

1. In the agricultural community that was ancient Israel, the ripening of the first fruits of the season was an occasion of great rejoicing and gladness. For the farmer of that day it represented the beginning of a year of prosperity and plenty. It dissipated his fears of ruination by drought or locusts. It meant that he would have a harvest so that he could feed his wife and children during the winter, and that the worries that weighed on him from the time the first blossom opened were over and done with. At such time, he would gather up these first fruits, called the BIKURIM, and bring them to Jerusalem where, according to this morning's Sidra, he recited a prayer upon offering them up, a prayer which is moving in its simplicity, its beauty, its sincerity and its depth. This short prayer is primarily a testament of the historical relation between G-d, the People of Israel and the Land of Israel. Having lived to see his labors so well rewarded and the land bear its fruit, the Jew came to his Temple, brought the first fruits to the Kohanim and declared that this Land was given to him and his people only by the goodness of G-d. It is therefore a prayer of thanksgiving and gratitude which is, at the same time, a resume of the history of Israel, which is, <sup>in fact</sup> after all, the story of the relationships between the G-d of Israel, the People of Israel and the Land of Israel.
2. Now since this is a prayer of this kind, giving insight into this history and these relationships, its importance far transcends the ancient farmer and the agricultural community of that day. A prayer of this kind has meaning and urgency for all Jews of all time, for are we not always a people, always praying to our G-d - and for our Land? Its meaning, then, should give us some serious clues as to our own predicament today.
3. In this connection, the very first 3 words of the prayer of BIKURIM are of greatest significance for they set the tone and establish the basic premise of what a Jew and Judaism really are. And they are three words which are somewhat difficult to understand, and two differing interpretations of them have been offered from the times of the Tannaim until down to the Middle Ages. And the difference in the translation of these three words reveals to us a divergency of approach that goes far beyond the bounds of this particular MITZVAH. They reveal a difference in attitude with regard to problems both universal and personal, and as relevant as this morning's newspaper.
4. These words are: ARAMI OVED AVI. Now what does that mean? Who is the ARAMI, the Aramean or Syrian? And what does OVED mean in this context? One interpretation, recorded by Rashi and anticipated by the translator Onkelos, maintains that ARAMI, the Aramean or Syrian, is Laban, the wicked brother-in-law of our Father Jacob who sought to destroy him and his family. OVED in this sense means "destroyed" or "wanted to destroy". And the entire verse, therefore, means, "Laban the Aramean wanted to destroy my Father Jacob". The beginning of Jewish history, its initiation on the world scene, its crux and guiding principle, is its miraculous survival from the rages of persecution. Anti-semitism is as old as the Jewish people, and Laban was the prototype of the anti-semite. The recurring theme of the Jew is: ARAMI OVED AVI, they, the non-Jews, wanted to obliterate us, but we managed to survive despite them. The inter-play between Jew and Gentile, the interaction of of hatred and death vs. faith and the will-to-live - this is the story of the Jew. It is a travelogue of persecution and flight, of pursuit and escape, of enslavement and redemption. The history book of the Jew is filled with such tales, from Laban to Pharo to H<sub>2</sub>man to Titus to Torquemada and Chmelnitzki and Hitler and Stalin, but its concluding chapter is VA'YOTZIENU HASHEM MIMITZRAYIM, and finally VESAMACHTA BECHOL HATOV. Despite the blood, the hatred, the tears, and the crying, the enmity and the coldness - which we shall never forget - we shall be avenged, we shall survive, we shall be the victors.
5. The other interpretation of ARAMI... is a radically different one, one which is more in consonance with both the grammar and the syntax of the verse and one which has an urgent bearing on our current situation. According to this explanation, offered by Ibn Ezra, Rashbam and Sforno, ARAMI is an adjective of AVI, who is Abraham, and OVED is an intransitive, not transitive, verb. The translation, therefore, would be, "A wandering Aramean was my Father Abraham". No mention here of Lavan, no mention of destroyin or destruction.

6. The leitmotif of Jewish history is not persecution, though G-d knows we've had more of it than any other people, but gratitude for growth - from a wandering Aramean to the first Jew; a humble and yet confident faith in the ability of a man who is rooted in truth - from a confused and perplexed son of an idol salesman to the first man who openly proclaimed and taught One G-d; pride in our origins - not military exploits, not epics of physical bravery, not even pioneering, but spiritual greatness which can make a believer out of a wanderer, a Jew out of an Aramean, a Prophet out of a shepherd. THAT is the gist of the story of the Jew - the capacity for spiritual growth, from small and humble beginnings to true greatness, from <sup>12/10 22/11 '47k To 2112/11/52 2/1</sup>
7. According to this profound understanding of the opening verse of the BIKURIM declaration, it is not the fight vs anti-semitism, not the defiance shown the taskmaster, not the achievement of political independence against odds, that makes the Jew what he is. Not the reaction to the enemy and the memory of his treachery, but the capacity for growth, the spiritual greatness that has marked us from the very beginning. It is this element of the confidence in the possibility of spiritual growth that is the true BIKURIM, the first fruit of the Jewish contribution to history, this and not a grudge we bear others, not resentment which expresses itself either in isolation or its opposite, assimilation.
8. Here, then, is a positive, mature view of Jewish history and all of Jewish life. The ARAMI OVED AVI which is the origin of every Jew and the fruit of his historical destiny is not an old grudge but an ever-fresh challenge to growth and greatness.
9. What we have said of Jewish history is, of course, extremely pertinent to our modern situation. There are those who imagine that the raison d'etre of the Jew is to react to the Gentile in one way or another, to express his pain and hurt, to lessen the sting of hatred. Worthy tho such a goal may be, it is catastrophic when this is taken to be the very essence of Jewish life. Yet that is just what is happening to us. In Israel this view of ARAMI OVED AVI takes the unholy form of complete and absolute faith in military power and political wisdom in order to outwit the evil Labans of our day. And in America this misreading of Jewish history has made anti-defamation the total expression of all of Judaism. Those of you who are members of Bnei Brith have in all probability read the article of Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of that splinter-movement called Reconstructionism, in which he answers to the question: should modern Jews observe the Tisha B'av fast. Yes, answers Kaplan, we should. But not for the traditional reasons, not for the reasons Jews have fasted these past 20 centuries. Instead, we should do so as a "hunger <sup>stink</sup> fast" to protest anti-semitism, to protest Russian tyranny, to protest against war. Now such protests are quite alright - but not as the essence of Tisha B'av. A "Hunger <sup>stink</sup> fast" is a thoroughly non-Jewish import. It is a pagan Hindu technique through and through. What has Kaplan done with this unstudied suggestion? He has taken a thoroughly Jewish, pure, genuine and deeply religious ~~experience~~ and converted it into a pagan theme in modern dress. He has misread Judaism to be a protest against the Gentile, against the Labans. And he is dead wrong. Fasting on Tisha Bav is NOT a protest against the brutality of the anti-semites, even those who destroyed the Temple. It is an expression of mourning for the spiritual decline we have experienced as a result of the loss of the Temple and a recognition that the anti-semites' destruction was a consequence of our own disloyalty to G-d. It is a tragic comparison of the spiritual stature that was once ours and is no longer. It is, according to Maimonides, a call to repentance, to better and cleaner and holier living so that we may regain that lost spiritual glory. HASHIVEINU EILLECHA VENASHUVA, CHADESIH YAMEINU KA'KEDEM - let us repent so that we can return to the days of old. It is not the nursing of an old grudge, not stale, sterile, impotent, cranky resentment, but a challenge to the other and deeper meaning of ARAMI... to the recapture of the Jewish capacity for spiritual growth. It is something the Kaplanists need perhaps more than anyone else. And it is worth ~~the~~ fasting ten Tisha B'av's a year for that. For that is the first fruit of Jewish thought and aspiration.

\* Fasting T.B. is not a demonstration. It is a demonstration for G-d.

10. Think of it yourself and you will see how these two attitudes reflect themselves in all aspects of life, and how one leads to enmity and friction and fruitlessness, and the other to harmony and maturity and fruitfulness. As we prepare to celebrate Labor Day, it occurs to us that both Labor and Management have a choice of one of these two alternatives. They

can, as they have done in earlier years, harbor old grudges, nurse old resentments, remember old treachery and ruthlessness. Labor can say ARAMI...the bosses, the Robber Barons, persecuted the poor working man. And Management can say ARAMI... the labor racketeers sought to undermine the American Way of Life and kill business. An approach of that sort, in its shallow immaturity, merely confirms the Marxist insistence on the inevitability of class warfare and makes of the bargaining table a battle ground. On the other hand, they can - and thank G-d they show all signs of so doing - forget the ~~sacr~~iminations and early injustices and unfairnesses and remark, rather, on the spiritual growth each has undergone - labor from a wandering, confused, nervous and disorganized group to an organized segment of American citizenry with sympathy for all classes and great charitable and social work on its own; and management from a selfish, narrow and pompous clique to an intelligent, compassionate and understanding body of people who accept social responsibility for the worker and the necessity for granting him real security. Such an approach to ARAMI OVED AVI can make for real peace and yield great fruit, and the BIKURIM of such an attitude can be a blessing to our great country and redeem our reputation for common sense and fair play.

11. Whether in religious life, or national life, or economic life, or in the complex personal worlds of each and ~~for~~ every one of us, Ibn Ezra's explanation of the Torah's verse shows the way to maturity, happiness, harmony and fruitfulness. One may bear a grudge, but a grudge, in turn, can bear nothing else but more grudges. But humility in contemplating modest beginnings, faith in the soul G-d gave man, acute awareness of the tremendous capacity for growth that man contains within him, that points the way to greatness for every People and every Land on G-d's earth.
12. May we, as we end an old year and look forward to a new one, learn that humility, that faith and that awareness. ~~And~~ May our efforts bear fruit, and may we have the understanding to offer up that first fruit to the Creator of all men, G-d Almighty, in happiness and in gratitude.