YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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INTRODUCTION TO PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT VAYESHEV

Who Sold Yosef?

By Rav Michael Hattin

INTRODUCTION

With the reading of Parashat Vayeshev, the focus of the Torah now shifts from the Patriarch Ya'akov and his travails to the account of his beloved son Yosef. The story of Yosef and of his brothers will occupy the remainder of Sefer Bereishit, making this narrative the longest of the book by far. As the tale breathlessly unfolds, we are both riveted by its sheer dramatic effects, as well as inspired by its noble and profound messages. Yosef's initial meteoric rise from the sheepfolds to the administration of Potiphar's estate, his temporary fall into undeserved ignominy and wrongful imprisonment, and his unexpected recovery to become Viceroy of Egypt and sustainer of his family are all stuff of which great stories are spun, but there is much more here than simply adventure, intrigue and political triumph. The story of Yosef is actually the convoluted tale of how a young man (or woman) may transcend selfish and immature egocentrism to yet stand in the presence of God, and how in the midst of human choices great and small the guiding hand of His providence may yet be discerned.

In years past, we have explored some of these broader themes quite exhaustively, and readers are invited to peruse earlier articles available in the archives. This week, our concerns will be quite narrow and perhaps even pedantic, as we closely examine a small series of verses that are seemingly tangential to the main account, and entirely unimportant in the larger scheme of things. We will discover, if nothing else, that for the traditional sources and for the commentaries, there is nothing in the Torah – as the revealed word of God – that is unworthy of close scrutiny and study.

THE FIRST SECTION OF THE PARASHA

We begin by tracing the outlines of the Parasha's first section. Having safely returned from the northeast land of Charan, escaping both Lavan's vengeance as well as Esav's settling of scores along the way, Ya'akov and his family reestablish themselves in the Canaanite hill country near Chevron, and return to their traditional calling of nomadic shepherding. But while the brothers are content to mind the flocks, never allowing their minds to venture much farther than the dusty horizons of the rock-strewn hills, tender Yosef is made of other stuff. Early recognized by his doting father as a natural leader and potential heir, Yosef dreams of greatness and accomplishment, and receives the precious coat of many colors as a pledge of his future prospects. But Yosef's immature arrogance, perhaps also his position as the firstborn progeny of Rachel the sister and life-long rival of their own mother Leah, soon sets him on a fatal collision course with his brothers. Biding their time as they feed their animosity, the brothers wait for an opportunity to strike, and it is not long in coming. Seeking greener pastures in the more verdant northern hill country of Shekhem, the brothers set out with the flocks while beloved Yosef remains at home under Ya'akov's watchful gaze. But the old father, inexplicably stricken with a sudden and anxious concern for their welfare, soon sends him in their direction, scarcely realizing that in so doing he will unwittingly unleash a chain of events that will trigger his adored son's anguished separation from him and estrangement from the other brothers for a period of twenty-two years!

...Yosef followed his brothers and found them in Dotan. They saw him from afar, and before he had come near to them, they prepared a plan to kill him. Each one said to his fellow: "behold, here comes this master of dreams! Now, let us kill him and throw his body into one of these pits, and we shall report that a wild beast has consumed him. Then we shall see what becomes of his dreams!" But Reuven heard and saved him from their clutches, for he said: "let us not take his life." Reuven further said to them: "do not spill blood, but rather throw him into this pit in the wilderness so that you do not kill him directly," for he intended to save him and to return him to his father (37:17-22).

Their nefarious preparations now in place, the brothers seize Yosef as soon as he arrives. Gleefully, they strip him of the insufferable coat of many colors, the reviled symbol of their father's favoritism, and then Yosef is summarily cast into the pit. The brothers calmly recline to take their meal, even as Yosef's muffled screams grow fainter and more despairing, and then a caravan unexpectedly appears on the horizon:

...they lifted up their eyes and saw that, behold, a caravan of Yishma'elites was arriving from Gil'ad, and their camels were bearing spices, balm and ladanum that they intended to take down to Egypt. Yehuda said to his brothers: "what profit is there in killing our brother and concealing the crime? Let us rather sell him to the Yishma'elites and not send forth our hand against him for he is our brother and our flesh," and the brothers concurred.

ATTEMPTING TO TRACE THE SALE

The account seems straightforward enough. As Yosef approaches, the brothers initially plan to kill him but are dissuaded from doing so by the intervention of Reuven. He convinces them instead to cast him into a pit in the wilderness, presumably so that he will die of exposure, thirst and hunger, while he secretly intends to later rescue him and escort him back home. But Reuven's bold and noble plan is foiled by the sudden arrival of a caravan of Yishma'elites heading southwards. These camel-riding desert nomads, who traversed the desolate trade routes from Egypt to Damascus and on to Mesopotamia, plying along the way their precious wares of spices and perfumes, are now flagged down by Yehuda himself, who makes them an offer that they cannot refuse. And thus it is that for a price of twenty pieces of silver, the Yishma'elites agree to take on another piece of cargo – a sturdy Hebrew slave that they can profitably peddle on the Egyptian market, now delivered to their care by none other than his own brothers!

But here the matter grows more murky, for where we expected Yishma'elites to seamlessly conclude the sale, we discover instead the involvement of Midianites in their stead! After Yehuda's convincing argument to his brothers to "rather sell him to the Yishma'elites and not send forth our hand against him for he is our brother and our flesh," the text indicates that

Midianite merchant men passed by and they drew forth and raised Yosef from the pit and they sold Yosef to the Yishma'elites for twenty pieces of silver and they brought Yosef to Egypt (37:28).

Who then sold Yosef, who bought him and from whom? Did the brothers sell him to the Midianite middlemen who then sold him on to the Yishma'elite traders? Or did the passing Midianites arrive on the scene (attracted by his plaintive cries) and themselves draw Yosef out before the brothers, surreptitiously selling him on to the Yishma'elites? The difficulties are compounded by the reappearance of Reuven, who, the text reports, "returned to the pit and behold Yosef was not there in the pit, and he rent his clothing. He returned to his brothers and said: ‘the lad is gone, and as for me where shall I go?!'" (37:29-30). Where, exactly, had Reuven gone in the interim? Why was he absent from the sale of Yosef? Why didn't the brothers react, except to take the hated coat and dip it into the blood of a freshly slaughtered goat (37:31)? Most puzzlingly, the end of the narrative fails to dispel any of the earlier confusion concerning the circumstances of Yosef's sale, for it unequivocally concludes with the observation that: "the Medanites sold him to Egypt, to Potiphar the minister of Pharaoh, the chief executioner" (37:36)!

The story of Yosef is now interrupted by a protracted description of Yehuda's exploits concerning Tamar that occupies all of Chapter 38. But when the thread of the narrative is again picked up, even further textual turmoil is sown, for now the text reports that Yosef had been peddled to Potiphar not by the Midianites, but rather by the Yishma'elites: "And Yosef was brought down to Egypt, and he was purchased by Potiphar the minister of Pharaoh, from the hand of the Yishma'elites who had brought him down to there..." (39:1). Thus, just as we encountered confusion concerning the first part of the sale involving the brothers' transfer of Yosef, we now encounter more confusion concerning the last part of the sale involving his transfer to the possession of Potiphar. How to begin resolving the disarray?

THE RESOLUTION OF THE IBN EZRA

Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra (12th century, Spain), in comments later echoed by Rabbi David Kimchi (Radak, 13th century, Provence) as well, provides what is surely the simplest and most straightforward solution. "The merchant Yishma'elites are themselves Midianites, for so is it stated in Sefer Shoftim 8:24 concerning the kings of Midian that they were Yishma'elites..." (commentary to 37:28). In other words, avers the Ibn Ezra, the Yishma'elites and the Midianites are one and the same; sometimes the text refers to them as Yishma'elites and sometimes as Midianites. Ibn Ezra's explanation has the distinct advantage of harmonizing all of the above texts and simplifying immensely the mechanics of the sale. According to his reading, Yehuda suggests the plan of selling Yosef to the passing caravan of Yishma'elites as an alternative to indirect murder, the brothers readily agree, and the sale is then consummated. The Yishma'elites pay the brothers twenty pieces of silver, take and transfer the captive to Egypt, and there he is purchased by Potiphar and enters his employ.

The seeming confusion concerning the sellers and the sale is therefore without basis, but Ibn Ezra still must demonstrate how Yishma'elites and Midianites can be identical. This he does by adducing a proof text from the Book of Judges. There, the judge Gid'on of Menashe is described as battling a vast force of nomadic Midianites who had infiltrated the Eframite hill country with their tents, flocks of sheep, and camels, despoiling the land like a proverbial plague of locusts. After miraculously defeating them, Gid'on rashly fashioned a cultic memorial out of gold, an object that later was venerated by the misguided Israelites as a god. The gold for the fetish was secured from the booty of battle, for Gid'on had requested his men to contribute the golden nose rings and earrings that they had won from the Midianites. But, surprisingly the text in Sefer Shoftim tells us that the latter had "rings of gold, for they were Yishma'lites..." (Shoftim 8:24). Ergo, Midianites are equivalent to Yishma'elites.

If we are to reconstruct the genealogy of the Yishma'elites, we must surely assume that they are the descendents of Yishma'el, Avraham's wayward son from the maidservant Hagar. Recall that at Sarah's behest, Hagar and Yishma'el had been banished, and had left the environs of Be'er Sheva and wandered southwards towards the border of Egypt. Mother and son then become lost and were only saved as a result of Divine intervention. But desert dwellers they remained, for the lad "grew up in the wilderness and became an archer. He dwelt in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother took for him a wife from the land of Egypt" (Bereishit 21:20-21). Thus, according to the text of the Torah, Yishma'el (and presumably his descendents) wandered in the vast and arid wastelands of the Negev and Sinai, and established connections of kin and commerce with Egypt to the south. It would not require a great leap of faith to imagine their entry at some point into the lucrative international trade that passed through their lands with the dusty camel caravans.

As for the Midianites (and the Medanites – see Bereishit 37:36), they were also descendents of Avraham, from his later marriage to Ketura whom he took as a wife after the death of Sarah (Bereishit 25:1-2). Significantly, the text in Bereishit 25:6 states that Avraham sent this wife and her children away to the "lands of the east" while he was still alive, in order to preclude any later struggles over the transfer of his inheritance and of his legacy to Yitzchak his true son. The eastern lands, beyond the Transjordanian hills, are also dry, sparse and desolate, for the Syrian and Arabian deserts there begin and stretch interminably, almost all the way to the banks of the Euphrates. And thus it was that the Midianites, like their Yishma'elite kin to the southwest, also became nomadic herders of flocks, and dedicated denizens of the desert. Again, it does not require oracular powers to predict their eventual entry into the international market, but this time securing it from the Mesopotamian base.

Taken together, the assumptions underlying Ibn Ezra's explanation are certainly plausible, and provide a reasonable explanation for the confusing switching of the names. The Radak elaborates and takes the further step of cementing the bond between the Yishma'elites and Midianites by maintaining that cordial relations and tribal marriage existed between the two groups. According to their reading, then, the brothers were fully aware of their role in the sale, freely concluded the transaction, and were thus absolutely culpable in the dastardly deed. And when the verse states that "they drew forth and raised Yosef from the pit and they sold Yosef to the Yishma'elites for twenty pieces of silver" (37:28), the indefinite pronouns refer exclusively to the brothers. The only puzzling detail that remains concerns Reuven's absence from the proceedings, for Radak unconvincingly explains that he "did not realize that the brothers had sold him but instead thought that he had been stolen from the pit" (commentary to 37:30).

THE COMMENTARY OF THE RASHBAM

While it may seem reasonable to assume a cohesive kinship between the Yishma'elites and Midianites and even a common culture and livelihood, a complete and utter merging of identities seems somewhat forced. And why would the Torah add an unnecessary element of confusion to the passage by constantly referring to the traders by two names? At the end of the day (unless we are to assume the existence of a traders' union!), the purchasers were either Yishma'elites or else Midianites, and if both groups were involved then one may have expected the Torah to have mentioned that fact at least once during the course of the passage. Rabbi Shemuel ben Meir (Rashbam, 12th century, France) therefore adopts a different approach, one that he believes represents the "profound straightforward reading" (commentary to 38:28).

Rashbam avers that indeed the brothers had thrown Yosef into the pit "that was in the wilderness" (37:22), but that they had then removed themselves from the location when they took their meal. After all, though their conduct was cruel, even they could not bear the dissonance of calmly partaking of bread while Yosef's anguished cries for help pierced the arid air. But as they eat out of earshot, they "lifted up their eyes" (37:25) and unexpectedly saw in the distance the outline of a camel caravan, suddenly realizing that the approaching Yishma'elites could solve their problem once and for all. Thus they resolved (at Yehuda's prodding) to sell their hapless brother down to Egypt and far away from them. But before the brothers were able to return to the pit and to extricate Yosef for sale, a passing band of Midianite traders serendipitously got there first, their attention drawn by his outcry. It was they who removed the startled lad from the pit and it was they who then sold him to the very Yishma'elites that the brothers had spied in the distance. By the time Reuven himself returned to the pit as reported in 37:29, hoping to preempt the sale by rescuing his brother, Yosef was already gone. Thus, Yosef was sold down to Egypt without the knowledge of the brothers (although certainly with their intent)! And when the verse reports that "Midianite merchant men passed by and they drew forth and raised Yosef from the pit and they sold Yosef to the Yishma'elites for twenty pieces of silver and they brought Yosef to Egypt" (37:28), all of the indefinite pronouns except for the last one refer to the Midianites.

Rashbam's commentary thus has the distinct advantage of explaining the constant switches in name as well as the absence of Reuven (and the other brothers) from the deed of sale. It somewhat mitigates their conduct as well, charging them with gross indifference rather than with being accomplices to the trafficking of their own brother. According to the Rashbam, we can clearly see in our mind's eye as Reuven breathlessly returns to his brothers to report that Yosef is missing (37:29), only to have his anxious words (37:30) met with steely silence, utter apathy and then the ritual dipping of the coat in the blood of the goat (37:31)!

And if in fact the brothers were not directly involved in Yosef's sale but it was instead the work of the Midianites, then the Rashbam has also admirably succeeded in explaining Yosef's pained outburst much later in the narrative. After he is imprisoned by Potiphar on trumped-up charges of rape, Yosef languishes interminably until Providence sends him salvation in the guise of the baker and the butler. The two ministers of Pharaoh had themselves been cast into prison for having offended the capricious sensibilities of the god king, and there Yosef interprets their dreams. Realizing that the butler will soon be released, he pleads with him to remind Pharaoh of his unfair incarceration, underlying the injustice of it all with the exclamation that "I have surely been stolen from the land of the Hebrews, and I have done nothing to warrant being placed in this prison!" (40:15). "Stolen" of course, by the Midianites who had rescued him from the pit only to themselves then sell him for a profit. And thus it is that the "Midianites sold him to Egypt, to Potiphar..." (37:36) since they were the instruments directly behind his transfer to foreign lands, while it was the "Yishma'elites who brought him down to there" (39:1).

Both the Ibn Ezra as well as the Rashbam therefore attempt to resolve textual difficulties that cannot be ignored by any serious student of the Torah. Though we often tend to focus upon the profound or else inspiring lessons of the Torah (as we rightly ought to), the commentaries occasionally remind us that we must not ignore the rigorous analysis of the text itself. The very first step in plumbing the depths of the Torah's profundities must be the acquisition of a solid understanding of the straightforward reading. This includes attention to grammar, syntax, vocabulary and the wider context. It is only from there that we may reasonably proceed to the more "glamorous" pursuits of seeking meaning in the narrative, guidance for the heart and balm for the soul.

Shabbat Shalom

For further study: for a brilliant analysis of the Yishma'elite/Midianite issue that is predicated upon the textual (although not theological) conclusions demanded by the modern method of source study, and for the related discussion of the role of the brothers versus the role of Providence in bringing about Yosef's descent to Egypt, see the article of Rabbi Mordechai Breuer in volume 2 of his seminal work "Pirkei Bereishit."