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COMPROMISING EVILS

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The “blessings” that Yaakov gives his sons are written as what we tend to call “poetry.” Yet they are clearly not all positive, so why are they blessings? And how does calling something “poetry” help us understand it?

Here is one possibility. “Prose” aims at syntactic clarity, using grammar and punctuation to minimize ambiguity. Poetry, by contrast, may seek to maximize ambiguity, and specifically to take advantage of grammar and punctuation to create ambiguity.

Punctuation is a complicated term with regard to Torah. The implications of the cantillation marks do not correspond to contemporary symbols such as the question mark or exclamation point. A closer analogy may be the line break in poetry. Poets often use enjambment, the technique in which a line break occurs in the middle of a semantic unit, to create a meaning in the first line which is different than what it means as part 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.” However, because Yaakov’s reaction to being shown Yosef’s bloody tunic was “*tarof taraf Yosef*” (37:33), we are tempted to read across the break here and translate “from the *teref* of my son/you have arisen.”

Rashbam resists this temptation mightily. He 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 punctuation or the cantillation breaks at all.

This harshness is surprising, as essentially the entire Rabbinic tradition sees in verse 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.) Perhaps he was motivated by anti-anti-Semitism.

Regardless, many Rishonim read this verse as a reference to the sale even without ignoring the line break. 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.” The technique of reading a word as if it appears twice shows up regularly in rabbinic reading, but I think it is particularly compelling when the word occurs at a line break in poetry.

There is a second level of objection to seeing a reference to the sale of Yosef in our verse. On what basis can we claim that Yaakov knew about the sale? 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:

It seems more reasonable

that Yaakov never considered that the brothers would harm Yosef such that he would suspect one of them of having done so but the words of the Sages are words of Tradition.

We can accept the Tradition as self-justifying. Alternatively, we can seek to justify it. Perhaps Yaakov was speaking semi-consciously, with prophetic insight that he did not himself fully understand. Or perhaps Yaakov had suspicions, but they were allayed when Yosef turned out to be alive. The verse describes Yehudah, in Yaakov’s mind, as having risen above the **suspicion** of having harmed Yosef.

Rashi interprets “*alita*” as “rising above suspicion,” but nonetheless asserts that Yaakov knew full well that Yehudah had advised the sale.

“מטרף” –

ממה שחשדתיך ב”טרף טרף יוסף חיה רעה אכלתהו;”

זוהו יהודה שנמשל לאריה:

“בני עלית” –

סלקת את עצמך ואמרת “מה בצע וגו”

“Miteref” –

from that which I suspected you of regarding “Surely tarof taraf Yosef; an evil beast ate him,”

which referred to Yehudah, who is compared to a lion.

“beni alita” –

You removed yourself when you said “what betza (=gain) is there if we kill our brother”.

Yaakov is not praising Yehudah for having repented of the sale; rather, Yaakov is repenting for having suspected Yehudah of worse.

This, in my humble opinion, is 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.

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”

“*A botzeia who blesses has disgraced Hashem*” (Tebillim 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 to Sanhedrin 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.

Rashi on Chumash is therefore explicitly rejecting Rabbi Meir, as he has Yaakov **blessing** Yehudah for saying “mah Betza?”

Rabbi Chaim Paltiel 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 only because there was no gain in killing him. This answer seems true neither to Rashi on Chumash nor to the Talmud.

Perhaps Rashi thought that according to Rabbi Meir, our verse refers only to the episode with Tamar and not at all to the sale. Perhaps Rashi, in direct contrast to Rashbam, thought that any reading of the verse that misses the allusion to the sale demonstrated ignorance of Biblical style. But I suggest instead that Rabbi Meir consciously opposed the standard Rabbinic interpretation of Yaakov’s blessing, and Rashi consciously set out to restore it. Both Rabbi Meir and Rashi were motivated by ideological convictions.

What is really at stake here?

Rabbi Meir’s statement is cited on Sanhedrin 6b in the context of its discussion of *pesharah*=*betziyah*=splitting=compromise as a mode of judicial practice. Perhaps Rabbi Meir saw Yehudah as a Biblical model of compromise: “You want to kill Yosef, but maybe that would be wrong – so let’s sell him instead.” Rabbi Meir condemns Yehudah forcefully – there should be no compromise with evil. By implication, strict justice should rule in every court case.

Rashi doesn’t think that Yehudah did “the right thing” by saying “Mah betza,” rather than standing against his brothers’ evil plan. But he may think – and I find this compelling – that suggesting the compromise was Yehudah’s first step toward repentance and redemption. Rashi then goes one step farther. He argues that Yaakov could bless Yehudah for suggesting the compromise **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 morally deficient people, communities, or countries in the hope of getting them to choose the lesser evil, of achieving a “mah betza” moment, and in the further hope that such moments will eventually lead to complete transformation? Or is it better to simply identify evil and stand against it?