

As a born and bred farm boy, from a tiny speck of a family farm in the middle of nowhere Illinois, I sat down to read this week's parashah. I leaned back in my chair, and closed my eyes, and I saw everything so crisply and so clearly. I let my mind leave my cramped, Brooklyn apartment and I re-lived the ancient text.

I imagined myself waking up in a tiny, one-room, cool, mud-brick home. In my mind, I stretched my aching body, and with my arms out wide, I placed my feet squarely upon the hard dirt floor. I breathed in the fragrant air of earth, cedar, and hyssop that inundated the world around me. For months my ancient self had prepared for what was about to transpire, for the journey I would make. As always, I had carefully planted seed that I saved from last year's harvest.

In the Spring, I saw the first infant, hints of green in my field. Once more, I was worthy. Once more, I was granted the ability to cultivate life upon the land. Rolling light away from darkness and darkness away from light, time edged forward, my seedlings were granted life, and they, in turn, would grant life to my family.

My groats, lentils, and amaranth grew toward the sun's warmth, watered by the sweat of my brow and harvested by the strain of my flesh. Their hard, small, green shoots and pods ever so slowly engorging, sweetening, evolving their color. Ripening and preparing themselves for what was next.

My straw basket filled, I wrapped myself in my best linen cloth. I took my first fruits, and I began to walk. I prayed that the precious cargo I carried would stay ever fresh and fragrant. It was more than just a gift to the Temple! My basket was my proof. My profession to God, of all that we had accomplished *together*.

Arriving in Jerusalem, my legs and feet ached after traveling so far. Nervously, I stood before the priest and great bronze altar, a cacophony of people behind me--hurrying this way and that--through the massive stone courtyards of the Temple. The languid, intoxicating smell of burnt offerings hung in the thick air. I was no longer in my familiar,

life giving field. I was no longer upon my cool, hard, dirt floor. I was in another world altogether. And in one powerful moment, I stepped forward and said:

Hee'gad'ti ha'yom l'Adonai Eloheikha ki va'ti el haaretz
I declare this day to the Lord your God, that I have come to the land
asheir nish'bah Adonai la'avoteinu latet lanu
the land that Adonai swore to our fathers to give to us.
Arami oved avi.
My father was a wondering Aramean...

And then... <snap> Just like that... I was back in, Brooklyn.
And once again, outside my window, I could hear the sounds of upper-middle class mothers in yoga pants and the *dulcet tones* of their offspring in their \$500, all-terrain, strollers. But it wasn't these all too familiar noises that roused me to reality.
It was "Arami oved avi."

Because this is where I got stuck. I, the farm boy reading Torah, had been feeling so at home, because so much of it, is agricultural, so much of the text seems to be about who I am.

Someone whom God had given land to farm?

Check.

Harvesting the first crops of the season?

Check.

Giving thanks to the Divine, for being so integral to every step of our crops?

Absolutely.

But then I read "Arami oved avi," and I was cut loose. Cut loose like reaped grain getting tossed around in a harvester. *My father was a wandering Aramean?* Hardly.

My Dad, is a fundamental Christian autobody mechanic who lives back in Illinois with my stepmother. <shrug>

How could this text be so much mine, and so much not? Who am I to insert myself into such a narrative? I'm a convert to Judaism. My farming past--so many years of my life -- *coheres* with the verses of the Torah, and all the more so from this week's reading. But yet, with this one line, "My father was a wandering Aramaen," I no longer fit.

Looking for answers, I turned to our classical commentators. I found that they too, were unsure about this passage. Having no Aramaen lineage themselves, the rabbis wrestled with who exactly this Aramean father was. Sforno thought it was Jacob, but since when was he an Aramean? Rashbam thought it was Abraham, but wasn't he originally from Ur Kasdim? Our enigmatic Aramean, was a riddle to them as well.

On each and every Passover, as we narrate the Exodus story by way of the Haggadah, we recite these very words, "Arami oved avi." My father was a wandering Aramean. But again, who among *us* can truly claim such parentage? Even as we recite them year after year, these words are distant from us. We find ourselves estranged from what we read. The Haggadah makes this text relevant specifically by uprooting and estranging its words. Taking this rite from the agricultural Temple cult and giving it a new context. "Arami oved avi" becomes a way for the exiled, estranged Jews of the post-Temple era to wander back into their collective history.

The obsolete first fruits liturgy now becomes the beginning of the recitation of the Passover story. The text now extends beyond farming and lives in the realm of the oppressed--any time, any where. Within the pages of the Haggadah, and by extension the walls of our homes, the agricultural is combined with the liberational and the phrase, "Arami oved avi" becomes a personal call to anyone who reads it. We are drawn in, to become part of a legendary epic. But that's the thing. We are drawn into it. We aren't already there.

Even the Deuteronomic farmer did not, in any literal sense, have an Aramean father. He himself was fulfilling a ritual, reciting lines that his father and his father before him

had been saying each year for ages, inserting himself into a past that he had never directly witnessed. The ritual of the first fruits, commands him to do so.

Could it be that all of us--the farmer of our parasha, the early rabbis, you sitting around the Seder table, and me, the convert, growing up with my sheep down a dusty road in Illinois—all stand equally estranged and apart from the pasts we claim?

None of us and yet all of us were born to Arameans; none of us can recall wiping the dust from our sandals, after receiving the Torah at Sinai and yet all of us were there. As Jews, what does it *mean* to own a past that is not your own? To stake claim to a narrative that in certain respects is simply not yours?

For some, this estrangement sows the seeds to challenge their Judaism or leave it all together. And doing so may be exactly what they need. The rest of us, however, are faced with a challenge.

I grew up with shepherding a flock and gleaning fields, but entirely without Seders. Most all of you grew up with Seders and b'nei mitzvah but are completely removed from the agriculture in the Torah. Yet both you and I feel, on some level, a connection to the same pasts, narratives, and founding myths of our people.

As progressive Jews, we wrestle with such estrangement. It doesn't sit well with us. For good or ill, we are more skeptical. Our *Wissenschaft* approach to Judaism, can fuel estrangement from our claimed, collective past.

Our western culture and contemporary way of life fuels a world of 10 second sound bytes, immediacy, intensity, demanding careers, and conflicting needs. We're all barreling ahead to a better future, inevitably distancing ourselves from where we have already been--be it real or claimed.

In our own lives, to close these gaps and to feel more at home, we often look back and remember. Philosopher John Macquarrie, wrote that: “Through memory, we bring with us our past; through anticipation and the projects of the will, we reach out into our future.”

Certainly, I can remember a time when as a little boy, I planted my very first tree. My grandmother told me that my tiny tree would one day reach farther than I could imagine. And likewise, if I worked hard, so could I.

I recalled *this* when I first moved to New York City--so far from home in every possible way.

In his book *Shuva*, Yehuda Kurtzer writes, “Memory, played out in ritual and recital, is an act of embracing the past...--[though it] can create a deep alienation between the past and the present.” To be sure, our task can be uncomfortable. We move through our texts and deeply held traditions--the very things that can fuel our continuity. And at the same time, we are roused to reality--as I was in my first reading of this parashah. Our attempt to remember a past that is not literally ours both pulls us in, and pushes us away.

Arami oved avi.

My father was a wandering Aramean.

<pause -- change tone>

I’m often asked why I converted. I respond with self-exploration as well as a measure of things I discovered in college. To be sure, nothing I say is false. But, at the same time none of it really explains why I completely changed my life. Was it the agricultural soul of our Torah that drew me in? Was it a theology of constant learning?

Yes, and yes.

But these, are things that I didn't *necessarily need* Judaism for. What it was and what it continues to be, is the experience of Judaism--the *process* of Judaism.

Our farmer is enjoined to recite the lines we read today and in so doing claim a past that isn't his. And at the *end* of the parashah, when Moses tells the people, quote, "You have seen all that the Lord did before *your* eyes in the land of Egypt..." He is not speaking to the people he led out of bondage. We all well know, that generation dies out before ever reaching the Promised Land. Moses is talking to a new generation, a *re-imagined, re-engineered*, people who are fully *ripened* and ready for a better future. *They are assumed* to be part of a past that was not theirs. They, like our farmer, our rabbis, like all of us at the Seder table, remember a past that was not theirs, is not ours, but yet is.

Our Torah *wants* us to be part of our people's narrative. Judaism, entreats us to turn estrangement into relevance. Closing a breach with our collective past and transforming it into an opportunity for us to connect with a narrative far greater than our own. Not just to experience the past but to grow from it. Finding ourselves distant and then creatively working to reinvent, to reconcile, and to return. Whether it is in the Exodus from Egypt, learning to live without a Temple, or surviving utter ruin, Judaism so often looks back and looks within and finds ways to endure. Situating us in the past to set off into the future.

And just as Judaism has done this for millennia, so too can we, Jewish individuals, do the same for ourselves. Harnessing the fluidity of memory, taking the Torah up on its offers and tapping into our collective narrative is exquisitely transformative. Particularly in the month of Elul, we should engage those moments of personal estrangement and their need for reconciliation.

What's more, none of what I've said today, is the sole, proprietary experience of converts or farmers or even rabbinical students. It is, and always will be, why I converted. To both be a part of this engaged, estranged, reconciling, fluidly

remembering, exquisite experience that we call Judaism; *and to do this same work within myself.*

But to be sure, it is an opportunity offered to all Jews by our tradition, by our story, by our Torah. As it was for me, it is yours for the taking and yours for the engaging.

<pause>

Hee'gad'ti ha'yom l'Adonai Eloheikha ki va'ti el *hachayim ha zeh...*

I declare this day to the Lord your God, that I have come to *this life...*

I have come with my past,
all my loves and labors,
and the first fruits they've born.

I have come with my fears,
those moments where I feel disconnected.

And I have come with my struggles
to reconcile myself
both for my own sake
and for the sake of my people.

Arami oved *avi.*

My father was a wandering Aramean.

And so, was yours.