

Between the Lines

Insights from Midrash with Rabbi Andy Shugerman

Genesis Rabbah 93:12

ויתן את קולו בבכי, כשם שלא פייס יוסף את אחיו אלא בבכיה, כך הקב"ה אינו גואל את ישראל אלא מתוך בכיה, שנאמר (ירמיה לא) בבכי יבוא ובתחנונים אובלים.

“He wept aloud . . . ” (Gen. 45:2). Just as Joseph could only reconcile with his brothers through weeping, so too does the Blessed Holy One only redeem Israel through weeping, as it is stated, “They shall come with weeping, and with *tachanunim* will I guide them” (Jer. 31:9).

There are many reasons why we are moved to tears, and seeing another person cry rarely fails to grab our attention, if not also our sympathy. We cry when we feel pain or sadness, anger or frustration, or even awe and joy. We can imagine that Joseph felt each of those emotions in the series of events that led to his reunion with his brothers.

Nonetheless, one might question the rabbinic interpretation that Joseph’s weeping moved his siblings towards reconciliation, given the plain meaning of the biblical passage. In the verse following the one that opens the midrash above, one finds that “his brothers were not able to answer him, for they were confounded in his presence” (Gen. 45:3). This report of silence and confusion does not describe a movement from estrangement to appeasement, so we must turn to the second part of this midrash to understand the rabbinic comparison of familial and national restoration episodes.

Indeed, our grasp of this midrash hinges on the rabbinic rereading of the verse quoted from Jeremiah. That prophetic passage foretells Israel’s emotional future return from exile and the renewal of its covenant with God. The term *tachanunim* refers to God’s compassion in response to Israel’s weeping, but it also comes to refer in rabbinic parlance to human pleas for mercy, especially as prayers of supplication. One finds this duality of God’s compassion and tearful human petitions a few verses later in Jeremiah:

Thus said the LORD: A cry is heard in Ramah—Wailing, bitter weeping—Rachel weeping for her children. She refuses to be comforted, for her children, who are gone. Thus said the LORD: Restrain your voice from weeping, your eyes from shedding tears; for there is a reward for your labor—declares the LORD: They shall return from the enemy’s land. (Jer. 31:15–16)

The prophet here depicts God’s message of comfort for an unconsolable Rachel, whose descendants from the tribes of Benjamin and Ephraim were exiled from the Land of Israel. Jeremiah’s conception of the tragic matriarch in this passage provided the foundation for a midrashic trope in which Rachel morphs into a voice of the Shekhinah, the indwelling Presence of God who journeys with Israel throughout their dispersions. The rabbinic interpretation, then, depicts God as both mourner and comforter, as both needing and providing reconciliation and redemption.

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Torah from JTS

Parashat Va-yiggash

Genesis 44:18–47:27

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Parashah Commentary

This week’s commentary was written by Rabbi Eliezer Diamond, Rabbi Judah Nadich Associate Professor of Talmud and Rabbinics, JTS.

Sometimes the midrash takes up a difficult verse and offers an interpretation that is even more opaque. This week’s Torah portion contains an example of this. We are told that initially Jacob refused to believe the brothers when they told him that Joseph was still among the living. However, “when they recounted all that Joseph had said to them, and when he saw the wagons that Joseph had sent to transport him, the spirit of their father Jacob revived” (Gen. 45:27).

It is not clear why the sight of the wagons led Jacob to believe that Joseph was still alive. Perhaps if he only had the brothers’ assurance that Joseph was still alive he would have refused to believe them. However, once he saw the wagons sent to transport him and his family to Egypt, he realized that only someone who both wielded great power and who cared about him deeply could and would have arranged this transport. In fact a number of medieval commentators understand the verse in this fashion.

However, Rashi cites a midrash asserting that the wagons or *agalot* were a sign sent by Joseph to Jacob. When Jacob last saw Joseph, says the midrash, they had been studying the laws of the *eglah arufah*, the broken-necked calf, found in Deuteronomy 21:1–9. The Torah teaches that when a corpse is found in an uninhabited area and the murderer is unknown, the elders of the city closest to the corpse go to the scene of the crime and perform a ceremony. This includes breaking the neck of a calf in a streambed that has been neither sowed nor plowed. Hoping that Jacob would be struck by the orthographic and phonic similarities between the words *eglah* and *agalah*, Joseph was attempting to remind Jacob that he remembered what they had been studying before he was sold, something that no one but Joseph would know.

This midrash is clever in its way but also bizarre and mystifying. While the midrash often retrojects the intense rabbinic devotion to study onto biblical figures, one has to ask why this is done in this instance. The midrash also asks us to believe that simply by seeing the wagons Jacob would have understood the arcane message that Joseph intended to convey. We have to consider the possibility, therefore, that rather than simply engaging in word play the midrash is telling us something of substance.

To unravel the mystery of the midrash, we must address a difficulty in the Joseph narrative. In the entire story, there is no indication that Jacob was ever told what happened between Joseph and his brothers in Dothan on that fateful day. Jacob no doubt wondered how it was that although his sons had told him that Joseph had been torn apart by beasts, he was alive and well in Egypt. Even before Joseph's reappearance, there are hints that Jacob suspected his sons of lying to him. Was Jacob in fact told of the brothers' sale of Joseph? If not, was this the result of a conscious decision on the part of the brothers or did Jacob, sensing that he might be devastated by the answer, choose not to inquire?

The midrash provides one possible answer to this question: it was Joseph who, without speaking a word, convinced Jacob that he would be better off remaining ignorant of the circumstances surrounding Joseph's disappearance. The *eglah arufah* ceremony is performed when the murderer is unknown. At the end of the ceremony the elders of the town literally wash their hands of the matter, declaring, "Our hands did not shed this blood" (Deut. 21:6-7). Joseph was responding to Jacob's misgivings by saying: Treat the mystery surrounding me as a case of an *eglah arufah*, where the facts are not known and all the parties involved can walk away claiming clean hands and ignorance of the crime. What you suspect about your sons may be true, but no good cause is served by pursuing this matter.

In urging this course of action upon his father, Joseph was showing compassion toward his brothers in response to his brothers' newfound ability to put responsibility before envy. As a youth, Joseph was constantly bringing news of his brothers' misdeeds to his fathers. Now, as an older and wiser adult, he kept their most terrible secret away from his father's ears. Of course, Joseph was also protecting his father. The truth can sometimes be destructive. In Joseph's estimation the relationship between his brothers and his father would not survive a revelation of the brothers' heinous act. Better to keep the truth a secret and preserve family harmony.

The brothers themselves could have chosen to confess their crime to Jacob but not surprisingly they chose silence. It must have been more difficult for them to keep their secret in Joseph's presence than in his absence. With Joseph around they had the added burden of knowing that he might choose at any moment to betray them to Jacob. At times the tension must have been so great that the brothers longed to unburden themselves of their terrible secret. To do so, however, would only have alienated them from their father and would have caused him endless pain. And so, like most families, Jacob and his sons did not live happily ever after; yet they were again one family.

In most families there is a price to be paid to remain part of the clan, sometimes small and other times significant. You have to laugh at your father's jokes if you want to stay in his good graces; or, you must put aside years of parental neglect or abuse to be able to sit at a Seder with him. Sometimes, particularly in marriages, the price of a relationship is silence about one's own betrayals. A remorseful husband may feel compelled to tell his spouse about a past infidelity, but he is often motivated more by the desire to unburden himself of guilt than by a sense of integrity. Sometimes what we owe the ones we love is to bear the unbearable knowledge of our own sins. Our penance comes not through confession but through changing the direction in our lives.

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A Taste of Torah

A Commentary by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, director of Israel Programs, JTS

Genesis 44:32-33 “. . . Now your servant (Judah) has pledged himself for the boy (Benjamin) to my father (Jacob), saying, 'If I do not return him to you, I will stand guilty before my father forever.' Therefore, please let your servant remain as a slave to my lord instead of the boy, and let the boy go back with his brothers. For how can I go back to my father unless the boy is with me? Let me not be witness to the woe that would overtake my father!"

B'khor Shor, "Now your servant (Judah) has pledged himself," If you ask 'why is it that I am spokesman before brothers that are senior to me, it is because I am the guarantor: [Judah had said to Jacob] if I do not bring him (Benjamin) back to you and set him before you, I will stand guilty before you forever' (Gen. 43:9). 'And if you need a servant, behold I will be your slave in place of the lad, because if you delay him then I will not return, for how could I be witness to this evil; it is better that I stay here alone and he will go up. He cannot remain here . . . and you have also said that you do not want to buy us as slaves since we have not sinned. So how is it that you are prepared to kill our father since surely, he has not sinned . . . '

This week's parashah, Va-yiggash, showcases the most dramatic moment of the Joseph narrative. Coerced by Joseph to bring their youngest brother Benjamin down to Egypt, the brothers find themselves involved in a Kafkaesque plot. Benjamin now stands accused of stealing a goblet from the pharaonic household. Judah's promises to his father of returning the child flash before him as he pleads with Joseph to let himself be enslaved in place of his brother Benjamin. How are we to understand the emerging character of Judah? And why does his plea open the emotional floodgates for Joseph, leading him to finally reveal himself before his brothers?

Joseph B'khor Shor imagines a dialogue taking place between Judah and Joseph on the one hand and between Judah and himself on the other. Seniority is on Judah's mind. That is to say, either Reuven, Simeon, or Levi should be the appropriate spokesperson for the group as each of these siblings is older than Judah. The reason, however, that Judah owns his role as interlocutor is because of a promise made to his father, Jacob. Judah assures his father that he himself will be surety for his beloved son Benjamin. And true to his word, Judah fulfills the vow made to Jacob. He presses his seemingly Egyptian nemesis, urging Joseph to take himself into custody in place of his younger brother.

We are feted to a portrait of Judah, once again standing within earshot of the pit into which Joseph is thrown. The brothers are about to lose another. Rather than responding with hatred, venom, and indifference, Judah is now ready to put his own life on the line. One imagines that it is both Judah's impassioned and compassion-filled words as well as Joseph's painful memories of a very a different brother that lead Joseph to reveal himself in the moment. Joseph is prepared to love again and admit of the splendid possibility of *teshuvah*. It is, at the end of the day, Judah's words and emotion that open the doorway to his brother's mercy.

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