

Yosef ha-Tzaddik

Joseph is known in Jewish tradition as “ha-Tzaddik”, the righteous one, and thus any attempt at biography in a genre other than hagiography requires justification. As this article constitutes such an attempt, I ask your indulgence for a somewhat extended and seemingly tangential introduction, with the promise that it will conclude directly on point.

A

Let us begin with what is, for better or worse, among the best-known Talmudic statements in contemporary Orthodoxy, namely, *kol ha'omeir David chatah eino elah to'eh* - “Anyone who says David sinned is in error” (Shabbat 56a). This statement is part of a series of such statements making the same claim with regard to Re'uven, Shlomo, et al. Note that these statements do not represent a consensus, or even necessarily widespread opinion; they are the opinion of R. Yonatan.

The very existence of this statement assumes that there is reason to suspect David of sinning, and of course the Biblical text seems to explicitly describe him as committing adultery with Batsheva and, having failed to gain her husband Uriah's complicity in covering the affair, misusing his military command to have Uriah killed. However, R. Yonatan asserts that in David's army all soldiers gave their wives conditional divorces on the eve of battle to protect them against being made practical (but not legal) widows by the vagaries of war, as for instance if a husband was killed behind enemy lines and thus the Jewish army could not confirm his death. Thus David's relationship with Bathsheba was not adulterous. Accordingly, when Uriah refused to go home and sleep with Bathsheba on his leave, he illegitimately disobeyed a direct order from the king, and thus David was within his rights to have him executed as a rebel.

[Taken at face value, R. Yitzchak's statement has profoundly dangerous implications; it would imply that adultery and murder are judged purely by their technical legal definitions, that there is no concept of wrong in Judaism beyond the narrowly halakhic. But such a reading would do violence to the text and meaning of Tanakh – surely the moral of the story is that David's actions were deeply and profoundly wrong –

the moral equivalent of adultery and murder, not to mention a horrible betrayal of a soldier by his commander-in-chief.

Surely R. Yitzchak himself did not mean to lessen the spiritual impact of the prophet Natan's unforgettable condemnation: "You are the man!". The technical excuse – or better, mitigation – must be seen as an effort to preserve our reverence for the character without condoning his behavior, and thus to preserve our awe for the Psalms attributed to him, for the messianic line, etc. I leave open the question of whether technical excuses are an effective method of preserving that reverence. I wish only to acknowledge that preserving such reverence is a worthy and important goal.

Some years ago R. Aharon Lichtenstein, shlita, gave a powerful lecture entitled "Relevance and Reverence". He pointed out that excessive reverence is problematic in that it makes characters seem irrelevant; how can we strive to imitate someone who was not subject to the same passions and temptations that affect us? This, I think, is not a problem with regard to King David. No amount of reverence can conceal the reality that he experienced much that the evil inclination might throw at us. In the story of King David then, perhaps some less-than-completely-realistic hagiography is useful in arriving at the proper balance between reverence and relevance.

B

Let us, however, look at another example. Sefer Bereishis records a famine in the Land of Canaan immediately after Hashem promises Avraham the land. Avraham reacts by leaving for Egypt. The Biblical interpreter can either justify Avraham's departure, or else condemn it. The first option preserves unmarred our reverence for Abraham – we say that Hashem's promise related to the future and had no relevance to his immediate decisions, or that the mitzvah of *pikku'ach nefesh*, of lifesaving, overrides that of settling the land, etc. The consequence of this justification, however, is that Avraham's behavior becomes an acceptable precedent. We may legitimately conclude that fleeing Israel in times of crisis is recommended behavior.

The general point is this: When the Biblical text is unambiguous in its condemnation of a particular act of a generally praised character, there is perhaps not much risked, and perhaps quite a lot gained, in constructing interpretations that preserve our reverence for

that character. But when the text is ambiguous, the same interpretational technique carries the grave risk of encouraging repetition of immoral or destructive behaviors.

In the case just discussed, Rashi justifies Avraham, but Ramban condemns him. Indeed, Ramban argues that Avraham's sin is the cause of the entire exile in Egypt, which was measure-for-measure punishment for his demonstrably insufficient attachment to the Land. Why is Ramban willing to say this, rather than to adopt R. Yonatan's approach and to say that "Anyone who says that Avraham sinned is in error"?

C

One might suggest that Ramban in general – and in contrast to most traditional interpreters - views the Patriarchs, in E. M. Forster's terms, as "round" rather than "flat" characters, as real, multidimensional, and flawed human beings rather than, in one of R. Lichtenstein's most felicitous phrases, as "ossified statues of petrified piety". In other words, Ramban seeks relevance even at the cost of reverence.

It is true that Ramban is consistently the medieval interpreter most willing to attribute sin to the Patriarchs, and that as a result his Patriarchs are more human and relevant than those, for instance, of Rashi. I contend, however, that this is a consequence of his interpretations, but not their motive. Ramban, I believe, never seeks to humanize the Patriarchs, but rather is compelled to do so by a different overriding theological agenda. Understanding that agenda requires us to turn to the very beginning of Sefer Bereishis.

Rashi begins his Commentary on the Torah by asking why the Torah starts with Creation rather than with the first commandment, here taken to be that of sanctifying the new moon. He answers that the fact of Creation is necessary to establish the Jewish right to the land of Israel. "Should the nations of the world claim that you are robbers, that you have stolen the land from the Seven Nations, you respond that Hashem created the land and has a right to give it to whom He sees fit, and He took it from them and gave it to us." (Rashi's argument seems in theory more useful as a support for internal Jewish morale than as a response to gentile attacks; however, the Balfour Declaration and subsequent UN recognition of Israel may well have owed much to this argument).

Ramban professes astonishment at Rashi's question: How could Rashi feel that Creation, which contains all the mystical secrets of the universe and is critical to a true

understanding of G-d, does not belong in Torah. He answers that while Creation is in fact religiously central, the creation story as written in the Torah is not a sufficient source for mystical knowledge, which can be attained only through Oral Tradition. The secrets of the universe could not be left accessible -- *ein dorshin...be-ma'asei bereishis b'shenayim* (Mishnah Chagigah 2:1) -- to the masses, and thus were encoded in Torah in a manner accessible only to those who already understand them. In which case we return to Rashi's question: Why include this text in Torah at all? And, Ramban says, we accept Rashi's claim that it was included to establish the Jewish right to Israel.

But only sort of. Because while Rashi expresses his answer in a line, Ramban's version takes a page, and his formulation is subtly but crucially different. Whereas Rashi says that because Hashem created the world He can give it to whom He pleases, Ramban says that Creation establishes the Jewish right to Israel because, since Hashem created the world, He has the right to establish the behavioral standards which determine who earns the land.

Ramban goes on to present a comprehensive structural interpretation of Genesis as a series of episodes in which people lose land as the result of sin. Thus humanity loses the Garden of Eden as the result of the first sin, and the generation of the Flood loses the land as a whole as a result of their collective depravity. And thus Avraham and his descendants get Israel when the Seven Nations lose it – but only when they lose it, not yet, *ki lo shalem avon ha-emori* (Bereishis 15:16). G-d cannot take the land from them by fiat; He has to have moral justification for taking it from them and giving it to us. (Note that Rashi may be increasing our reverence for G-d at the cost of decreasing the relevance of His behavior; if G-d is above moral standards, his behavior cannot be a model for our own.)

In other words: Rashi believes that the fact of Creation means that Hashem can do whatever He wants with the world (perhaps because since human beings owe their very existence to Him, they cannot possibly have any rights with regard to Him). Ramban, however, refuses to acknowledge that G-d's relationship with human beings is not bound by morality, that He does not accept the same behavioral standards that He imposes on them.

This theological vision, I suggest, forces Ramban to read the Patriarchs as he does. Why? Because Ramban believes that G-d controls history, and thus history must express His justice. Ordinarily, our failure to understand how it does so can be attributed to our limited human perspective – but in Chumash we get Hashem’s Own perspective *k’veychol* ! Thus for Ramban all human suffering in the Torah must be justified by prior sin,, which compels him to discover those sins even where the text chooses not to explicitly identify them. All Biblical history must be justified history. The Patriarchs suffer, therefore they must have sinned. That they emerge as rounded characters is, thus, an accidental outcome of this theological equation.

D

Ramban’s claim that Avraham sinned by descending to Egypt as a result of the famine in Israel is an example of this method at work. Ramban knows that the Jews were to suffer 400 years of exile; he needs to find an antecedent sin to justify this punishment. Avraham’s abandonment of the land seems a likely candidate.

Note, though, that we can adopt Ramban’s theological framework without accepting his specific interpretations. We can, for example, agree with Ramban that the exile in Egypt clearly implies a significant prior sin, but accept Rashi’s claim that Avraham’s behavior here was perfectly justified. Or we can agree with Ramban that Avraham’s behavior was sinful, but not view the sin as sufficiently grave to justify so long an exile. Or we can argue that the sin justified exile, but has no measure-for-measure relationship with the slavery in Egypt. Each of these options would leave us, as heirs to the interpretational framework established by Ramban, in search of a sin for which the slavery in Egypt would be a measure-for-measure punishment.

I have always been partial to Ramban’s framework, but always questioned his explanation of the slavery in Egypt; so I looked for an antecedent sin. In the process of my extended search, I found some peculiar textual phenomena in the story of the Exile and Exodus. Let’s go through them.

First: When Joseph is dying, he tells his brothers “G-d will surely redeem you from this, at which point you will take my bones with you from Egypt”. Why not take them now? Even we accept the midrashic claim that Pharaoh would have prevented this,

why does Joseph make the removal of his bones dependent on a general redemption, rather than asking for their removal whenever possible?

Second: From what, exactly, will G-d redeem the Jews? Isn't Egypt – at the time Yosef was still alive - good to them? Don't they have the best land? And even if Joseph's bones wouldn't be permitted to leave, why must the rest of the Jews wait for divine intervention to return to Israel?

Third: The Torah introduces the Jewish enslavement by saying that “A new king arose in Egypt who did not know Joseph”. Since any king would have had access to the records, the commentators correctly assert that this lack of knowledge reflected policy rather than ignorance. Why was the new king eager to disassociate himself from Joseph?

Fourth: Pharaoh's speech to his population about the Jewish danger seems incoherent. “Lest there be war, and they fight against us and go up out of the land”; if he's worried about Jewish disloyalty, he should expel them rather than enslave them, thereby certainly losing their loyalty?

Fifth: The Torah emphasizes that Moshe Rabbeinu personally fulfills the promise made to Joseph: *Va-yikach Moshe et atzmot Yosef imo...* - Why?

Sixth: The Torah deliberately makes the removal of Joseph's bones the absolute end of the Jewish stay in Egypt, recording it in a semi-flashback after having already placed the Jews on the road. Why?

The answers to all of these questions lie in Joseph's Egyptian policy. Joseph saves Egypt by preserving its grain from the years of plenty for the years of famine. His policy seems wondrously foresighted; by taking 20% of agricultural produce in taxes during the fat years, he has more than enough stored away for the lean years. If that had been all he did, he would have been lionized forever.

But the above description is not comprehensive. Joseph does tax Egyptian farmers at a rate of 20% during the fat years, but he does not give them back their tax-grains during the lean years, he sells them back. His policy does not establish Social Security but rather a ruthless and absolute government monopoly. As a result, he can

charge whatever prices he wants, and the price he charges bankrupts the Egyptian populace in the first year. So they sell him their animals and their goods, and eventually they sell themselves to him (this is different from R. Samson Raphael Hirsch's interpretation which argues that Joseph refused the Egyptians' offer to sell themselves) in exchange for the grain he had taken from them in taxes. Thus, Egypt is converted from a land of freeholders to a land of serfs.

Lest one try to justify Joseph – or at least mitigate his behavior – by contending that the Egyptians brought this on themselves by not maintaining private stores for the coming famine, let me cite a stunning midrash from Bereishit Rabbah 91. That midrash asserts that Joseph forced all Egyptian males to circumcise themselves before allowing them to buy grain. Reasonably, they protest to Pharaoh. He responds that they had brought this upon themselves by not maintaining private grain stores. They say that they had maintained such stores but that they rotted. Pharaoh tells them that if Joseph could make their grain rot, he might do worse things to them, and so they had best obey him.

This midrash offers two critical interpretation perspectives on the story of Joseph. First, it presents him as abusing his power over the Egyptians. Second, it shows Pharaoh disassociating himself from that abuse without stopping it.

At the end of Joseph's administration, the only people in Egypt who own their own land are the priests and the Jews. Joseph has centralized power in the monarchy as never before in Egypt. The new king finds himself in a great position. But he also finds himself, reasonably, facing a terrible political backlash from all the new serfs. And so he chooses not to know Joseph, and he looks for a scapegoat. Who can the scapegoat be? Obviously it must be somebody who did not suffer, and perhaps even prospered, under Joseph. The priests may have had long-standing popular loyalty behind them, and perhaps Pharaoh truly feared the Egyptian gods. He, therefore, decided to leave the priests alone; the Jews were, thus, the obvious candidates.

In other words, Pharaoh reaps the benefits of Joseph's policy but does not take responsibility for them. It's the Jews' fault, he says; enslave them and everything will be better again. At the very least everyone will be equal then. Like all demagogic arguments, it doesn't have to make much sense, it just has to have emotional appeal. Pharaoh's argument is very much parallel to that used to trigger the Cossack massacres in

the early seventeenth century, when Jewish middlemen and bartenders suffered as surrogates for the Polish nobility, who escaped to their fortified cities until they had a sufficient military response.

E

The argument above is not original with me; among others, Professor Moses Pava of Yeshiva University has argued on straightforward economic-theory grounds that Joseph's policies were bound to trigger a violent backlash. What I hope to contribute is an understanding that the Torah views the later enslavement of the Jews as the moral, and not merely political, consequences of Joseph's policies.

In other words – if one needs a sin that justifies, that serves as the moral cause of, the Egyptian enslavement of the Jews, what better candidate than the Jewish (in the person of Joseph – but the Torah nowhere mentions that the Jews objected to their unique status and benefits) enslavement of Egypt!

The question that arises then is: If we, in retrospect, see the backlash coming so clearly and inevitably – and if we, in retrospect, see the moral failure – why didn't Joseph, who was wise and righteous, see it when it happened?

I want to suggest that Joseph's failure here is reflective of a blind spot in Joseph's moral vision. This argument may seem wholly inconsistent with the traditional view of Joseph as “the righteous”, but I think it is possible to speak of “concentrated righteousness”, of a type of righteousness which creates spectacular performance in some areas of life and behavior, but misses others. To enable me to do that, I ask your indulgence in another, this time brief, tangent.

F

A contribution of Ramban's Commentary on the Torah of perhaps equal significance to his “rounding” of the Avot is his use of the concept that history sometimes repeats “in large” the biography of specific individuals, a concept to which he creatively applies the midrashic phrase *ma'aseh avot siman le-banim*. This is to some degree simply an instance of what might be described as his “fractal” view of history, in which every

part contains the whole; for example, he believes that each day of creation foreshadows a millenium of universal history.

But there may be more to it, as Ramban does not apply the principal indiscriminately. As the late Mady Katz z"l showed in an unpublished paper, building on the work of Amos Funkenstein, Ramban applies it systematically only to the Patriarchs, although he also uses it with regard to Moshe Rabbeinu at the battle of Amalek. Why does he use an apparently universal principle so narrowly?

Perhaps Ramban viewed the Patriarchs as uniquely suprahistorical figures, as personalities who imposed themselves on history rather than submitting themselves to its vagaries. Their supreme characteristic is that imposed by the first command to Avraham – the capacity to be utterly free of context, and thus to be truly determinative of the future. Moshe Rabbeinu had a “liminal moment” during the battle with Amalek, but was not a liminal personality in the same way.

Joseph ends the liminal period of Jewish history. Why? Because he was deeply contextually bound, and it was this confinement that generated the moral blind spot posited above. Let us review Joseph’s biography.

The point I want to suggest is intimated by the Torah in the episode of Joseph’s confinement in Potiphar’s prison. The Torah tells us that the prison warden found no fault in him, and eventually put him in charge of all the prisoners. Why would we care? Furthermore, once Joseph takes charge, do conditions improve in the prison? If yes, we aren’t told. Should a completely moral person have been able to behave in a way that made the warden of a prison-at-whim completely happy?

In other words, all we learn from this episode is that Joseph was good at making the powers-that-be happy. And this episode is perfectly typical. Joseph makes Potiphar prosper, even though we learn later that Potiphar is certainly not a zealous observer of fair trial protocol, and again the Torah records no positive moral consequences of his prosperity.

In the episode which earns Joseph his sobriquet, his spurning of the advances of “Mrs. Potiphar”, he formulates the problem in terms of loyalty to his master: “there is none in this house greater than me, and he has not denied me a thing other than you, since you are his wife; how can I do this great evil, and thereby sin to G-d?” A close reading

suggests that [even] the “sin to *elokim*” might be interpreted as ingratitude to his master, Potiphar (see, e.g., Shemos 21:6).

At the outset of Joseph’s career, his father makes him the ill-fated coat. He does not share the coat with his brothers; indeed, he wears it when he goes to check up on them as his father’s agent ([Note that] Malbim maintains that he wore it under another cloak, based on the seeming redundancy in Bereishis 37:23; I would suggest that “the coat” was how his brothers saw him before he saw them.). He sees no reason to question the decisions of his father, the power-that-was.

And so, when Joseph becomes the Grand Vizier of Egypt, we should not be surprised that he sees his task as the extension of Pharaoh’s power without regard for consequences.

To sum up: Joseph seems not to question his moral context, not to wonder whether the power in a society is necessarily doing that which is right. Thus a former slave places all Egypt in slavery. Perhaps the Sages are making this point when they censure Joseph for relying on the Cupbearer rather than on G-d to rescue him from Potiphar’s jail. As an arbitrary prisoner, he had a clear chance to recognize the corruption of Egyptian society, but instead he worked the system.

Mosheh Rabbeinu provides the perfect contrast. Mosheh, raised by the Egyptian monarchy, has a sudden epiphany in which he realizes the corruption of the system and rejects all the advantages it brings him. Joseph is the Jew who loses himself in the Egyptian moral context; Mosheh is the Jew who finds himself by recognizing its corruption. Thus, Mosheh Rabbeinu is Joseph’s personal redeemer. And thus Mosheh Rabbeinu is capable of at least the occasional liminal moment.

[Happily, however, Joseph’s story does not end at this point; Hashem gives Joseph one last chance to recognize his error. Jacob issues him a command (see Bereishis 49:29) which exposes his dual loyalties, which forces Joseph for the first time to choose between loyalties.

Joseph finds a way out. But the machinations necessary to get his father’s bones out force him for the first time to recognize the tenuousness of his position, and to question the decisions of his past. And in the suddenly-diminished influence that episode betrays, he perhaps sees the coming of a Pharaoh who will deny knowing him, and understands what the consequences will be for his family.

So Joseph tells his brothers: I, who have always had optimistic dreams, now see a bleak future which is my responsibility. I accept my responsibility for this; when G-d redeems you, and only when G-d redeems you, remove my bones from this country. If the enslavement is my fault, I have no right to redemption until every Jew is redeemed.

Thus Joseph earned his title, as David rehabilitated himself, through repentance.

And something more. Ramban claims that Avraham's sin in descending to Egypt caused the exile, while his actual stay there foreshadowed it. We have suggested that Joseph's political/moral misjudgements constitute a better cause for the exile; is it not possible that his experience as a slave constitute a better foreshadowing of it? In which case, Joseph's final recognition enabled him to reach the level of the Patriarchs, and to truly deserve being called "the righteous."