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Was Yosef on the Spectrum? Understanding Joseph Through Torah, Midrash, and Classical Jewish Sources (Introduction)

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WAS YOSEF ON THE SPECTRUM?

Understanding Joseph

Through Torah, Midrash,
and Classical Jewish Sources

SAMUEL J. LEVINE

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Through Torah, Midrash, and Classical Jewish Sources
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“Prof. Levine is both a *ben Torah* and an accomplished scholar. His work is an act of both courage and love of Yosef. Courage – because some will criticize him for trying to diminish the stature of one of the *shivah ro'im*, when his intention was the very opposite. Love – because in order to address the difficulties many have raised with aspects of Yosef’s behavior, he worked thoroughly and painstakingly with traditional sources to advance his theory, rather than ignore them as so many others do. Whether the reader accepts Prof. Levine’s thesis or remains skeptical (as I do), we must imagine Yosef smiling at someone who labored so hard to defend him.”

– **Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein**,
author of *Nesivos Shalom*

“Levine’s interpretation of Yosef’s life through the lens of contemporary psychology is innovative and provides a way for readers to find personal and practical insights for how to approach neurodiversity in the Jewish community today. While the topic is potentially controversial, Levine treats it with scholarship and respect and comes up with a very strong reading of the narrative. It is an interesting take and a worthwhile read.”

– **Rabbi Dr. Ira Bedzow**,
Director of Biomedical Ethics and Humanities,
NY Medical College

“Sam Levine was my student in yeshiva, and I have known him for decades as he has continued to study and teach Jewish law. I enjoyed his book on Yosef, which presents a thoughtful and creative literary analysis of the story, based on a close reading of the Chumash, *midrashim*, and classical *meforshim*.”

– **Rav Menachem Mendel Blachman**,
Senior Ra”m at Yeshivat Kerem B’Yavneh

“Sam Levine has created a fresh, thoughtful and new perspective on a classic story, offering readers a unique lens with which to view one of Genesis’s most colorful characters. In the process, he sensitizes us to what it means to live and lead on the spectrum, turning a handicap into a ladder for incredible future triumph for Joseph and for all those who come after him who struggle yet succeed.”

– **Dr. Erica Brown**,
author of *Jonah: The Reluctant Prophet*

“As he lays out his extraordinarily bold, profoundly thought-provoking hypothesis, Levine’s deep love for and highly nuanced understanding of his subject leaps from every page.”

– **George Rohr,**
noted philanthropist

“Levine presents a compelling portrait of Yosef, based on a close and insightful reading of the biblical text and traditional Jewish sources. As Levine describes in careful detail, individuals on the autism spectrum often possess a powerful set of strengths and abilities, and provide both countless tangible and intangible benefits to society. A sensitive reader will never look at Yosef, or individuals with autism, in the same way again.

More broadly, this book will spark conversation and awareness, and hopefully change attitudes toward individuals with disabilities, both within the Jewish community and beyond.”

– **Jay Ruderman,**
President of the Ruderman Family Foundation

“This work represents a deeply researched close reading of the story of Yosef. Readers will experience a thought provoking analysis of Yosef’s personality and a window into the lives of those on the highly functioning end of the autistic spectrum and their families. Recommended reading!”

– **Dr. Deena Zimmerman,**
author of *A Lifetime Companion to the Laws of Jewish Family Life*

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Introduction

THE STORY OF YOSEF (JOSEPH) presents some of the most challenging questions of all biblical narratives. Yosef's behavior, interpersonal relationships, and personal journey and development are often difficult to understand, and at times seem to defy explanation. Leading commentators are repeatedly puzzled both by Yosef's actions and by the events that surround him: from Yosef's bitter interchanges with his brothers, which his father Yaakov (Jacob) is apparently unable to mediate, to the events in the Land of Egypt, where Yosef finds both failure and remarkable success, to Yosef's strange machinations, when his brothers travel to Egypt to purchase food and later settle in Egypt along with Yaakov.

Commentators have offered a variety of approaches in an effort to understand and explain many of these difficulties. Yet, these explanations tend to be incomplete, often responding to individual events and aspects of the story, without providing a cohesive understanding of the story as a whole and the puzzling ways Yosef interacts with others. Moreover, although commentators sometimes find common ground in their views of certain episodes, their approaches often contradict one another, and at times their interpretations of different events seem inherently inconsistent.

This book attempts to achieve a coherent and cohesive reading of the story that offers a plausible understanding of Yosef's behaviors toward others and those of others toward him, while at the same time accounting for both his successes and his failures. Toward that goal, the book suggests that a close reading

of the biblical text paints a portrait of Yosef consistent with an individual on the autism spectrum.¹

Although individuals with autism spectrum disorders vary widely in their symptoms and their behaviors, common characteristics include many of the behaviors Yosef exhibits and the interactions he experiences, such as: social challenges, punctuated by an inability to read social cues, understand and anticipate the feelings and reactions of others, and navigate social settings; attachment to animals or to inanimate objects in place of interpersonal relationships; heightened intellectual capacity and creativity in narrow areas of interest; repetitive and inflexible behaviors; an obsessive and compulsive focus on a private way of perceiving the world; and a rigid and literal perspective on truth, ethics, and morality that sees virtue in extreme terms rather than allowing for nuance.

In addition to offering a way to understand Yosef's behaviors and interactions, picturing Yosef as an individual on the autism spectrum, moving from childhood through his adult life and career, provides continuity to the remarkably varied experi-

1. This project does not aim to categorize – let alone diagnose – Yosef with any degree of clinical precision. Indeed, the thesis of this project is premised on the notion that the portrait of Yosef presented in the text of the Torah is intended for the close, careful, and sensitive reader, not for the clinician. Accordingly, the project relies on a close textual reading and the insights of leading biblical interpreters, spanning thousands of years and geographical locations across the world, who applied their non-clinical wisdom, experience, and powers of observation. Based on these sources and analyses, it may be helpful for contemporary readers to observe that Yosef's behaviors and experiences closely resemble many of those common among individuals with forms of high-functioning autism or Asperger's syndrome. For clinical descriptions and diagnostic criteria, see, e.g., *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5): Autism Spectrum Disorder; Social (Pragmatic) Communication Disorder; Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV): Autistic Disorder; Asperger's Disorder*.

It should also be emphasized that this portrait of Yosef is not a simplistic and ahistorical labeling based on a superficial reading of a few events recorded thousands of years ago, but instead represents a carefully documented understanding of Yosef, based on dozens of statements in the biblical text and hundreds of comments in classical Jewish sources including *midrashim*, *rishonim*, and *acharonim*.

ences Yosef undergoes at different stages of the story. Viewed through this lens, Yosef emerges as a more familiar and less enigmatic individual, exhibiting both strengths and weaknesses commonly associated with autism spectrum disorder, facing concomitant and interconnected challenges and opportunities, and experiencing, often at once, both surprising success and unexpected failure.²

Perhaps most importantly, understanding Yosef as an individual on the spectrum helps illuminate not only the text of the Torah on a *p'shat* level (plain reading),³ but also many comments and teachings about Yosef found in classical Jewish sources, including *midrashim*, *rishonim*, and *acharonim*. To be sure, none of these sources contains a comprehensive depiction of Yosef that would fully comport with contemporary understandings of autism spectrum disorder. However, a close reading of many of the classical sources suggests that for thousands of years, leading scholars have presented insights and explanations producing a portrait of Yosef consistent with a person who exhibits a number of characteristics and behaviors associated with contemporary views of the autism spectrum. Thus, applying contemporary psychological insights serves as a way to remain faithful to traditional interpretations while at the

2. It should go without saying, but may need to be noted, that this way of analyzing the story of Yosef should not be seen as casting Yosef in a negative light. Instead, this project is an effort to understand Yosef, on a human level and through a reading that is faithful to the *p'shat* of the text of the Torah, similar to the way nearly all of the classical and authoritative *midrashim*, *rishonim*, and *acharonim* work to understand the story. Cf. *Minchas Asher*, Bereishis 561 note*. If anything, compared with the highly critical interpretations often found in many of these sources, seeing Yosef as an individual on the spectrum tends to render both Yosef and those who interact with him less susceptible to criticism and more open to sympathy and understanding. Most basically, being on the spectrum is not a moral vice, and the condition of autism spectrum disorder does not invite or imply a reason or avenue for criticism.

3. The particularly high degree of difficulty in explaining the story of Yosef on a *p'shat* level may have served as the motivation for the extended – and otherwise, unusually placed – disquisition by Rashbam, at the start of the story, describing his methodology of focusing on the *p'shat* of the text. See Rashbam 37:2.

same time bringing together many of these different approaches to provide a more unified and complete picture of Yosef.⁴

Finally, although the primary goal of this project is focused on exploring a way to understand the character of Yosef and the events that surround him, with this understanding, the story may offer lessons for interactions with children and adults on the spectrum. If so, the fact that upon a close and careful reading the Torah contains such lessons, which are both current and timeless, is a further illustration of the principle: *hafoch bah, v'hafoch bah, d'kula bah* (“turn it and turn it, for everything is in it”).⁵

4. Accordingly, applying a method often utilized by scholars in the context of both *halacha* and *aggada*, this project aims to present a fresh approach that relies on disparate strands of traditional and highly authoritative sources of interpretation, while at the same time acknowledging that none of the earlier sources expressly or entirely adopts the new approach. Cf. Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, *Leaves of Faith: The World of Jewish Learning* 78–79; Rabbi Hershel Schachter, *B'Ikvei Hatzoran* 1–3; Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, *Ra'ayonot al haTefillah* 1–2, in *Ish haHalacha – Galuy V'nistar* 239–40.

5. Mishna, Avot 5:25.