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YOSEF WAS NOT MODERN ORTHODOX: OR, THE ART OF MORAL POLITICS

Rabbi Aryeh Klapper, Dean

Yosef was not a Modern Orthodox Jew, or at least not the kind of Modern Orthodox Jew I aspire to be. He lived a bifurcated rather than an integrated life, with different names for different environments, and constantly (at best) balancing his own values against the interests of his masters.

Those were the good times. When the brothers show up in Egypt, Yosef faces the harder challenge of dual loyalties. Now he has to balance not only values against interests, but interests against interests. His testing of his brothers may be an understandable expression of his hope that they are not worthy of deep loyalty, and therefore unlikely to force him into hard and deeply uncomfortable positions. A similar dynamic may explain some aspects of American Jews' relationship with the State of Israel.

Yehudah's task in the monologue that opens Parashat VaYigash is to bring Yosef to the point where he is willing to confront that challenge. Bereishis Rabbah 93:4 offers two powerful, beautiful, and complementary metaphors to explain how Yehudah accomplishes this.

A. Scripture writes (Proverbs 20): "Deep waters are the eitzah in the heart of man, but a man of tevunah can draw it up" – This can be compared to a deep well of cool water, with its waters cool and clear, from which no one could drink. A man came and tied rope to rope and string to string and thread to thread, drew water up from it, and drank.

Then everyone began to draw and drink.

So too – Yehudah did not leave off responding to Yosef, matter after matter, until he was "omeid al libo."

B. Scripture writes (Proverbs 25) "Golden apples in silver filigree – a word spoken al ofanav" –

Just as a wheel (ofan) shows a face in all directions, so too the words of Yehudah were nir'im lekhoh tzad when he spoke with Yosef.

The first metaphor – which the rabbis elsewhere use reflexively, to describe the role of metaphors in teaching philosophy – teaches that Yehudah's words must be read as psychologically sequential, as leading Yosef step-by-step through the emotional stages that will enable him to acknowledge his family.

The second metaphor – here I will be reflexive – can itself be understood in multiple ways.

One meaning, offered by R. Chiyya bar Abba (B.R. 93:6), is that Yehudah conveyed different emotional content to different audiences simultaneously.

א"ר חייא בר אבא:

כל הדברים שאת קורא שדיבר יהודה ליוסף בפני אחיו עד שאת מגיע "ולא יכול יוסף להתאפק", היה בהם פיוס ליוסף, ופיוס לאחיו, ופיוס לבנימין:

Said R. Chiyya bar Abba:

All the words you read that Yehudah spoke to Yosef before his brothers up until "Yosef could not etc." included appeasement toward Yosef, toward his brothers, and toward Binyamin:

פיוס ליוסף,

לומר ראו היך הוא נותן נפשו על בניה של רחל, פיוס לאחיו, לומר ראו היאך הוא נותן נפשו על אחיו,

פיוס לבנימין,

אמר לו כשם שנתתי נפשי עליך, כך אני נותן נפשי על אחיך,

toward Yosef:
 See how I offer my life for a son of Rachel;
 toward his brothers:
 see how he offers his life for his brothers;
 toward Binyamin:
 just as I offer my life for you, so too I (?would?) offer my life for
 your brother(s?)

A second meaning, offered by Rashi, is that Yehudah conveyed a range of possible meanings to Yosef simultaneously.

דבר באזני אדני- יכנסו דברי באזניך:
 ואל יחר אפרך- מכאן אתה למד שדבר אליו קשות:
 כי כמוך כפרעה-
 א.חשוב אתה בעיני כמלך.
 זה פשוטו.
 ב.ומדרשו:
 סופך ללקות עליו בצרעת,
 כמו שלקה פרעה על ידי זקנתי שרה על לילה אחת
 שעכבה.
 ג.דבר אחר:
 מה פרעה גוזר ואינו מקיים, מבטיח ואינו עושה, אף אתה
 כן –
 וכי זו היא שימת עין שאמרת לשום עינך עליו!?
 ד.דבר אחר:
 “כי כמוך כפרעה” –
 אם תקניטני, אהרוג אותך ואת אדוניך:
 “A word in my master’s ears” – may my words enter your ears
 “and let your wrath not flare”- from here you learn that he spoke
 harsh things to him
 “for you and Pharaoh are alike” –
 a. I regard you as equal to a king.
 This is its pshat.
 b. But its midrash is:
 You will eventually be plagued with tzora’at over him,
 just as Pharaoh was plagued with tzora’at regarding his
 foremother Sarah for the one night he detained her
 c. Another interpretation:
 Just as Pharaoh decrees but does not fulfill, promised but does not
 act, so too you –
 is this the ‘placing of eyes on’ that you intended when saying I
 will place my eyes on him’?
 d. Another interpretation:
 “For you and Pharaoh are alike” –
 if you antagonize me, I will kill you and your master

Each of these are necessary tactics. Yehudah cannot himself expose Yosef, lest Yosef respond defensively and seek to demonstrate his Egyptian loyalty by rejecting his brothers. Nor can he risk having the rest of the brothers abandon Binyamin – and thereby let Yosef justify abandoning all of them– or even worse, having Binyamin turn on the brothers.

At the same time, Yehudah has to give Yosef a motive for changing. Yosef has known all along who the brothers are, and not dropped the charade that they are strangers, so Yehudah has to find the right combination of carrots and sticks to enable Yosef to find the courage to expose himself.

What encourages Yehudah, I suggest, is that Yosef has already exposed himself to at least one Egyptian. Somebody had to plant the cup in Binyamin’s bag (as Bekhor Shor notes, with Ramban following in his wake), and that someone both makes Yosef vulnerable and demonstrates that at least in part he wants that vulnerability.

The art of moral politics, and the aim of moral political rhetoric, is often to get people to act in accordance with what they already believe but cannot find the courage to act on. Sometimes that requires jettisoning an alluring but deceptive complexity for the sake of moral clarity – this was the teshuvah-process of Yehudah, and his hardwon clarity enables him to bring all his powers to bear on the task of winning over Yosef. Sometimes, as for Yosef here, it requires facing complexity at the expense of an alluring but disingenuous clarity.

Modern Orthodoxy in America faces both these challenges; may we, as we read Yehudah’s words and Yosef’s reaction, be inspired to meet both with courage and integrity.

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