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REVIEW OF SAMUEL J. LEVINE’S WAS YOSEF ON THE SPECTRUM? UNDERSTANDING JOSEPH THROUGH TORAH, MIDRASH, AND CLASSICAL JEWISH SOURCES: URIM PUBLICATIONS, JERUSALEM, NEW YORK

*Nathan Weissler**
Self-Advocate

Professor Samuel J. Levine’s *Was Yosef on the Spectrum? Understanding Joseph Through Torah, Midrash, and Classical Jewish Sources*¹ is a truly important book in many respects. Not only does the author provide an original perspective regarding Yosef but the book is also a powerful tool to help increase empathy for individuals who have special needs. Hopefully, if readers think about how one of the greatest figures in Jewish history, and likely other people who achieved great things, could have been on the autism spectrum, this book can play an important role in aiding inclusion.

I am on the autism spectrum, having been diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome at four, and therefore this book is particularly meaningful for me personally for the reasons above. A few examples of the persuasiveness of the author’s arguments struck me. In particular, I noted Professor Levine’s analysis of why Yosef told his father, Yaakov, of his brothers’ actions. According to the author,

Yosef has a close connection to truth and a powerful commitment to morality, leading to a compulsion to express his views, often in stark terms, regardless of other considerations. Thus, like many on the spectrum, in scenarios that call for diplomacy or discretion, Yosef bluntly speaks the truth as he sees it, even to his own detriment.²

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¹ SAMUEL J. LEVINE, *YOSEF ON THE SPECTRUM? UNDERSTANDING JOSEPH THROUGH TORAH, MIDRASH, AND CLASSICAL JEWISH SOURCES* (2019).

² *Id.* at 18-19.

Professor Levine added that, “Though his [Yosef’s] brothers have engaged in wrongful activities, there does not seem to be an urgent need to inform Yaakov, particularly when those activities are not directed at Yosef.”³ Those observations deeply resonated with me because in school, I at times in a public manner told teachers when peers were breaking certain relatively minor school rules, such as students having a cell phone out even if they were not using the cell phone during school hours, when the behavior did not involve me. I felt that I was taking a stand for what was right and was unable to see that despite the violations of the rules that it might have been better, overall, to not comment.

The author returns to the theme of saying what one believes to be true even when it may not only be unwise but very dangerous, when discussing Yosef’s interactions with Potiphar’s wife. At this time, Yosef followed his mention of allegiance to Potiphar by mentioning his allegiance to G-d. According to Professor Levine,

While the reference to Potiphar might resonate with his wife, it seems unlikely that she will be persuaded by Yosef’s insistence that he not sin against God. If anything, mentioning his God will only serve as a reminder to Potiphar’s wife that Yosef is an *Ivri* (Hebrew), and indeed, she will later exploit this outsider status as part of her effort to incriminate him. Nevertheless, exhibiting another common characteristic of children on the spectrum, Yosef speaks to Potiphar’s wife with the same zeal and enthusiasm he used in telling his brothers of his dreams. He is unable to stop himself from speaking the truth, as he sees it, even if it will later be used against him.⁴

This is truly an accurate description of how individuals on the autism spectrum can be truthful in ways that can be very harmful and can be oblivious to warning signs of certain dangers that others might assume would be obvious. However, it is worth emphasizing that I have found that characteristics associated with being on the autism spectrum have given me, and continue to give me a stronger moral

³ *Id.* at 19.

⁴ *Id.* at 60-61.

compass, and a healthy sense of right and wrong. For instance, it is greatly upsetting to see anybody being treated disrespectfully and this sense of morality drives a lot of my advocacy work for inclusion of individuals who have special needs. Similarly, Yosef clearly had a strong moral compass and a powerful sense of what was morally correct and what was not.

Furthermore, separate from his profoundly questionable decisions about how and when to express his opinions, Yosef's moral compass and ethical values reflect highly on him as a person. For instance, Yosef's refusal to emphasize his accomplishments, which he likely felt would be exaggerating, by crediting G-d at his own expense, when speaking with Pharaoh right after leaving prison, discussed by the author⁵ and later in this review, is an example of this positive attribute, despite the fact that, as Professor Levine makes clear, that was precisely the wrong time and place for Yosef to make that statement.⁶ On the other hand, in a world in which people often attempt to inflate their accomplishments, there is without doubt something refreshing about Yosef's honesty.

Although Yosef's choice of words with Potiphar's wife was undoubtedly unwise, I would urge great caution about judging his behavior harshly. Indeed, for a child to be in captivity is such a traumatic experience—and in Yosef's case, the captivity was brought on by his being sold by his own brothers, thus making the experience doubly traumatic—that we need to show substantial leniency in judging his decisions made in captivity. Another way to look at the Yosef story is that when his brothers sold him and he disappeared, Yosef essentially became a missing child as that term would be defined today. In today's world, there could well have been fliers in public places seeking information on Yosef's whereabouts, extensive searches by law enforcement for Yosef and perhaps a monetary reward for his safe return home.

Regarding Pharaoh's intervention on Yosef's behalf directly resulting in his release from prison, discussed previously in this review, the theme of truth returns once more. Yosef states that understanding dreams is an ability that only G-d has. Professor Levine states,

⁵ *Id.* at 83.

⁶ *Id.*

Although Yosef's modesty is admirable, the wisdom of his response is questionable. After all, Pharaoh has just retrieved him from prison because of his acumen in interpreting dreams. As such, Yosef should not downplay his own talents, and his first words to Pharaoh should certainly not dispute Pharaoh's generous introductory remarks. . . . Finally, invoking God to Pharaoh seems to repeat Yosef's past errors, serving again as a reminder of Yosef's status as an *Ivri*.⁷

It is as if Yosef felt that he had to speak the truth regardless of what consequences could result.

The author also describes how sometimes individuals on the autism spectrum can be unaware of certain dangers. The author shows how Yosef displayed those characteristics in seeming to be unaware of the danger that his brothers would cause serious harm to him. While Yosef could not have known that his brothers intended to sell him into slavery, one could have reasonably expected that Yosef's brothers would inflict substantial harm on him, either physical or psychological or both.⁸ Later in the book, in his analysis of Yosef's reunion with his brothers, Professor Levine reveals how those characteristics of being oblivious to potential dangers showed themselves once again.⁹

The author discusses Yosef's instruction to everybody, except for his brothers, to leave to allow Yosef to tell his brothers that he is indeed their long-lost brother whom they sold into slavery. Professor Levine noted that, "Although several commentators and *midrashim* praise Yosef's apparent desire to" not emotionally hurt anyone,

other *midrashim* note the risk Yosef took in casting out all of his guards, rendering himself vulnerable to an attack by his brothers, with whom he has just concluded a heated altercation. Yosef's failure to recognize this potential danger may illustrate a reversion to a more general lack of awareness of his social setting, coupled with an inability both to understand the effect

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.* at 27-55.

⁹ *Id.* at 122-25.

that his actions will have on others and to anticipate their reactions.¹⁰

The author adds that Yosef's actions could have led his brothers to be afraid that he would harm them and once Yosef revealed that he was their long-lost brother, it is entirely plausible that they might have thought that Yosef's telling everyone else to leave was an attempt to cause them to be vulnerable to his revenge. That could, then, lead Yosef's brothers to lash out in self-defense. The author then goes on to discuss other examples of behaviors that can be displayed by individuals who are on the autism spectrum being showcased by Yosef when reuniting with his brothers.¹¹

At the same time, Professor Levine makes it very clear that Yosef was an incredible success story. Yosef's ability to foresee the need to rescue the Egyptian people from famine could well have been related to traits typical of the autism spectrum. For instance, I have a photographic memory and can often remember dates and other occurrences from many years ago. Additionally, in order to accomplish what he did, in rescuing the Egyptian people, Yosef needed to be able to foresee events that would happen many years into the future. In my opinion, a photographic memory could have likely been a crucial tool in enabling Yosef to succeed.

It is fitting to end this review by referring to Professor Levine's concluding thoughts in the book. According to the author,

Yosef's thoughtful, gracious, and heartfelt response to his brothers, concluding this episode—and with it, concluding the story of Yosef—may offer a message of optimism for individuals on the spectrum, their families, and their friends. . . . This is now the true Yosef, outside of the protective watch of either Pharaoh or Yaakov, truly reconciled with his brothers. At the conclusion of the story, the reconciliation is complete.¹²

Despite Yosef's character flaws, Yosef's story, as it relates to the autism spectrum, is essentially a positive story. It is my hope that

¹⁰ *Id.* at 122.

¹¹ *Id.* at 122-27.

¹² *Id.* at 140-41.

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Was Yosef on the Spectrum? is a tool for helping individuals in the Jewish community to have a better understanding of people like myself and truly cannot recommend this book highly enough.