

Torah Table Talk – Sacred Words

L'michyah sh'lachani: To save life, God has sent me

Providence and Human Initiative

Parshat Va-yigash, Genesis 44:18 – 47:27

Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt

With love to their grandchildren

Elka, Joshua, Lindsay, Oren z"l, Jenny, David, Lauren, Kayla, Zenna, and Emily

The climax of the Joseph saga comes with Judah's impassioned speech in defense of Benjamin and Joseph's tearful self-revelation. The man, who made himself a stranger (*hitnaker*), can no longer contain himself (*lihitapek*) and now reveals himself (*hitvadah*) to his brothers. It is no accident that all three words that are used to describe Joseph's state of mind are in the self-reflexive verbs (*hitpa'el*). Joseph's encounters with his brothers have inspired a deep self reflection in which he must come to terms with himself, his family and his God. But even in this moment of self revelation, Joseph is still struggling to understand his relationship with his family.

What does Joseph mean when he says that God has sent him to be a *michiyah*? In the course of his brief speech to his brothers, Joseph comes to realize the true meaning of his mission and the dreams that set him on this path. Whichever interpretation of this word one chooses, it is clear that this is a story about life and death. Joseph's brothers nearly killed him but sell him into slavery instead. Jacob presumes that his beloved son is dead when they bring him the bloodied tunic. And the first question that Joseph asks his brothers when he reveals his true identity is "Is my father still alive." For Jacob, too, this is a defining moment. He responds to the news that his son is still alive by saying, "My son, Joseph, is still alive! I must go see him before I die." Joseph not only promises to bring life to the family during the famine but he is the giver of life after years of grieving and guilt for his presumed death.

Genesis 45:5-8 I am your brother Joseph whom you sold into Egypt. Now do not be distressed and reproach yourselves because you sold me hither; it was to save life (*michyah*) that God sent me ahead of you...God has sent me ahead of you to ensure your survival on earth and to save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance. So it was not you who sent me here but God....

Sources

Judges 6:4

They (Midianites) would attack them, destroy the produce of the land all the way to Gaza and leave no means of sustenance (*michyah*) in Israel, not a sheep nor an ox nor an ass.

Ezra 9:8

But now for a short while there has been a reprieve from the Lord our God, who has granted us a surviving remnant and given us a stake in His holy place; our God has restored the luster in our eyes and furnished us with a little sustenance (*michyah*) in our bondage.

Rashbam, Commentary on Torah

"It is to save life that God sent me ahead of you:" The Holy One did all this for your benefit.

Robert Alter, The Five Books of Moses, a Translation and Commentary

"For sustenance (*l'michiyah*) God has sent me before you:" Joseph's speech is a luminous illustration of the Bible's double system of causation, human and divine. Commentators have tended to tilt the balance to one side, making a Joseph mouthpiece of piety here. His recognition of providential faith may very well be admirable from the view point of monotheistic faith, but there is no reason to assume that Joseph has lost his own brilliant initiative in all that he has accomplished, and so when he says "God," (*elohim*, which could also suggest something more general like "providence" or "fate,") he also means Joseph. "Before you" is the first intimation that he intends the whole clan to come down to Egypt after him.

Nehama Leibowitz, Studies in Bereshit

Note the changeover from the verb *makhar* (sell) to the verb *shalach* (send). First Joseph identifies himself as the brother whom they sold into Egypt, a fact which could not be denied. In the final resort, it was the brothers who were responsible for his sale, whether we accept Rashi's interpretation that it was they who took him out of the pit and sold him to the Ishmaelites or whether we accept *Rashbam* who maintained that it was the Midianites who heard his cry and took him out of the pit, selling him to the Ishmaelites, whilst the brothers were waiting for the Ishmaelite caravan and were unaware of the sale. Joseph reminds them of their ultimate

responsibility for this iniquity. But Joseph immediately proceeds to appease them...In this case the verb *makhar* appears in the subordinate and not the main clause...the two different facets of the deed are placed side by side – the deed as it appeared superficially and its deeper consequences. On the surface to the eye, it appears a sale. But on deeper insight a mission is revealed...

Liturgy

Praise to you, Adonai our God, sovereign of the universe, who has kept us in life (*she-shekheyanu*), sustained us and allowed us to reach this time.

Commentary

First a procedural question: how do we know how to translate a word in the Bible? It is not like we have a New Oxford Dictionary written by people in the time of the Bible. There are really only three sources of information. First, one can analyze the word by looking at its root meaning. Second, one can compare similar words in other ancient Near Eastern languages. Finally, and most important of all, one can look at where else the same word is used in the Bible. A Concordance is a book which lists every word in the Bible and all the places it appears. By comparing the use of a word in a number of places, we can surmise what it means based on the context.

The word *michyah* is clearly taken from the root *chai*, life. But what does it mean in this context? We find at least two other citations in which the word implies sustenance. Based on this, Alter suggests that the word, *michyah*, has a similar meaning in Genesis. God has sent Joseph ahead to provide sustenance during the years of famine. While this interpretation is not as poetic as the New Jewish Publication Society translation (in the box above), it is simpler and more to the point. In affect, Joseph says, ‘now I understand what my life is all about. My job is to provide sustenance for my family, no more and no less. All the travails and suffering of the years has led to this moment.

Alter and Leibowitz offer different interpretations of Joseph’s brief, but eloquent, speech. On the one hand, Alter sees a bit of the old Joseph in this speech, still scheming and mindful of his childhood dreams. He welcomes his brothers but reminds them that he rules over all of Egypt. Leibowitz, on the other hand, sees this speech as working out conflicts with his brothers. He begins by reminding them of their past actions; they sold him into Egypt. But he ends by saying, “So it was not you who sent me here but God.” With these words, Joseph comes of age and learns how to forgive.

The focus of the Joseph narrative is on survival; faith comes second. Unlike our forefathers who communed and wrestled with God, Joseph’s mission was much more fundamental – to survive and provide the means for the children of Israel to make it through another generation. Discerning God’s role in our lives only comes as an afterthought. I guess we are not so different from Joseph; in moments of transcendence we do not affirm our faith but simply thank God for “Keeping us alive, sustaining us and allowing us to reach another moment in our lives.” In the end Judaism is a religion of life – we celebrate the miracle of life and the opportunities it offers us each day.

Questions to Ponder

1. What do you think Joseph meant when he spoke of being a *michyah*?
2. Alter and Leibowitz offer two different translations of the expression *l’michyah shelachani*: “It is to save life that God sent me,” or “For sustenance God sent me.” Which one do you prefer? What does each translation add to our understanding of Joseph and his relationship with his brothers?
3. Do you feel that Joseph has changed as we reach the climax of the story? In what ways is he still the same as he was as a young seventeen year old?
4. Do we ever experience God as ‘the One who saves us?’ How do we experience God as the one who provides sustenance? In what ways are we in a partnership with God in providing these two gifts?
5. What is the difference between the three phrases in the *she-shekheyanu* blessing: ‘to keep us in life,’ ‘to sustain us,’ and ‘to allow us to reach this day?’

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