose of the *seder* was
to commemorate the Exodus. Fundamentally, an exposition at the *seder*
should commence with either the beginning of slavery, or the beginning
of the story of our ancestors, and not with a side matter, such as one in-
volving Lavan. Henshke, p. 39.

27   It is hard to consider anything in verse 5 after *arami oved avi* as a *genut*.
Being small in number might be considered a *genut,* but it is followed
immediately by *va-yehi sham le-goy gadol atzum ve-rav* and it is difficult to
view this as the *genut/shevaḥ* contrast contemplated by the *mishnah*.

us *avadim* or directly assign to us a negative status. Reading the *genut* as focusing on the first few words of the section referred to, words that do clearly portray a *genut* in the non-Lavan understanding, seems to be the simplest understanding of the *mishnah*.

Our assumption that verse 9 was part of the ritual at the time of the *mishnah* is a compelling one.[28] The *mishnah* describes the sec-

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28   It is made by many scholars. See, e.g., Goldschmidt, p. 14, Tabory, pp. 106-08 and *Pesaḥ Dorot*, p. 358, Lachs, p. 65, and Kahana, p. 423. (But others, such as Safrai, p. 33 and Kulp, Golinkin and Harel, p. 214, disagree.) Some rabbinic authorities who have taken the position that verse 9 was part of the *Mishnah Pesaḥim* ritual include R. Shimon b. Tzemach Duran (see Tabory, *Pesaḥ Dorot*, p. 358), R. David Zevi Hoffmann (see above, n. 23), and R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik (see, e.g., Abraham R. Besdin, *Reflections of the Rav,* 1979, pp. 210-11). It can even be argued that one of the reasons that the *mikra bikurim* section was chosen as the section for exposition at the *seder* was precisely because it included a verse about the Jews being brought to Israel.

Sec. 301 of *Sifre Deut.*, which includes explications on Deut. 26:5-8, also includes an explication on Deut. 26:9. If we take the position, as some do (see, e.g., Safrai, p. 33), that this section of the *Sifre* is derived from an early *haggadah* text, this would be further evidence that verse 9 was part of the *seder* ritual of the *mishnah*. *Midrash Tannaim* (pp. 173-74) also includes an explication on verse 9. Also, the *mikra bikurim* section in *Sefer Pitron Torah* includes an explication on verse 9. If we adopt Kahana's view of the dating of this section (see above, n. 14), this would be further evidence that verse 9 was part of the *seder* ritual of the *mishnah*. See Kahana, p. 423. (But according to Rovner, most of the *mikra bikurim* section in *Sefer Pitron Torah* did not develop from the original Palestinian *seder*, but was created later, in a Babylonian or Persian setting. See Rovner, p. 120, 2004.)

It is likely that the tenth chapter of *Mishnah Pesaḥim* reflects mainly the post-*ḥurban* ritual, and not the pre-*ḥurban* ritual. See Shamma Friedman, *Tosefta Atikta: Masekhet Pesaḥ Rishon* (2002), pp. 88–92, 430–432, and 437-38. The Tannaim still lived in Israel after 70 C.E. In a previous article, I argued that one can easily take the position that all the *mah nishtannah* questions were composed after the *ḥurban*. See <http://seforim.blog spot.com/2010/03/some-observations-regarding-mah.html>.

Admittedly, verse 9 is not found in any surviving *haggadah* text. But our earliest *haggadah* texts are only from the Geonic period (from Babylonia and from Palestine/Egypt), long after the period of the *Mishnah*. Our position is only that verse 9 must have been part of the *seder* ritual at the time of the *Mishnah*. It may have already been gone from the ritual by the

tion to be expounded upon as running from *arami oved avi* through *kol ha-parshah*. To read the *mishnah* as implying that only up to verse 8 was expounded upon is farfetched. Verse 9 is a direct continuation of the capsule history ongoing in verses 5 through 8; **the mishnah would have had to be more specific to indicate that verse 9 was not part of the ritual.** Moreover, *Mishnah Bikurim* 3:6 specifies a ritual in the *bikurim* context beginning with *arami oved avi* and continuing through *kol ha-parshah*.[29] It is evident from chapter 26 of Deuteronomy that verse 9 was part of the ritual recitation there.[30]

<div align="center">∗∗∗</div>

It has been argued that *ve-doresh* means some form of extended exposition beyond the reading of verses.[31] If it does, then perhaps the statement beginning with *ve-doresh* introduces a new require-

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time written *haggadot* began to be composed. Admittedly, why it would disappear from the Palestinian ritual requires explanation. Perhaps the statements of Rav and Samuel eventually influenced the Palestinian ritual.

[29]   .וקורא מ"ארמי אבד אבי" עד שהוא גומר כל הפרשה

[30]   The *bikurim* ritual also includes the first part of verse 10 (*ve-atah hineh heveti et reshit pri ha-adamah asher natatah li Hashem*). If we make the reasonable assumption that these words were not part of the *seder* ritual at the time of the *mishnah*, we have to admit that the term *kol ha-parshah* does not mean **exactly** the same thing in both cases.

Alternatively, we can suggest that the term *kol ha-parshah* means exactly the same thing in both cases; it refers to the capsule history. We can view the first part of verse 10 as a mere addendum, applicable in the *bikurim* ritual only. (But there is language in *Midrash Tannaim*, p. 172, that seems to view the first part of verse 10 as within *kol ha-parshah*. Despite its title, *Midrash Tannaim* may not be a Tannaitic work. See above, n. 22.)

Those disagreeing with the view that verse 9 was part of the *seder* ritual can argue that the author of *Mishnah Pesaḥim* 10:4 merely borrowed the term *kol ha-parshah* from *Mishnah Bikurim* 3:6, even though nothing past verse 8 was included in the *seder* ritual. But this is farfetched. Precision was surely intended in *Mishnah Pesaḥim* 10:4; this *mishnah* was composed to give instruction with regard to the proper *seder* ritual. (I do not view the imprecision with regard to the first part of verse 10 as significant.)

[31]   Both David Halivni and Safrai take this position. See Safrai, p. 32 and his reference to Halivni there. In their view, the word *ve-doresh* would not be used if the focus was mainly on the verses themselves.

ment and is not merely a specification of the manner of fulfilling the *genut/shevaḥ* requirement. Alternatively, even if the statement beginning with *ve-doresh* is meant as such a specification, perhaps the *genut* and *shevaḥ* are found in the extended exposition and not in the verses themselves.

But although we are used to the root *doresh* as indicating an extended exposition, or a resort to midrashim or hermeneutical principles, this was probably **not** the meaning of this root at the time of the *mishnah*. As one scholar has written:

> The *Mishnah* probably did not assume knowledge of midrash, even the simple midrash in our Haggadot... [T]he verb דרש was used to mean 'expound,' 'explain,' 'explicate'...[32]

> [T]he addition of midrashic elements [to *miqra' bikurim*] progressed slowly, giving the impression that earlier the *miqra' bikurim* lection was simply recited by itself or else it was variously "expounded" according to each leader's tastes and abilities.
> The usage of *drš* to indicate recourse to hermeneutical principles develops in the amoraic period....[33]

Thus, *Mishnah Pesaḥim* 10:4 most likely did **not** mean that *derashot* of the Sages on *mikra bikurim* were expounded upon at this point. All it meant was that some explanation above and beyond the mere recital of the verses was required or customary. In this interpretation of *doresh*, there is not an implication that the statement beginning with *ve-doresh* introduces a new requirement,[34] or that the *genut* and *shevaḥ* are found in the exposition and not in the verses themselves.

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[32]   Rovner (2000), p. 354.
[33]   Rovner (2004), p. 72, n. 2.
[34]   Since the statement of R. Shimon b. Yoḥai cited in *Midrash Tannaim* and *Sotah* 32b refers to the *mikra bikurim* verses as *genut*, this strongly suggests that we are reading the *mishnah* correctly in viewing the *mikra bikrurim* verses as the *genut* and the *shevaḥ*. This point was made by Hoffmann.

Conclusion

Reading the *genut* as focusing on the first few words of the Deut. 26:5-9 section seems to be the simplest understanding of the *mishnah*. If the *genut* is to be located in these words, the *mishnah* almost certainly understood *arami oved avi* to mean "my father was a homeless/wandering/lost Aramean."[35] If we make the compelling assumption that verse 9 (*va-yevienu el ha-makom ha-zeh va-yiten lanu et ha-aretz ha-zot...*) was part of the *seder* ritual at the time of the *mishnah*, a *genut* of "my father was a homeless/wandering/lost Aramean" contrasts perfectly with the *shevaḥ*.

Our approach to *Mishnah Pesaḥim* 10:4 is very satisfying since we are no longer forced to take the position that a widespread interpretation of the Sages was ungrammatical.[36] There is other evidence that the Sages knew that *oved*, if used as a verb, was intransitive.[37]

Over the centuries, due to the influence of *Targum Onkelos* and the *haggadah*, and due to the statements made by the Amoraim about *Mishnah Pesaḥim* 10:4, the way the *mishnah* originally understood *arami oved avi* was forgotten.[38] It did not occur to the

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[35] This was probably the view of the Tanna R. Shimon b. Yoḥai as well. See above, n. 22. See also our discussion of a passage in *Sefer Pitron Torah*, above, n. 14.

[36] Also, as mentioned earlier, contextually it made little sense for there to be a reference to Lavan in either *mikra bikurim* or the beginning of the story told at the *seder*.

[37] Steiner, p. 132, citing *Sifre Deut.*, secs. 354, 324 and 43.

[38] The fact that the *trop* also seems to be consistent with the Lavan interpretation perhaps contributed to this as well. Also, because of its location in the *haggadah* and utilization of Deut. 26:5, it was probably often erroneously assumed that the passage in the *haggadah* with the Lavan interpretation was connected to the following section of the *haggadah*, which comprised *derashot* of the Sages on Deut. 26:5-8. This made the Lavan interpretation appear to be the official interpretation of the Sages on Deut. 26:5. See Lachs, pp. 68-69, and Tabory, *Pesaḥ Dorot*, p. 358, n. 38. *Sifre Deut.* included another interpretation aside from the Lavan interpretation, but this may not have been well known.

Ironically, because the Lavan interpretation has usually been viewed as the official interpretation of the Sages, many rabbinic authorities have gone to great lengths to attempt to justify it, and have severely criticized

Rishonim who argued for the homeless/wandering/lost Aramean interpretation that they were advocating the interpretation already implied in this *mishnah*.[39]

Of course, a fascinating question is what motivated the Lavan interpretation.[40] This question is even stronger if we make the reasonable assumption that whoever authored the interpretation knew that the verb אבד, in the *kal* construct, was intransitive. Many answers to this question have been suggested. The best answer is that the author of the Lavan interpretation wanted to avoid tying the origins of the Jewish people to the Arameans. The interpretation was probably authored at a time and locale when such a connection would have been thought of as disparaging.[41] The author's desire to avoid a Jewish-Aramean connection was probably strong enough to outweigh any concern about the odd grammatical construct that resulted from the new interpretation.[42]

Rishonim who adopted the alternative "homeless/wandering/lost Aramean" interpretation. See, e.g., the Maharal's *Gur Aryeh* commentary to Deut. 26:5, and his *Gevurot Hashem*, chap. 54, and see Steiner, pp. 132-34.

[39] The only exception is Ibn Balam. He cites *Mishnah Pesaḥim* 10:4 and understood it the way I am suggesting here.

[40] It bears repeating that the Lavan interpretation may have originated after the time of Onkelos himself. See above, n. 5.

[41] See, e.g., Kogut, p. 66 and 192, and Steiner, p. 129, n. 9. For example, Steiner writes:

> If the meaning 'Gentile, heathen' (attested for ארמי in Jewish and Christian dialects of Late Aramaic) developed early enough, the standard Jewish interpretation [=the Lavan interpretation] may have been a response to it, as well.

Similarly, Tabory, p. 104, n. 27 (citing Abraham Geiger) writes that the term ארמי became the usual term for idol worshippers.

[42] Some other suggestions include:

1) The author of the interpretation interpreted the word *oved* as though it were Aramaic. Steiner writes (pp. 136–138):

> In Aramaic, אובד is not a *Qal* participle with the meaning 'perishing, wandering' but rather, a third masculine-singular '*Apel* perfect with the meaning 'he destroyed.' …It is perhaps not fortuitous that the rabbis chose to read this particular verb as Aramaic; after all, it describes an activity of an ארמי 'Aramean.'

Another fascinating question is what motivated the two Amoraim to deviate from the plain sense of the *mishnah* that the *genut* is found in the *mikra bikurim* verses. Many answers to this question have been suggested as well.[43]

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2) The author of the interpretation had a different vocalization of אבד in his text of Deut. 26:5. He had a vocalization that would be consistent with the verb being in the *piel*. See, e.g., Steiner p. 135, citing Arnold Bogumil Ehrlich.

3) The author of the interpretation was employing a pun, based on his knowledge of Greek. In Greek, ἐρημόω is a rough equivalent of "destroy." (In a widely used Greek-English Lexicon, it is defined as: "to strip bare, to desolate, lay waste.") See David Berger, "Three Typological Themes in Early Jewish Messianism: Messiah Son of Joseph, Rabbinic Calculations, and the Figure of Armilus," *AJS Review* 10 (1985), p. 161, n. 77.

It should be mentioned that the only individuals referred to as Aramean in the Torah are Lavan and Betuel. This also could have motivated or been a contributing factor to the interpretation. See, e.g., Goldschmidt, p. 34. The word order *arami oved avi* also perhaps contributed to *arami* being viewed as the subject.

Louis Finkelstein suggested that the Lavan interpretation arose in the 3rd century BCE, when Palestine was under Egyptian rule and the Syrians were viewed as enemies. He suggested alternatively that the interpretation arose in Maccabean times. The Syrians were viewed as enemies in this period as well. See Finkelstein, "The Oldest Midrash: Pre-Rabbinic Ideals and Teachings in the Passover Haggada," *Harvard Theological Review* 31 (1938), p. 300. Most scholars today reject these suggestions. It is complete speculation to pinpoint the origin of the Lavan interpretation to these particular periods.

It is noteworthy that Josephus (1st cent. CE) did not mention Lavan in his brief paraphrase of *mikra bikurim* at *Antiquities* IV, 242:

> [L]et him... render thanks to God for having delivered his race from the insolence of the Egyptians and given them a good land and spacious to enjoy the fruits thereof.

[43] As mentioned earlier (above, n. 23), Hoffmann deals with this question. Attempts have also been made to interpret the two Amoraic statements in a manner consistent with *mikra bikurim* being the *genut* and *shevaḥ* of the *mishnah*. On all these issues, see, e.g., Goldschmidt, p. 14, Tabory, pp. 97-99 and *Pesaḥ Dorot*, pp. 358-59, and Henshke, pp. 33–35 and 39–46.

I will close with a description of how the all-important Maxwell House *haggadah* has revised its translation of our passage. The original edition, published in 1932, translated *arami* as "Syrian." Because of Syria's ongoing conflict with the State of Israel, it was decided to avoid this term in the new translation, published in 2011. The new translation is "Aramite." According to the translator, "Aramite" was chosen over "Aramean" because "Aramite" sounded nastier, and "Laban, as a nasty customer, deserves a nasty description."(!)[44] ೞ

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[44] Deena Yellin, "Haggada on the House," *The International Jerusalem Post*, April 15–21, 2011, p. 25.