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IS "Please Obey Me" AN OXYMORON?
by Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

All initially creative modes of reading can be reduced to algorithms given enough examples. The general problem is that "all the good ones are taken" by the time we have enough examples to reverse-engineer the algorithm, so the algorithm isn't of much use – it provides weak or at best humdrum applications of the method. But that may be a good thing, because coming up with one of the good ones directly rather than algorithmically is a heady experience that we should want as many people as possible to have as many times as possible. Let me therefore warn you that this essay provides algorithms that might diminish your chance of that experience.

One algorithm for producing midrash is this: Take a word which has multiple connotations or meanings, bonus points if these connotations or meanings are antonymic. Find a place where the context seems to suggest one of these connotations or meanings, and plug in the other, and see where it leads you.

Take for example the word נא/*na*. According to Ibn Shoshan's Concordance, *na* can have the implication either of "please" or of exhortation = "do it!". When the associated verb is in the future, the meaning is "please"; when the associated verb is in the command, or hortative, the meaning is usually an exhortation, an intensifier of the command.

However, Midrash Tanchuma on the Akeidah declares that "*na* is always a language of request" with reference to a verb in the hortative.

He said: Take na *your son* -
"*na*" is always a language of request.
A parable:
Compare this to a flesh-and-blood king facing many battles,
who had a warrior who had won all his battles.
After a time a great battle faced him.
The king said to that warrior:
"My request of you is that you stand for me in this battle,
so that my officers won't say: 'All those earlier battles were meaningless'."
So too, the Holy Blessed One said to Avraham:
"I tested you with nine tests and you withstood them;
now, withstand this test for Me so that they won't say: 'The earlier ones were meaningless'."

Neither this *mashal* nor its relationship to the *nimshal* are clear to me here. I don't for example know why the risk to the king is what his officers will say, rather than simply losing the war. I am nonetheless confident that the midrash is trying to play down the element of commandedness. The king must ask, not demand. Maybe the warrior/Avraham has earned retirement, or maybe some things just can't reasonably be demanded.

We can take this algorithm and apply it to a *na* in this week's parshah. Avraham addresses his *eved*/slave when sending him off to find a wife for Yitzchak:

Place *na* your hand underneath my thigh.

Here, too, the point would be to reduce the element of command. Why would we want to understand Avraham as requesting rather than demanding? One midrash speculates that the slave, identified as Eliezer, at one point reasonably expected to inherit his childless master, as Avraham may declare in 15:3 (although Pesikta Zutrata identifies the presumptive heir as Lot). Although he has since been superseded by Yishmael and then Yitzchak, he retains the hope of joining Avraham's family by marrying his daughter to Yitzchak. Avraham cannot command him to undertake a mission intended to end that hope forever – he can only ask.

Here we can introduce another algorithm, one that produces "modern" readings. What if this sort of midrash can only introduce a harmony rather than replace the tune? In other words, maybe *na* here, and at the Akeidah, means that the command had an element of request, not that Avraham was genuinely free to say no to G-d, or that the slave was genuinely free to decline Avraham's mission.

I think this is true regardless of the semantic intent of *na*. Real power turns every request into a command, an offer that you can't refuse. It would take incredible trust to say "No" to a being with arbitrary life-or-death power over you just because they said you could choose.

On the other hand, ultimately every human being is free to choose. No one can make you do anything – they can only punish you for not doing it. Therefore, almost all commands

are requests on some level, because a sane king would rather be obeyed than punish.

Moreover, power over groups of people is always fragile, subject to shattering if more people disobey than you can effectively punish. So obedience is a gift to the commander that enables further commands. Every command therefore carries an implied request for obedience.

Here we can introduce yet another algorithm, which might yield post-Modern readings. When the text can be understood in more than one way, assign the different understandings to different characters in the text.

So Avraham may really have believed that he was giving his *slave* a choice, just as G-d had done everything He could to make Avraham believe that he could say no to the Akeidah. But from the slave's perspective, there is nothing the master can do to make it a choice, because the master still has the power to punish. From the slave's perspective, the master can only give him a choice about THIS if he is freed to make all choices. So long as the relationship is one of *slave* and master, there is no free choice. Moreover, the *slave* can't even let the master know this, lest the master be offended at not being unconditionally trusted.

With these understandings, we can generate another algorithm, which is to recognize that interactions affected by power always have misunderstandings baked in, and are almost never capable of being grounded in perfect trust. Understanding an interaction properly therefore requires correctly identifying the power dynamics involved.

For example: At the outset of this week's parshah, do we see Avraham as a weak guest of the Hittites begging for a plot to bury his wife? On that understanding, it seems very likely that he is being overcharged exorbitantly for the land, and every delaying tactic of the Hittites is emotional abuse designed to get him to agree to the price. Alternatively, Avraham remains the man who, together with his allies, defeated an invading empire, and whose G-d punished both the Phillistine and Egyptian royal houses on behalf of the woman he is now asking to bury. The Hittites may have had very clear rules that only their own could be buried in their cemeteries, and here the powerful warlord Avraham was demanding a section set aside just for him and his family. So they stalled and dithered and perhaps tried to pretend the land was worth much more than its market value until Avraham made them an offer they could not refuse.

Based on our previous algorithm, it should be clear that these understandings are not mutually exclusive. The Hittites and Avraham may each have genuinely understood themselves to be negotiating from a position of weakness. That would be in character for Avraham, who went into both Gerar and Egypt believing that his safety required risking Sarah.

We can read this sort of misunderstanding into many elements of Yaakov Avinu's career as well. For example, Yaakov expresses fear after the massacre of Shekhem that his family will be slaughtered, but the actual effect is that all the surrounding peoples are too intimidated to consider imposing any consequences.

We might see that intimidation as a great thing, and criticize Yaakov for his fearfulness. The Torah never explicitly states that Shimon and Levi's actions were unjustifiable. Yaakov rebukes them, but they get the last word in our parshah. However, Yaakov's deathbed "blessings" to Shimon and Levi in Parshat Vayechi clearly indicates that his final judgment was harsh.

I wonder whether in the immediate aftermath, Yaakov wondered whether they had been right. After all, the practical consequences for his family seemed to be a period of relative calm.

What eventually turned Yaakov against Shimon and Levi was his realization that the massacre of Shekhem led to the near-murder and actual sale of their brother Yosef into slavery. It may be better to be feared than loved, but it is not good to love being feared. People who love being feared will likely express this love of power in all relationships.

Shabbat shalom!

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