

בראשית פרק מט פסוק ט  
גור אריה יהודה מטרף בני עלית כרע רבץ כאריה וכלביא מי יקימנו:

The 'blessings' that Yaakov gives to his sons this week are written as what we tend to call 'poetry'. Yet they are clearly not all positive, and it's not clear how calling something 'poetry' helps us understand it. Here, however, is one possibility. "Prose" style aims at syntactic clarity – the purpose of grammar and punctuation in prose is to minimize ambiguity. Poetry, by contrast, may seek to maximize ambiguity, and specifically to take advantage of grammar and punctuation to create ambiguity.

Now punctuation is a complicated term with regard to Torah, as the implications of the cantillation marks do not correspond to those of contemporary symbols such as the question mark or exclamation point. A closer analogy may be the line break in poetry. But great poets regularly use enjambment, the technique in which a line break is deliberately inserted in the middle of a semantic unit, often to create a temporary meaning which is replaced when one reads the whole, or to give a set of words semantic coherence as if they were independent of the whole.

In Bereshit 49:9, the start of the 'blessing' of Yehudah, the cantillation inserts a break between "miteref" and "beni alita", so that the translation must be "from teref/ my son you have arisen"<sup>1</sup>. However, just about every reader recalls that Yaakov's reaction to being shown Yosef's bloody ketonet passim was "tarof taraf Yosef", and is therefore tempted to read across the break, so that the translation becomes "from the teref of my son/you have arisen".

Now Rashbam resists this temptation mightily, and insults those who surrender to it as being ignorant of punctuation and cantillation.

והמפרשו במכירת יוסף לא ידע בשיטה של פסוק ולא בחילוק טעמים כלל:

Anyone who interprets this as a reference to the sale of Yosef knows nothing of the way of punctuation or of the cantillation breaks at all.

Perhaps Rashbam had a polemical, anti-anti-Semitic motive for this insistence, as essentially the entire Rabbinic tradition in fact sees this as a reference to the sale of Yosef, although not exclusively so – it may also refer to Yehudah's last minute rescue of Tamar, or to the later military triumphs of David, etc. But there is an interesting undercurrent to Rashbam's attack. Many rabbinic readers seem to *translate* the verse as Rashbam apparently would have them do, but nonetheless see it as a reference to the sale of Yosef. Numerous Acharonim note that they are actually reading the word *beni* twice, as if the verse said "from the teref of my son - my son, you have arisen". Now the technique of reading a word as if it appears twice shows up regularly in rabbinic reading, but I think it is particularly compelling here, even if Rashbam, and perhaps other pashtanim, apparently see it as cheating.

Now there is a second level of objection to seeing a reference to Yosef here, namely that there is no explicit Biblical evidence that Yaakov ever knew about the brother's treatment of him. Thus Or HaChayyim writes

והדעת נותנת כי מעולם לא עלה על דעת יעקב שאחים ישלחו יד ביוסף לחשוד אחד מהם, אלא שדברי רז"ל הם דברי קבלה:

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<sup>1</sup> Ibn Ezra mentions but rejects the possibility of translating "from teref/my son you caused to be lifted", with "alita" transitive, i.e. Yehudah caused Yosef to be lifted out of the pit. Note also Seforno's remarkable claim that the term "beni" here is direct address to Yosef; in the midst of blessing Yehudah, Yaakov turns to Yosef and tells him not to bear a grudge, because he was not in fact killed by the brothers.

It seems more reasonable that Yaakov never considered that the brothers would harm Yosef, so that he would suspect one of them of having done so – but the words of the Sages are words of Tradition.

One can, of course, simply accept the Tradition as self-justifying. Alternatively, one might suggest that Yaakov was speaking semi-consciously, with prophetic insight that he did not himself fully understand. Finally, we might suggest that Yaakov had his suspicions, but they were allayed when Yosef turned out to be alive, and the verse describes how Yehudah, in Yaakov's mind, as risen above the suspicion of having harmed Yosef.

Rashi, however, even as he interprets "alita" as "rising above suspicion", asserts that Yaakov knew full well that Yehudah has advised the sale. For Rashi, Yaakov was afraid that Yehudah had been in on the plot to kill Yosef, but now blessed him for having advised the brothers to sell him instead.

מטרף - ממה שחשדתיך (לעיל לז לג) בטרף טרף יוסף חיה רעה אכלתהו, וזהו יהודה שנמשל לאריה: בני עלית - סלקת את עצמך, ואמרת (שם כו) מה בצע וגו'.

"Miteref" – from that which I suspected you of regarding "Surely Yosef is tarof taraf; an evil beast has consumed him", which referred to Yehudah, who is compared to a lion.

"beni alita" – you have removed yourself, when you said "what *betza* (=gain) is there if we kill our brother".

In Rashi's reading, Yaakov is not praising Yehudah for having repented of his actions in the sale, but rather for causing the sale – Yaakov, rather, repents for having suspected Yehudah of worse. This, in my humble opinion, seems a very difficult read, as repentance and change seem to be a key element of the Yehudah story. Perhaps we can say that Yaakov saw Yehudah's suggestion of the sale as a first step toward repentance.

Regardless, Rashi's reading seems directly opposed to the position of Rabbi Meir on Sanhedrin 6b:

"ובוצע ברך נאץ ה" –

רבי מאיר אומר: לא נאמר בוצע אלא כנגד יהודה, שנאמר "ויאמר יהודה אל אחיו מה בצע כי נהרג את אחינו" – וכל המברך את יהודה הרי זה מנאץ, ועל זה נאמר "ובצע ברך נאץ ה"

"uvotzeia beirakh has ?disgraced? Hashem" (Tehillim 10:3) –

Rabbi Meir says: The term 'botzeia' refers to Yehudah, as Scripture says "Yehudah said to his brothers: What *betza* (=gain) is there if we kill our brother" –

And anyone who blesses Yehudah is a disgracer, and about this Scripture says "one who blesses a *botzeia* has disgraces Hashem".

In case anyone missed the point, Rashi comments:

"כנגד יהודה" - שהיה לו לומר: 'נחזירנו לאבינו' אחרי שהיו דבריו נשמעין לאחיו

"Referring to Yehudah" – because he should have said 'Let us return him to our father', as his brothers were heeding him.

Now Rashi on Chumash is then explicitly rejecting Rabbi Meir, as he has Yaakov *blessing* Yehudah for *saying* "mah Betza"! This question is posed by Rabbi Chaim Paltiel, who cites R. Yehudah son of R. Natan as seeking to split the difference – Yehudah should be praised for saving Yosef from death, but nonetheless criticized for doing so on the ground that there was no gain in killing him.

"מטרף בני עלית" - פי' רש"י ממה שחשדתיך מיוסף דכתיב ביה טרף טורף יוסף סילקת עצמך ואמרת מה בצע. והר"א "כ משמע

דטיבותא הוא, ובפרק קמא דסנהדרין אמ' ובוצע ברך ניאץ יי, כל המברך את יהודה ואומר מה בצע אינו אלא מנאץ?! ותירץ ר' יהודה בר' נתן זצ"ל: דוודאי במה שהצילו מן המות יש לשבח, אבל במה שאמר מה בצע שנטה אחר הבצע דמשמע הא אם היה בצע היה טוב לעשות, בזה אמרו כל המברך.

But this answer seems true to neither Rashi on Chumash nor to the Talmud.

Why, then, does Rashi on Chumash reject Rabbi Meir, and so directly? What is his motive? Rashi himself mentions the story of Tamar as well, and most rishonim simply assume that for Rabbi Meir, Yaakov is blessing Yehudah only for Tamar. Perhaps Rashi, in direct contrast to Rashbam, thought that any reading of the verse which did not refer to Yosef demonstrated ignorance of Biblical style.

I think that would be insufficient. Rather, I think that Rabbi Meir was well aware of the standard Rabbinic interpretation of Yaakov's *blessing*, and set out to oppose it, and Rashi maintained it in full ideological consciousness. So what is really at stake here?

Rabbi Meir's statement is cited by the Talmud as an apparent tangent in a discussion of *pesharah* = *betziah* = *splitting* = *compromise* as a mode of judicial practice. Perhaps, though, Rashi understood that it was not really a tangent – rather, for Rabbi Meir, Yehudah is a Biblical model of compromise. “You want to kill Yosef, but maybe that would be wrong – so let's sell him instead.” This Rabbi Meir condemns forcefully – there should be no compromise with evil. And in every court case, by implication, strict justice should win as well.

It is hard for me to believe that Rashi thinks that Yehudah did the right thing by saying “Mah betza”, rather than standing against his brothers' evil plan. But Rashi may think – and I find his compelling – that it was the first step toward Yehudah's redemption. I think Rashi then goes one step farther, arguing that Yaakov could bless him for it even though it was wrong.

This last step is worthy of a major ideological battle – can/should we bless people for choosing the lesser evil when the good is available?

In practice, the question is usually slightly different – is it worth engaging with people, communities, or countries in the hope of getting them to choose the lesser evil, of achieving a “mah betza” moment, and the further hope that this moment will eventually lead to complete transformation, or is it better to simply identify them as evil and stand against them?

Shabbat shalom

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