

The Evil Eye – A National Emergency

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The book of Genesis, a book about families, closes with the death of one its beloved sons, Joseph. The book of Exodus, a book about the making of a nation, opens with the saga of the Egyptian oppression. The two are linked in that the exile came about as a punishment for the sale of Joseph.¹ Since it is axiomatic that God does not punish for punishment's sake, but rather to educate through the crucible of object lesson, Joseph holds the key to understanding the lesson, the key to transforming a family into a nation, and ultimately, the key to redeeming the nation.

As part of the divine plan to perfect the world, God, as it were, looked to transform individuals to families, and families to nations, whereby one nation would be “a light unto the nations.”² The families in Genesis, mired in internecine fighting, lacked the internal strength to become a nation. Even the select family, descending from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, lacked the requisite unity for the task. And so God appears to Jacob in a “vision of the night” saying, “I am the God of your father, fear not to go down to Egypt for I will make of you there a great nation” (Gen. 46:2-3). The “vision of the night” portends of dark times ahead,³ as does God's warning to “fear not.”⁴ Nevertheless, the going down to Egypt is promised to serve the goal of becoming “a great nation”.

Why was it necessary to go down to Egypt to become a great nation? God closes the vision with the words, “... and Joseph will put his hand on your eyes” (Gen. 46:4). I suggest that this promise serves as an allusion to Joseph's power over the “eye” which will help explain why the Jews had to be refined through the iron furnace that was Egypt to become a nation.

The Power of the Eye

Talmudic lore associates Joseph with “the eye”, specifically, “the evil eye”. In Jacob's deathbed blessing to Joseph, he proclaims, “Joseph is a fruitful vine, a fruitful vine by a fountain (*alei ayin*) ...” (Gen. 49:22). The Gemara (Baba Metzia 84a), in the name of R. Abbahu, states, “Don't read this as ‘by a fountain (*alei ayin*)’ but rather as ‘above the eye’ (*olei ayin*),” meaning that Joseph and his descendants are immune to the evil eye.⁵ The Gemara goes on to bring yet another verse to support this immunity: “and let them grow (*veyidagn*) into a multitude in the midst of the earth” (Gen. 48:16). R. Yossi Bar Hanina explains that, “just as fish (*dagim*) in the sea are covered by water such that the eye has no power over them, so too are the descendants of Joseph [protected such that] the eye has no power over them.” The Rabbis, through an amusing play on words, communicate the very serious ethic that Joseph is, somehow, above “the power of the eye”.

¹ Abarbanel (Hagada “Zevach Pesah”, s.v. Yodoa Teida; Ber. 15:12). He explains that the exile was a punishment for the brothers' sale of Joseph and to a lesser extent for the favoritism of Jacob and the tattletales of Joseph. It should be noted that this opinion is at odds with the Gem. (Ned. 32a) and explained by the Maharal (Gevurot Hashem, ch. 9-10). Be that as it may, no matter how one reads the Torah, Joseph is closely connected with Egypt experience.

² See R. A. Kaplan, *If You Were God*, p.16; R. M. C. Luzzatto, *Derech Hashem*, Part II, Ch. 4. “Light unto the Nations (Isaiah 42:6; 49:6); “Nations will walk in your light” (Isaiah 60:3).

³ Recanati (ad loc.); R.S.R. Hirsch (ad loc.).

⁴ One is not told ‘fear not’ unless he is afraid (Hizkuni, Gen. 46:3); also Abrabanel (Gen. 46:1).

⁵ Rashi (ad loc.).

What exactly is this “power of the eye” from which Joseph and his descendants are protected? The Gemara (Pes. 50b) teaches that “a person who trades in reeds and jars will never see a sign of blessing. What is the reason? Since their bulk is large, the eye has power over them.” The Gemara goes on to give a list of people who, due to their profession or actions, will not see a “sign of blessing”: “Traders in market-stands and those who breed small cattle and those who cut down beautiful trees, and those who cast their eyes at the better portion. What is the reason? People stare at them.” Rashi (ad loc.) explains that in each of these cases, people’s attention is drawn to them and thus “the eye has power over them.”

There is a school of thought that holds this power to operate on a mystical plane; nevertheless, others understand the “evil-eye” in purely rational terms. R. Kook (Ain Ayah, Ber. 20, p.120) explains that the evil eye is an influence that one person has on another. He writes that, while it is quite natural for people to be influenced by one another, everyone has the power to rise above the negative influences of others in two ways.⁶ The first way is to be cognizant of one’s self-worth, thus recognizing the worthless nature of external pressures. The second way is through a strong inner commitment to self-perfection, thus making oneself unsusceptible to external influences. From R. Kook’s description we can understand that the influence of the evil eye is not mystical but social, not psychic but psychological. Indeed, this school of thought understands the evil eye to be nothing more and nothing less than the highly destructive trait of jealousy.⁷

Consequently, the damage done by the evil eye is not that others bring ruin upon one’s good work, but rather, one brings it upon oneself. Being susceptible to jealousy is simply a reflection of one’s own jealousy. Furthermore, if the power of the eye is one’s own jealousy aggravated, as it were, by the jealousy of others, then the immediate antidote is to not flaunt what one has. This serves to strengthen the individual’s sense of self, as one gains an appreciation for one’s own achievements without the need for external endorsement. And thus we can understand the Gemara’s (Taanit 8b) advice to keep things “hidden from the eye”, as explains R. Yishmael, “Blessing is found only in that which the eye has no power over.” By developing a sense of self-worth one removes himself from “the power of the eye” and enjoys that with which he was blessed.

Conversely, by harboring jealousies one will never see a sign of blessing for he will never be happy with what he has. This is the trait of the “evil eye”, as R. Ovadya MiBartenura (Avot 2:11) explains: the evil eye is the psychological tendency to be dissatisfied with what one has. Furthermore, the individual possessed of the evil eye, writes R. Shimon ben Tzemaḥ Duran (Avot 5:19), “is distressed over the good that others have.” To avoid this trait, one of Rashi’s students, R. Yaakov Bar Shimshon (Avot 2:11) advises: In the way that a man views his wife, his children and his house [with no taint of jealousy], so should he view his friend’s home; for anyone who looks upon his friend’s money with an evil eye, loses his possessions and even himself, as it says: “a broken spirit dries the bones” (Proverbs 17:22) and “jealousy rots the bones” (Proverbs 14:30).

⁶ R. Kook (ibid.) parallels these two ways to the verses on Joseph as interpreted by the Gemara: “*olei ayin*” – being above the eye – hints to the high self worth which places the individual above the influence of others; “*vaydigu*” – being covered from the eye – hints to the hidden nature of the inner conviction of the individual.

⁷ See Tosfot Yom Tov (Avot 4:21), R. Matityah (Avot 3:14), Rashbatz (Avot 2:11); Sefat Emet (Avot 2:11).

This proverb – “jealousy rots the bones” – is explained by the Gemara (Shabbat 152b) to mean that “anyone who has jealousy in his heart: his bones rot, [and conversely,] anyone who has not jealousy in his heart: his bones rot not.” R. Y. Frand understands the relationship between “jealousy” and “bones” as follows:

A person who is jealous is fundamentally unhappy with who he is. He would much rather be someone else. He is unhappy with his wife. He is unhappy with his family. He is unhappy with his job. He is unhappy with his position. He wants to be someone else. He rejects who he is, his *atzmius*, his very essence. Therefore, he loses his *atzamos*, his bones, to decomposition.⁸

Bones, at the core of one’s being and responsible for one’s ability to stand on his own, are taken here to be symbolic of one’s self-confidence and inner conviction, one’s ability to stand firm, psychologically speaking. Jealousy reflects a lack of confidence and conviction which is symbolized in rotten bones.

Joseph

Returning to Joseph, we find him a paragon of self-confidence and inner conviction; from playground to plantation, from prison to palace, he didn’t have a jealous bone in his body. As a child he displayed these traits in his relations with his brothers, telling them unflinchingly of his dreams. When he was sold as a slave he maintained his self-confidence and rose to be the chief hired hand. There, due to his strong moral convictions, he resisted the seductions of his master’s wife. Then, upon being thrown into prison under false accusations, he accepted the situation with unflappable equanimity and rose, once again, to the highest position available. And finally, when he was called for an audience before Pharaoh, though brought in as a jailed foreigner, he evinced the confidence and conviction of a prince and was, as such, appointed Viceroy, second only to Pharaoh himself.

Joseph maintained his sterling character to the very end. After Jacob died, the brothers expressed great fear that Joseph would now avenge himself against them for the sale: “It may be that Joseph will hate us, and will fully requite us all the evil which we did unto him” (Gen. 50:15). Joseph, however, bore no ill will, responding: “Fear not, for am I in God’s stead? ... You thought evil against me, but God meant it for good” (Gen. 50:19-20). The book ends a few verses later with Joseph’s last will and testament:

And Joseph took an oath of the children of Israel, saying: God will surely remember you, and ye shall carry up my bones from hence. So Joseph died, being a hundred and ten years old. And they embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt.

(Gen. 50:25-26)

Joseph, like his father Jacob, relays the prophetic message of redemption (Gen. 48:21). And Joseph, like his father, makes the next generation swear to bury him in the land of Israel. However Joseph words his oath very differently, making them swear to “bring up his bones.” While we can understand that he, like his father before him, wished to be buried in the homeland, surely it would have been more conventional to ask, as did

⁸ Listen to Your Messages, ArtScroll, Ch. 4.

Jacob, that they “bury him” in the land of his fathers (Gen. 47:30; 49:29),⁹ or that they “bring up his coffin.” Why did he specify “bones”?

Evidently this detail was quite significant, for the Torah reiterates it upon the fulfillment of the oath at the Exodus, “And Moses took the bones of Joseph with him; for he had solemnly sworn the children of Israel, saying: God will surely remember you; and ye shall carry up my bones away hence with you” (Ex. 13:19). It seems there is a message in his bones, a message that is intimately connected to the birth of the nation. Could it be that Joseph, the paradigm of confidence and conviction, who bore no jealousies, is sending his last will and testament to the nation in the form of his bones? Could it be that Joseph is saying, “Jealousy rots the bones,” so “carry up my bones,” my wholly intact bones, that they may serve as an ever present reminder that the nation must be free of jealousy, for jealousy rots the *nation*?

Commandments and the Nation

The Gemara (Sotah 13a) tells of how Joseph’s coffin (*aron*) was transported, side by side, with the chest (*aron*) carrying the Ten Commandments. When passersby would note in bewilderment that a coffin was being carried alongside the chest of the Ten Commandments, upon which God’s very presence rested, they were told, “the one in this chest fulfilled everything that is written in this chest.” In what way did Joseph fulfill all the commandments?

At the foundation of the commandments lies the imperative to not be jealous: “Thou shalt not covet” (Ex. 20:14). Recanati (ad loc.), in explaining the significance of this tenth commandment, brings the words of the sages who teach that the Ten Commandments were sealed with “thou shalt not covet” because “all the commandments are included in it.” The fulfillment of all the commandments is predicated on being free of all covetous jealousies.

Joseph’s bones are the tangible symbol of this ideal, of fulfilling all the commandments by being above jealousy, above the “evil eye”. The Gemara (Ber. 20a) teaches that, for he whose “eye did not desire to imbibe from that which was not his, the evil eye has not power over him.” Rashi explains that the Gemara refers to none other than Joseph, who refrained from “enjoying his master’s wife”, who did not covet his master’s wife. Just as Joseph did not exhibit the evil eye, was not jealous, so the jealousy of others, their evil eye, had no influence over him.

Now Joseph’s attainment, while certainly of personal significance, is ultimately of national importance. The story of Joseph’s bones ends with their interment in Shechem, “And Joseph’s bones which the children of Israel carried up from Egypt, they buried in Shechem” (Joshua 24:32). The burial of Joseph’s bones is given national import as it occurs as a conclusion to the conquest of the land of Israel by Joshua (23:1) immediately following Joshua’s death (24:31). Just as the commandments are “sealed” with the imperative to not covet, so the newly founded nation is “sealed” with the same message in the burial of Joseph’s bones. Joseph’s bones (*atzumot*), linked as they are to the birth

⁹ One could here answer that Jacob asked to be buried since he was never buried in Egypt in the first place. The Gemara (Sotah 13a) explains that Joseph was also not buried, but either sunk in the Nile or stored in a mausoleum. Even if this is considered a type of burial, it is not unreasonable that he ask to be buried again.

of the nation, to the founding of the nation, indeed to the independence (*atzmaut*) of the nation, send the message that the nation qua nation must eschew all jealousies.¹⁰

The Gemara (Sotah 13b) asks why Joseph was buried in Shechem, to which R. Hama bar Hanina explains that “from Shechem they stole him and to Shechem they returned him.” The story is brought full circle. Joseph was stolen from Shechem due to the jealousy of the brothers which resulted in the great Egyptian exile. As a remedy, the exile was decreed with the explicit goal of making a great nation – a nation that would be free of jealousy. For a nation – even with all the commandments to guide it – will tear itself apart if driven by jealousy.

Joseph is returned from whence he was removed. The jealousy that prevented Jacob’s family from becoming a great nation was overturned. The typical jealousies that were rife in the book of Genesis are nowhere to be found during the entire Egyptian sojourn and onward.¹¹ This can be seen initially in Joseph’s children, Ephraim and Menasheh, who exhibit no animosity when Jacob favors the younger over the elder.¹² Joseph succeeded in instilling his “power over the eye” in the family – but what of the nation?

God promised Jacob in the vision of the night, “I will bring up [the children of Israel]¹³ and Joseph will cover your eyes” (Gen. 46:4). The redemption of the children of Israel is directly related to Joseph covering Jacob’s eyes – to Joseph removing the evil eye started by the favoritism of Jacob.¹⁴ In so doing, Joseph began the transformation of the family of Israel into the nation of Israel. Nevertheless, the “power over the eye” that Joseph impressed in the family still needed to be forged into the national conscience through the iron furnace of Egypt. Only then would God “bring up the children of Israel”, unified, as “the great nation” He promised.

Conclusion

Jealousy, otherwise known as the “the evil eye”, is the insidious trait that eats away at society from the inside, one individual at a time. And while one might be inclined to think that this only affects the jealous individual himself, the message from Joseph is that jealousy is ruinous to the nation as a whole. Indeed, Rashi (Num. 7:22) explains that the nation was commanded to sacrifice a goat every Yom Kippur to atone for the sale of Joseph.¹⁵ But does the nation of Israel continue to bear the guilt of the brothers? Only in as much as the nation repeats the sin underlying the sale: “And his brothers were jealous of him” (Gen. 37:11).

This is the lesson of Joseph: each individual must remove all jealousy from his heart for thus he fulfills the commandments and thus he redeems the nation to fulfill its role as “light unto the nations”.

¹⁰ Perhaps there is herein a mandate upon the government of Israel to insure the welfare of society in such a way that jealousies are not kindled due to imbalances, economic or otherwise.

¹¹ We do read of Korah, et al., exhibiting jealousy (Bam. 16), but perhaps that is why God Himself enters to put an end to the rebellion quickly and decisively.

¹² Might the tradition to bless one’s boys to be like Ephraim and Menasheh be based on their ability to receive blessings without jealousy?

¹³ Sechel Tov, Radak, Recanati, Baal HaTurim, Alshich, Kli Yakar (ad loc.).

¹⁴ Could it be that the “hamsa” hand used as an amulet against the evil eye would be better understood as a reminder of Joseph’s hand that covered the evil eye generated by Jacob’s favoritism?

¹⁵ See also Ramban (Num. 9:2).