

Stories are the means through which we humans define both our personal and our cultural identity. We tell and retell our stories, carrying them forward from generation to generation. In the book of Deuteronomy Moses retells our story to the immediate descendants of the people he has led for the past 40 years. He recalls the successes, but also the disastrous shortcomings of their elders, reminding them of HaShem's miracles and the eternal covenant which now they must uphold. One mark of a good leader is the ability to tell the sort of narrative that not only defines the people, but that also unites them in a common goal and provides them with a vision to carry it through. Here, Moses has become the quintessential Jewish leader. We Jews know that Judaism is short on dogma, but rich in narrative that shows us who we are, where we come from, and where we are to go. Ki Tavo carries the narrative to new heights, instituting a thanksgiving ritual with words everyone who has ever attended a Pesach seder knows well: "My father was a wandering Aramean ... / An Aramean tried to destroy my father ..." In Temple times, this ambiguous text was used on Shavuot to give thanks for the first fruits of the season. After the destruction of the second Temple, it became a focal element of our Pesach Haggadah. The genius lies in having people repeat these words in the first person – *my* father, not some ancestor's father. We are told to not just recite these words, but to live them. Each one of us is instructed to feel as though we have personally gone through the entire experience from nomadic life in Mesopotamia to prosperity and eventual slavery in Egypt, to miraculous rescue by HaShem. In our TaNaKh and in our liturgy, this powerful narrative is augmented by countless injunctions to remember: Remember being a slave in Egypt, remember (and the paradoxical remember to forget) Amalek, remember the successes and failures of past generations, remember what HaShem did to Miriam, remember HaShem's countless miracles – remember, remember, remember, and instill it in your children so the memories continue to live and define us as a people! Moses makes it abundantly clear that if the people forget the past, they will lose their vision, which means they will ultimately lose their identity and disappear.

If we look at that huge litany of blessings and curses in this light, we can understand the dire warnings they contain. These terrifying predictions, which also appear in Parashah Bechukotai (Leviticus 26), are called *tocheicha* (reprimand / rebuke). They depict the horrific consequences of abandoning our covenant. It is noteworthy that in Parashah Bechukotai HaShem addresses the people collectively, while in our parashah Moses addresses each person individually. They know as a group what is expected of them, but it is up to each individual to participate in making it happen. Group responsibility depends on personal responsibility, and personal responsibility is heightened by knowing and being invested in the common history. It is our tradition to chant both *tocheichot* softly, so they are not perceived as a threat, but as an earnest plea to never forget where we came from and how we got there. We are not supposed to serve HaShem in fear, but in love and in deep appreciation. That is why we tell the story of our origin in the first person, as a visceral reminder of the poverty from which HaShem helped us to emerge, and of our eternal covenant and the responsibilities it entails. Moses reiterates the warning not to become complacent and allow success and prosperity to obscure our connection to the past, because if we forget our origins and lose our past, we will lose our future.

Now perhaps we can reconcile the divergent translations of the words אֲרַמִּי אֲבֹד אָבִי (My father was a wandering Aramean / An Aramean tried to destroy my father). No matter if the Aramean was our patriarch Abraham or Jakob's uncle Lavan, the word אֲבֹד implies *lost*. Abraham started his/our journey as a homeless nomad, exiled from his birthplace and dependent on the protection of foreign powers. Lavan, who is not looked upon kindly by our sages, preyed upon Jakob's vulnerability, changing the conditions of his employment in order to keep him and his growing family dependent. Had they not been able to escape, the connection to HaShem established by Abraham would have been broken. Either way, we would not be here to tell the story. But *dafke* – we are still here! Amid untold vicissitudes that have scattered us all over the earth, we have managed to create and maintain a common culture with a cornucopia of subcultures, each with its own particular, yet intrinsically Jewish flavor. We have accomplished this unique feat by virtue of our collective memory, and our ability to find new relevance in our ancient narrative to guide us and to keep us united through time and space. As long as we remember to transmit our narrative to the next generation, no matter where our wanderings take us, we will never become lost.

Shabbat shalom!