

Was Yosef on the Spectrum? Understanding Joseph through Torah, Midrash, and Classical Jewish Sources

by Samuel J. Levine. Urim Publications. 141 pages, 2019

Ever since the Bible was written there have been attempts to understand the characters and events of its narrative. Indeed, in *The Ancient Commentary on the Bible* (1993) Hananel Mack suggested that as long as there has been Bible, there has been commentary, whether Deuteronomy commenting on the preceding books of the Torah, or Psalms and Chronicles on earlier sections of the Bible. The Apocryphal books continued the tradition, as did Philo's Bible commentary (first century Alexandria), Josephus, then the many forms of Midrash, and since Saadiah Gaon (10th century Babylon), a steady flow of authors, the most known among Jewish readers being Rashi (11th century France), Ibn Ezra (12th century Spain) and Ramban (13th century Spain), and most recently Nehama Leibowitz, who have all published commentaries on the Bible text. While each commentator may ask some unique questions, many clearly duplicate each other. How is it that each commentator emerges with different answers, and that often they are distinctive to that author? The answer must lie not only in each new questioner emerging from a particular cultural background but also having different responses that are suitable for their readership: Rashi writing at the time of the Crusades and the destruction of Jewish communities, Ibn Ezra having travelled the world and seen many cultures, etc.

The characters and stories of the Bible narrative may be viewed through many types of lens. The large amount of Midrashic commentary on the Joseph story resulted in most of the second volume of *The Legends of the Jews*, the *magnum opus* written by Louis Ginzberg in 1909-38, while Thomas Mann's monumental work *Joseph and his Brothers*, first published in 1933-43, is a retelling, incorporating mythical, archaeological and historical findings and much Midrashic material and psychological understanding, resulting in a work viewed by some as one of the literary masterpieces of the century. *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* by Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber was a hugely successful modern musical based on the Bible story.

In *The Hidden Psychiatry of the Old Testament* (2018), George Stein looks at the Bible through a psychiatrist's lens. He published a series of half-page studies in the

British Journal of Psychiatry over several years called *Psychiatry in the Old Testament* in which he analyzed the Bible text for symptoms that suited psychiatric diagnoses, suggesting Saul was suffering from bipolar disorder, Ezekiel from schizophrenia, Hannah from infertility associated with depression, and the case of the *Sota* in Numbers chapter 5 a remarkable presentation of delusional jealousy. Unlike Ginzberg and Mann, Stein holds two texts alone, the Bible in one hand and the classification of mental disorders in the other, applying the latter to the former. Is it valid to take two texts, written 2-3000 years apart, and use the text from today to understand the people in another distant time? Are these concepts, schizophrenia, depression, autistic spectrum and others, likely to persist, or is it enough that they mean something to us today?

If George Stein sitting with the Bible in one hand and the ICD or DSM in the other seems valid, the present book by Samuel J. Levine can be considered in a similar vein. Levine is a Professor of Law in the U.S. He has written a short, thoughtful and provocative book on the subject of the biblical Joseph, in which he claims that Joseph suffered from autistic disorder. Like all of the above commentators he has his own particular theory and brings his sources. Levine analyzes the text in which Joseph is center-stage, Genesis 37-50, through an impressive array of classic Jewish commentators, from Midrash, through Rashi and Abravanel and, in the 20th century, Leibowitz and Soloveitchik. Sifting through all their questions and answers on the text he emerges with the suggestion that Joseph had autistic disorder.

Is this a pertinent suggestion? Joseph first appears in the Torah aged seventeen. He tells tales on his brothers and they hate him for it. He has a dream of his brothers' sheaves of corn bowing to his sheaves and tells his brothers the contents of the dream, adding to their hatred. He has a second dream of the sun, moon and eleven stars (the number of his siblings) bowing down to him and tells his brothers the second dream too. Soon after, they contemplate killing him but instead sell him into slavery. Anyone considering these events could be forgiven the suggestion that Joseph is not overly sensitive to the effects of his words and actions on those close to him. This absence of understanding of the emotional world of the other is understood by Levine as clear indication of Joseph's autistic disorder. The text refers to him as a *na'ar*, implying immaturity, and Jewish commentators saw this as meaning he played with his hair and eyes, which Levine suggests are self-stimula-

tion rituals rather than prettification. There are several critical moments in Joseph's life when he speaks without waiting for responses: when he tells the chief butler the meaning of his dream, when he tells Pharaoh the meaning of his dream, and when he reveals his identity to his brothers. These monologues, described by Levine as "rambling," are understood as expressions of his lack of social appropriateness. Levine presents an impressive array of ideas of Jewish commentators, of whom understandably none considered the autistic spectrum, a concept only introduced by Leo Kanner in 1943. As the story progresses, Levine notes how Joseph, once he becomes the viceroy of Egypt, appears to develop an understanding of the feelings of others. The book's longest chapter is the return of the brothers to Joseph when he reveals his identity. His concern for their feelings of guilt, his detailed advice as to how to approach their aging father with news of Joseph's return to life suggest great change, and "a measure of appreciation, understanding, and anticipation of the perceptions, expectations, and actions of others" (p. 127). Would

such a profound change be expected in a person growing up with autistic disorder? An alternate explanation that Levine himself brings from the 16th century Italian commentator Sforno is that the early versus later behavior of Joseph are best understood reflecting a process of maturity.

It can ever be argued whether we can use today's measures to evaluate yesterday's personalities and their actions. Generations of commentators do just that, each finding a new lesson worthy of being written. Whether Joseph is comfortably included in this diagnostic group or not is perhaps not the purpose of Samuel Levine. Instead, he is suggesting that Joseph could be so, that a person with this condition can play a central and fruitful role in communal life, and we should beware of negating individuals with limitations as they also have qualities that can enrich and change the world.

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