

MITZVOT HAT'LUYOT BA'ARETZ **BIKKURIM**

FIRST FRUIT PRAYER

With the rainy winter behind them and the summer harvest ahead, Jewish farmers in the time of the *Beit HaMikdash* would celebrate the year's bounty by offering their first fruits of the *Shivat HaMinim* (the seven species), *bikkurim*, to G-d. They would festively carry their produce to Yerushalayim and ceremonially present them to the *Kohanim*. At this sacred, joyous moment, the farmer would recite a prayer, one of the few *tefillot* written in the Torah, recalling the history of the Jewish people from our earliest ancestors:

אַרְמֵי אֲבִד אָבִי וַיֵּרֵד מִצְרַיִם וַיֵּגֶר שָׁם בְּמִתֵּי
מֵעֵט וַיְהִי שָׁם לְגוֹי גָדוֹל עָצוּם וְרַב...

"*Arami Oved Avi*, and he went down to Egypt and sojourned there in a small group, and he became there a great, multitudinous, populous nation..." (Devarim 26:5).

The meaning of the opening phrase, *arami oved avi* is ambiguous and much discussed. The *avi*, forefather, mentioned here is identified with Ya'akov Avinu.

Some of the traditional commentators consider *oved* a verb: "An Aramean wished to destroy my forefather."

This interpretation, adopted by Rashi, Sa'adia Gaon and the Maharal, has the verse referring to Lavan's attempts to already stymie the Jewish people's development at its inception. It is recalled by Jewish farmers living centuries later to celebrate the immortality of the Jewish people, despite the attempts of all those who have tried to destroy us – from Lavan to Pharaoh and all who would follow. We give thanks to G-d for

our people's providential continuity, ensured by the stability of living in our own Land and fulfilling our destiny in part through its sustenance.

Yet there is an alternative interpretation, suggested by Ibn Ezra and others, that *oved* is an adjective meaning wandering or nomadic, hence rendering the opening phrase as "My forefather was a wandering Aramean."

According to this reading, the backdrop of the farmer's recounting of the servitude in Egypt is Ya'akov's experience of wandering. The instability of Ya'akov's home, riddled with family strife among his children, becomes the direct cause for the descent to Egypt at the end of Sefer Bereishit, paving the way for the Jewish people's subjugation under Pharaoh's rule.

As the farmer recites these words over the *bikkurim*-basket, what comes to mind is not an image of our enemies from afar, but rather of our own familial conflicts and communal points of tension.

Distrust, breakdowns in communication, resentment towards our fellow Jews – these are the sins that led to the first-ever exile to Egypt and the destruction of the second *Beit HaMikdash* and its long exile, which perpetuate our continued experience to this day.

Bikkurim, the personal/national celebration of the bounty of the Land, is a celebration of the unity of the Jewish people, and a reminder that our relationship with the Land is contingent upon maintaining that unity.



It is for this reason that the Mishnah (Bikkurim 3:3) describes the leadership and citizens of Yerushalayim warmly greeting the *bikkurim*-pilgrims as an essential part of the *mitzvah* itself. G-d has brought us from being a "wandering Aramean" to the promised Land of Israel in order for us to live in harmony; to love and respect every Jew – a challenge we still face today.

The recitation of this paragraph at a time of agricultural plenty and affluence comes to remind us of a very fundamental tenet: our respect for the other is a necessary condition for our physical affluence and for our safety and security in the Land as well as being the foundation necessary for achieving our purpose: being a light unto the nations.

As we celebrate Tu BiShvat this year, let us rejoice in both the goodness of the Land of Israel and accept the responsibility for strengthening the bonds among all Jews, including those who may differ from us, so we may merit G-d's blessings this and every year.

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