

Parshat Ki Tavo 2018

I was in Milwaukee for Pesach a few years ago and had the opportunity to leave my kids with my in-laws and get a rare *chag* at shul without interruptions. It was certainly the first time in a long time that I could look at the *machzor* and delve a little bit deeper into what I was saying. It was time to recite Shir HaShirim, and as I glanced at the ArtScroll preface, my jaw nearly dropped to the floor. Listen to this paragraph written by the author:

*"...The Song is an allegory. It is a duet of love between God and Israel. Its verses are so saturated with meaning that nearly every one of the major commentators finds new themes in its beautiful but cryptic words. **All agree, however, that the true and simple meaning of Shir HaShirim is the allegorical meaning. The literal meaning of the words is so far from their meaning that it is false ... Has it been misinterpreted by fools and twisted by scoundrels? Most assuredly Yes! . . .**"*

I also particularly enjoy the translation of "*shnei shadayich*" as "your nourishing synagogues." Other versions offer the more laughable "your two tablets." Someone, please create an "Artscroll Euphemisms" twitter account!

How **infuriating** is this preface? Anyone who does not have a grasp of Hebrew and is relying on the author to guide them through their text study is being entirely manipulated. Of course, translations are never perfect, the process is arduous and tricky, and the author is entitled to his opinion - but this is borderline trickery.

And then it hit me – hey, I’ve been relying on Artscroll *machzorim* and Stone *Chumashim* my entire life. What else have I been entirely wrong about? What other narratives have been usurped either by poor translations or bad actors? Pretty much all of them, as it turns out. But I digress.

Ki Tavo features some pretty significant interpretation drama, and it involves the foundational story of the Jewish people. When we talk about our freedom story – the crux of Pesach – we talk about Ki Tavo. We know the story well; the Israelites finally make it to the promised land, and are instructed to recite a certain formula after bringing their first harvest. As if to ingrain it into our collective heads, they start by praising God but then, each, individually, recite the story of the Jewish people by saying: "Arami AVD Avi".

"...My father was destroyed by an Aramean. He went down to Egypt with meager numbers and sojourned there; but there he became a great and very populous nation..."

This is how I’ve always known this story: someone is out to get us. "My father was destroyed by an Aramean." We’re Jewish, and people tried to kill our parents, tried to kill our grandparents, etc. It’s our foundational story. They tried to kill us, we won, let’s eat. Right? Victimhood. You better observe these mitzvot, because your grandparents went through the Holocaust.

The shresh of “AVD” is translated here as IBED, destroyed, but in more normative translations it can be read as OVED, “lost,” or gone astray. So – the alternative translation can be read as:

“...**My father was a wandering Aramean.** He went down to Egypt with meager numbers and sojourned there; but there he became a great and very populous nation...”

The different translation here changes the whole perspective of our origin story for me. The first one portrays us as vulnerable, much in the way that Jacob was vulnerable when Laban hunted him down; the way the original Haggadah translation intends. The second one, which I obviously much prefer – talks about us as intrepid risk takers and discoverers. It references Abram & Sarai, leaving the only thing they’ve known because of the promise of something better. They were wanderers. Refugees.

What if **this** was the narrative I had grown up with instead? Would I have always looked behind my back for “the goyim?” Would I have been so reticent to engage with others who did not look like me, or act like me? On that Pesach, when I spent a bit of time with this new perspective on this interpretation, I decided then and there to reclaim my foundation story. I wanted to honor other wanderers, those who left everything behind in search of a better life for themselves. At the time, the thought was to try and work with refugees who were trying to escape war-torn Syria. People who were like my ancestors; literal modern-day Arameans seeking refuge.

And so, because of this community’s help, around 2 years ago you helped me begin to honor and reclaim my story. Our story, as wanderers. Since then, we raised over \$10,000, had hundreds of items donated, fully furnished an apartment, and have been meeting with and tutoring a family for the past 4 months. I’d like to introduce you to them. They are the Ramazanis: a family of six who had been awaiting their redemption in a Tanzanian refugee camp for 21 years and ironically found it in West Rogers Park, though us. While they are not a Syrian family, their plight was no less dire: their story started in the Congo, where civil war destroyed their lives and necessitated them fleeing in 1997.

Maimuna, the matriarch, is 47 years old but looks like she’s 60. She is a strong mother for her children, and although she is resistant to learning English and integrating into American culture, occasionally we are able to catch her with her guard down and she’ll crack an enormous smile and laugh. Her children say that she didn’t do much of that in Tanzania. Maimuna now works at Tyson foods as a meat packer, and works from 5 AM to 5 PM.

Dina is the oldest daughter at 25 years old. She is too old to be placed in college and to receive an American education at this point, and thus has to share the burden of providing for the rest of the family alongside her mother. In many ways, Dina appears to be a mother to the rest of the children in the family. Dina now has a job at Eli’s cheesecake, and is always smiling and open to learning new things.

Zawadi is the eldest son; at 20 he just meets the cutoff for being eligible for senior year of high school, but also has to earn money in order for the family to survive. He has a new job at the airport, but up until recently had a job at a restaurant downtown which he would WALK home from past midnight for several miles because the busses didn't run that late. When asked what his favorite part about America is so far – he smiles and says “everything. There is nothing bad here.” This coming from an 18 year old who is sharing a 2 bedroom apartment with five other people, including his mother, where without air conditioning in the summer the temperature hovers around 95 degrees.

Milanda is 15. In the four months since coming to this country, he has soaked up English like a sponge. Aside from Google Translate, he is often the main translator on our tutoring visits between us and other members of his family – which is remarkable when you think about it. Milanda loves soccer and Tanzanian music and is excited for school to start.

Sungura is 13, and when you compare his size to other 13 year old he appears as if he's barely 10. I'm not sure if this is from overall malnutrition in Tanzania, or what. Sungura speaks Swahili and French very well, and is catching up to his older brother Milanda in English. On my last visit, when asked if he needed anything – he told me that he would love an antenna. I was not really clear on what this was or why he needed an antenna (their TV worked just fine) – but after ten minutes of google translate and a back and forth conversation, I realized he meant Wi-fi.

And lastly is Amina, the 9 year old girl. Admittedly I don't know much about Amina because she is the shyest – but Amina loves drawing and watching whatever cartoons their TV can pick up signal for. She is perpetually happy, always with a smile on her face. Her older brothers watch out for her. For her, America is heaven.

The family's story here is only beginning, and I'd like to publicly thank all of the families who financially contributed, but also a big shout out to the families who have dedicated a few hours each week to mentor and tutor this family. Special thanks to Judy Sloane, Rebecca Minkus Lieberman and Debbie Lesch for essentially overseeing the family's every need.

How do **you** translate Arami OVD Avi?