

ONE HAGGADAH MYSTERY AND ITS HISTORY

Devar Torah
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The Haggadah is such a precious national treasure that our scholars like to research, expound and comment on it. As a result there exist hundreds of commentaries about almost every line or word it contains. But in spite of this not everything has been fully explained and a few matters remain mystery. The reason for this stems, most probably, from the fact that different passages of the Haggadah were written during or relate to different ages of our vast history. It is, therefore, seems logical that historical research could be of some help in solving these intriguing riddles. Today, I would like to examine this assumption by suggesting an historical interpretation for one of the Haggadah's mysteries: this being the mystery of "Laban the Aramean" or rather "Laban the Syrian".

In this case the Haggadah is quoting a Midrashic commentary on a verse from Deuteronomy chapter 26. The commentary urges every one of us to: *"go forth and learn what Laban the Syrian sought to do to Jacob our father. For Pharaoh only wanted to kill the young boys but Laban wanted to uproot us all. As it is said (Deuteronomy 26: 5): "a Syrian would have destroyed our father, but he went down to Egypt and lived there as stranger, few in number; and he became there a nation, great, mighty, and numerous"*. Here we find a startling praise of Pharaoh on Seder night.

This commentary is a mystery. It raises so many questions:

1st- Laban is our grandfather. He was the father of Leah and Rachel, the revered mothers of the nation. Why he is now called, with disdain: "a Syrian", as if he were a stranger?

We are, in fact, all Arameans, i.e. Syrians, in origin. Abraham our father was an Aramean wanderer. He was born in "Aram Neharaim", i.e. "Mesopotamia": "The Land between the Two Rivers". He first lived in Ur by the Euphrates then later moved to Haran in the north. In the book of

Genesis (24: 4), Abraham called the place: *"my country and my homeland"*. He sent his servant there to find a wife for his son Isaac (an Aramean wife). He took: Rivka, the sister of Laban. In turn, Isaac asked his son, Jacob, to do the same and take a wife from Aram. He took four. Apart from Benjamin, all the forefathers of the tribes of Israel were born there. They were all Arameans. Furthermore, and this truly is amazing, archaeologists have discovered that "Nahor", which is the name of Abraham's brother and grandfather, was in fact an ancient town near Haran - the town where Abraham's father lived and died.. They also discovered other ancient settlements around Haran by the names of "Terah"- Abraham's father; "Serug"- his great grandfather; "Reo"- the grandfather of his grandfather and "Peleg"-who was his 3 times great grandfather. The fact that all the ancestors of the Patriarch Abraham were called after places in northern Mesopotamia constitutes astonishing evidence that we are all of Aramean decent. So why would the Midrash distance us from Laban in such an abstruse fashion?

2nd. The Midrash is accusing Laban of harbouring evil intentions to annihilate all of Israel by destroying Jacob. Was this truly the case? Most probably not. It is true though, that Laban chased Jacob for 7 days, from Haran to the Gilad. This was not, however, for the purpose of killing him, but in order to recover the Terafim that his daughter, Rachel, without the knowledge of Jacob, stole from her father. What were these Terafim and why Rachel should steal them? And why were they so important to Laban? *The importance of the Terafim lied in the fact that they were gods. They were private household gods.* In ancient Mesopotamia every family had its own private gods. They were believed to be the guardians and protectors of the family. Without them the Arameans felt extremely threatened. This is why the theft of the Terafim was considered to be of grievous consequence, prompting Laban to chase Jacob and angrily question him: "why did you steal my gods"? (Gen 31: 30). And indeed why should Rachel steal them? And how did she manage this? This was possible because those gods were but small portable figurines like big dolls. She was, therefore, able to quickly conceal them in the camel's cushion. The reason for stealing them did not stem from their religious significance as she scornfully and wilfully defiled them by sitting on them. She stole them because she feared that they could be activated against her family. It was

the general belief in antiquity that these private gods would attack the enemies at night, breaking them in body and spirit. The ancient Accadians called them: "il idu". And indeed Laban threatened Jacob with them when he confronted him on the Gilad saying in Hebrew: "Yesh Le El Yadi laa'sot immachem Ra' ", which is wrongly translated everywhere to mean: "It is in my power to harm you". No. It actually means: "It is in the power of my "il Idu" (i.e. my Terafim) to harm you" as El Yadi is nothing but the Hebrew pronunciation of "il Idu, which most of the translators had, possibly, never heard of. It is now obvious why Rachel stole her father's Terafim. She did it in order to protect her family from the hurt that they might otherwise cause. Their disappearance terrified her father and provoked him to immediately pursue Jacob, not so as to kill him, but in order to retrieve from him his protective gods. This conclusion is also compatible with Laban's behaviour later on. After conducting a thorough search, and determining that Jacob was innocent, he concluded with him a pact of mutual non aggression and peaceful coexistence before Laban returned to Haran never to see his daughters (and his Terafim) again.

There now however, remains the question: why the Midrash deliberately changed the meaning of Deuteronomy in order to condemn Laban? The Bible stresses *a fact* that reads: "Arami ovaid Avee", which exactly means: "My father was an Aramean wanderer". This was true for all our forefathers: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They were all Aramean wanderers. But the Midrash wilfully turned the meaning of the Biblical verse upside down. It translated it to mean: "A Syrian would have destroyed my father", which is not only factually wrong but also grammatically incorrect. It is certain that the Midrash had a compelling reason to do this. What was the reason? This remains a puzzle.

The 3rd Midrashic mystery - "why the praise of Pharaoh at all"? Why of all nights is it that on Passover night, when we are supposed to recount Pharaoh's atrocities we instead stress that our Syrian grandfather was, in fact, much worse? Why this magnanimous exoneration of Pharaoh on Seder night? This also remained a mystery.

To solve these riddles one needs to conduct what might be described as historical detective work. One should enquire: 1st, whether there existed

during our vast history a Pharaoh who merited praise and was worthy of exoneration? 2nd, if there lived, in parallel, a Syrian ruler who deserved condemnation? And 3rd, whether conditions at the time were so dire that our sages were compelled to publicly denounce such a neighbour in spite of a possible retaliation? Investigative historical probing provides an alternative answer: YES to all three questions. How? Well, the story goes like this:

It happened that some time after the death of Alexander the Great (323 BCE), the State of Judea found itself trapped between two Greek superpowers: one to the north called Syria and the other, which was Egypt, to the south. They constantly and bitterly fought each other for control of the strategic land of Israel. The Seleucid Dynasty ruled Syria, whilst Egypt was ruled by the Ptolemaic Dynasty. These rulers were completely different. The Seleucid rulers valued their Greek culture and religion and often tried to impose them upon the many nations of their empire, while the Ptolemaic Dynasty abandoned their tradition, accepted the Egyptian culture and became Pharaohs. During the 3rd century BCE the Greek Pharaohs ruled the Jewish state of Judea and *maintained a friendly attitude towards their Jewish subjects both in the Holy Land and in Egypt itself.* Ptolemy 1st (soter) allowed the Jewish state to be self- ruling. The High Priest continued to be the head of the state and the Sanhedrin was in full charge of all important matters of state, law and religion, as before. In Egypt itself Ptolemy 1st had complete confidence in the loyalty of his Jewish subjects. He enlisted them to his army and entrusted them with the guarding of the strongholds of Egypt. He also gave the Jews the right to settle in and become legal citizens of Alexandria. There they grew and prospered, both commercially and culturally, so as to establish one of the greatest and most productive centres of Jewish life in the ancient world.

The successor to the throne of Egypt, Ptolemy 2nd (Philadelphus), was also favourably inclined towards the Jews and treated them well. He was a scholar and wanted to read and understand the Bible. He, consequently, ordered a Greek translation of the Bible. The High Priest, Aleazar, sent him 70 Jewish sages, the greatest scholars of the state, to fulfil his wish. They did an exalted job. Their Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible was called: "Septuagint" which means 'seventy' in Latin. It has become one of the most important documents of Jewish and world literature. The reason for

this stems, not only from the sublime quality of the translation, but also from the fact that, in addition to the books of the Bible, it also contains the 'Apocrypha', which are other important Hebrew writings, such as the books of Judith, Ben-Sirah, Tobias and others, which otherwise would be lost for the world.

It is now evident, that the Greek Pharaohs were good to the Jewish State and to their Jewish subjects and were, therefore, worthy of praise and exoneration. Yet this situation was not to last for long. Grave danger suddenly loomed during the reign of Ptolemy 3rd (Euergetes) (246 – 221 BCE). At the beginning of his rule, the Syrians tried to tear the important land of Israel away from him. War was about to rage at any time. The Pharaoh badly needed money to conduct his campaign. He asked the High Priest Honio 2nd to hand over the customary taxes, but Honio refused. His refusal enraged the Pharaoh who suspected the High Priest of conspiring with the enemy. As a result he threatened to abolish the Jewish State and divide the land between his soldiers. This threat sent a tremor through the people of Judea. *It was, most probably, under these conditions that the Midrash regarding Laban was written.* In their desperation, and in order to save the State and the Jews of Egypt, our sages entirely changed the meaning of the verse of Deuteronomy (26: 5) so as to send a message to Pharaoh to tell him that: *'we the Jews everywhere are loyal to you as you are the goodie; The Syrians are the badies. They have always been bad. We have had bitter experiences with them since ancient times when they wanted to annihilate us completely by destroying our father Jacob. But he had a lucky escape. He left Syria and went to Egypt. There he really prospered and became a nation, great, mighty and numerous like the Jews now-a-days in Alexandria'.* Desperate circumstances call for desperate measures. This was a brilliant piece of Midrashic diplomacy greatly required during this perilous period.

The problem was finally solved in the spirit of the Midrash. One of the leaders, Joseph ben-Tuvia, a nephew of the High Priest, went to his uncle to rebuke him and urge him to rush to Alexandria to apologize and prove his loyalty to the Pharaoh. Honio refused again, saying: that he would prefer to resign his post than to do this. So Ben-Tuvia requested his permission to go and see the King himself. Permission was granted and Ben-Tuvia called

the people of Jerusalem to a general assembly in the Temple where he promised them to eradicate the looming calamity by going to the king, denouncing the Syrians, paying the taxes and assuring the king of the unwavering loyalty of the Jewish people to the Pharaohnic throne. This wise man did just that and rescued the country from impending catastrophe.

In conclusion, the study of Jewish history can greatly assist in understanding the mysteries of the Hagadah. It can reveal the political, social, and theological conditions under which these mysteries evolved. In the case of Laban the Syrian, it offers us valuable insight into the way our sages reacted to the trials and tribulations of their time, and into the ways they tried to overcome them. We can now pinpoint the time of this baffling Midrash, the circumstances that compelled our sages to write it, the purpose of writing it and above all the message that they wanted to convey to us. We can almost hear the echo of their voices coming to us across the centuries, telling us: "listen O Israel, though the Scriptures are holy, they become even more sacred when they are creatively used to salvage the Jewish State and the People of Israel". That is exactly what they did.