

Mishnat Hashavua': Bikurim 3:7

Rabbi Daniel Nevins, Pearl Resnick Dean, The Rabbinical School, JTS.

How do we balance the integrity of a ritual with the need to invite participation by the masses?

Originally, they used to allow any [farmer] who wished to recite the passage [i.e., the lengthy first-fruits declaration from Deuteronomy 26:5 in Hebrew] to recite. But for those who didn't know how to recite, the [priests] would recite [and the farmers would repeat the words]. The [less educated farmers] stopped bringing the fruits [to avoid being humiliated in this way]. So it was decreed that the priests would recite for both those who knew and those who didn't know.

בְּרֵאשׁוֹנָה, כָּל מִי שִׁידַע לְקָרוֹת,
קוֹרֵא. וְכֹל מִי שֶׁאִינוּ יוֹדְעֵי לְקָרוֹת,
מִקְרִין אוֹתוֹ. נִמְנָעוּ מִלְתְּכִיבֵי, הַתְּקִינוּ
שִׁיהוּ מִקְרִין אֶת מִי שִׁידַע וְאֶת מִי
שֶׁאִינוּ יוֹדְעִים:

Comments

The Torah describes a first-fruit ritual in which the farmer must present the basket of fruit to the priest in Jerusalem and recite, "My father was a wandering Aramean . . ." The Torah is so explicit that the Rabbis understand this to be one of the few liturgies that must be said in Hebrew. But apparently Jewish farmers had trouble memorizing the texts. The original system created two classes: literate farmers who proudly chanted the text, and ignorant farmers who had to repeat after the priest like little schoolchildren. This public humiliation was deemed intolerable, and many farmers simply stopped bringing their first fruits to the Temple. In response, the entire ritual was adapted and made "user-friendly."

Questions

1. This Mishnah has also had a major impact on the format of our Torah service. Originally those called for *aliyot* were expected to chant from the scroll with only the ignorant relying on a substitute reader. The current practice of appointing an expert reader for all congregants alike is meant to spare less literate Jews from being humiliated. What does this teach us about the purpose of public prayer?
2. How did the sages protect both the integrity of the liturgy and the dignity of the participants?
3. How can we maintain the same balance today?

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Torah from JTS

Parashat Va-yiggash
December 15, 2007
6 Tevet 5768

Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Daniel Nevins, Pearl Resnick Dean of The Rabbinical School, JTS.

"And Joseph gave the [brothers] wagons, as Pharaoh had ordered, and he gave them supplies for the journey. To all of them, each one, he gave changes of garments, and to Benjamin he gave three hundred pieces of silver and five changes of garments." (Gen. 45:21-22, translation by Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*)

Gifts can make you crazy. Picking them is hard, and so is accepting them with grace. Gifts give pleasure, no doubt, but they also cause great jealousy. The problematic nature of gift giving is a key lesson of the Joseph story. If only Jacob could have found a more subtle way to show Joseph his love! That silly cloak caused decades of suffering.

Sitting in jail, Joseph must have reached the same conclusion. Starting out in his magnificent cloak he wound up stripped bare—shamed, beaten, threatened, and enslaved. In hindsight, was his tunic a gift or a curse? Joseph is an astute interpreter of dreams and a social engineer. Surely he can comprehend jealousy!

Thus, you have to wonder about Joseph's subsequent behavior. When he finally reveals himself after Judah's heart-rending soliloquy this week, Joseph demonstrates his forgiving and generous nature by giving gifts to his brothers. He picks out nice outfits for each of them, reminding them none-too-subtly of the clothes they had ripped off of him. Blatantly, he favors Benjamin with extra clothes—five sets instead of the single suits the other brothers received. What is Joseph playing at?

The Rabbis are alarmed by his conduct. In the Talmudic tractate *Megilah* 16b, they

ask, “How could the very same thing that caused this righteous man [i.e., Joseph] to be tormented now trip him up?” Joseph had suffered as a result of his father’s favoritism. Won’t the brothers now direct their jealousy at Benjamin and attack him? It seems crazy for Joseph to repeat the same dynamic.

The Talmudic commentator Maharsha (R. Samuel Eliezer Edels) says that the fact that Benjamin was his full brother would not suffice to blunt the other brothers’ jealousy. They would attribute the differential in gifts to Joseph’s anger at their betrayal of him. Isn’t it enough that Joseph also gives Benjamin 300 silver coins? At least that gift is hidden in his pocket. But these fancy clothes will remind everyone who sees them of the brothers’ shameful conduct. Some gift!

The Rabbis insist on finding a noble explanation for Joseph’s behavior. According to the Talmudic Rabbi Binyamin bar Yafet, the five sets of clothes that Joseph gives Benjamin are actually a hint of the five garments that will be worn by his distant descendant Mordecai, who is identified in the scroll of Esther as “*ish yemini*” or a Benjaminite. But even if we accept this imaginative explanation (note this rabbi’s first name!), it doesn’t really answer the original question. Whatever his motive, Joseph must know that the brothers will be jealous of Benjamin’s extravagant wardrobe.

Rabbeinu Bachya has an even more imaginative answer. The half-brothers “owe” Joseph for selling him into slavery. Thus Joseph simply deducts the value of their fine from his gift. Benjamin was not involved in that betrayal, so he received the gift’s full value. Fair is fair, and no hard feelings. This solution might (with great latitude) make some accounting sense, but it ignores the Talmud’s psychological concern. By giving Benjamin five sets of clothes, Joseph is provoking his half brothers to more jealousy. How can he do this to them, to Benjamin, and to his father?

I think that Joseph knows exactly what he is doing. His is a kind of behavior that Israelis call “*davka*.” We don’t have a great English word for this, but I’ll call it “in your face.” He is still testing (tormenting?) his brothers. When Judah offers to take Benjamin’s place in prison, he demonstrates repentance. But what about the other brothers? Have they learned to control their jealousy, or will they once again fall into a murderous jealous rage over some fancy threads? Like a dog trainer holding up a treat but ordering the dog to sit, Joseph is tempting his brothers, watching to see if they have learned self-control.

What do you think of Joseph’s conduct? Is he being vengeful or wise? Is he showing love for Benjamin or using him as a hapless pawn? I am afraid that Joseph seems like an analyst who views patients as fascinating puzzles rather than showing them love. He is acting *davka*—in opposition to human nature.

Rather than understanding jealousy and seeking to minimize its impact, Joseph uses jealousy as a test of virtue. This dynamic worsens at the parashah’s close when Joseph favors his family with choice land in Goshen but manipulates the Egyptian farmers into serfdom. This favoritism comes back to bite the Israelites as the Egyptians will soon strip them of their fancy garments and toss them into a new pit of enslavement.

It is no coincidence that the Ten Commandments conclude with the prohibition of coveting. It is exceptionally difficult to purge oneself of jealousy. How many people can succeed in such a trial? We should limit our exposure to jealousy, but should also avoid tempting others.

For this reason it behooves a decent person to avoid conspicuous consumption

and blatant displays of favoritism. Such behavior unleashes jealousy in even decent people and can lead to great suffering all around.

American Jews would be wise to learn this lesson. It can be tempting *davka* to lavish gifts on ourselves rather than reaching out to those who are in urgent need of our assistance. We need an opposite form of *davka*. The more comfortable we become, the more we should involve ourselves in the needs of the poor. *Davka* the wealthiest among us should be personally involved in poverty relief. This is not a form of noblesse oblige, but it is a necessity for us to live lives of goodness and tranquility. Only by becoming agents of justice and healing in society can we break the cycle of suffering and jealousy. Only by acting with compassion and fairness can we create a society at peace.

The publication and distribution of the JTS Commentary are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee and Harold (z"l) Hassenfeld.

A Taste of Torah

A Comment on Rashi by Rabbi Marc Wolf

As he sent his brothers off on their way, he told them, “Do not be quarrelsome on the way” (Gen. 45:24).

Rashi

“Do not be quarrelsome on the way.” Do not engage in a halakhic debate to ensure the road does not irritate you. Another explanation: Do not walk with large steps, and enter the city while the sun is shining (Ta’anit 10b). According to the simple meaning of the verse, we can say that since they were ashamed, he (Joseph) was concerned that they would perhaps quarrel on the way about his being sold, debating with one another, and saying, “Because of you he was sold. You slandered him and caused us to hate him.”

Comment

Here Rashi provides three distinct rationales for the command Joseph gives the brothers as they return to Jacob. What his comment clarifies is the scene we are not given. After these long years and this incredible drama in Egypt, the brothers return home. Our narrative does not include the journey home. Rashi has us imagine the conversation throughout the caravan. What would they speak of? How would they begin to create an understanding of what has transpired? Rashi’s three explanations are rooted in Joseph’s consciousness. He recognized that the journey would be difficult.

The brothers needed time to process what transpired and could not run away from the experience either literally or figuratively. Ignoring what transpired and engaging in “halakhic debate” or rushing through the journey without addressing their thoughts and feelings would negate Joseph’s aim of putting them on that journey. At the same time, the conversation could quickly deteriorate into levying blame. Along with Joseph, we hope the brothers have grown through their experience in Egypt.

The publication and distribution of A Taste of Torah are made possible by a generous grant from Sam and Marilee Susi.