Paired Perspectives on the Parashah: Vayeshev

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Vayeshev:

Who Sold Joseph? The Narrator and His Characters

Introduction

One of the great moments in the history of parshanut concerns an apparently straightforward question: Who sold Joseph? Most readers would respond immediately that Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery. Yet a careful reading of the narrative reveals that this conclusion is far from self-evident. Rashbam develops a striking alternative interpretation that challenges our conventional understanding of the story and teaches a fundamental lesson about reading biblical narrative.

I. The Brothers Sold Joseph

After throwing Joseph into a pit, the brothers sit down to eat. They see a caravan of Ishmaelites traveling toward Egypt, and Judah proposes that they sell Joseph rather than kill him. The brothers agree (Genesis 37:25–27).

According to Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Radak, the brothers were eating near the pit. They subsequently removed Joseph from the pit and sold him. This interpretation,

however, raises an immediate difficulty. When Reuben returns to the pit, he is shocked to discover that Joseph is missing. Where was Reuben when his brothers sold Joseph?

Bereshit Rabbah (84:15), followed by Rashi, suggests that it was Reuben's turn to attend to his father. Bekhor Shor finds this interpretation difficult, given the considerable distance between Hebron and Shechem. He proposes instead that it was Reuben's turn to tend the flocks while his brothers ate.

Both interpretations address a difficulty generated by the conventional understanding of the sale. If the brothers sold Joseph, Reuben must have left them at some point. Otherwise, he would have known what had happened.

II. The Midianites Sold Joseph

Rashbam (on 37:2), followed by Hizkuni and Shadal, offers a fundamentally different reconstruction of the narrative. After throwing Joseph into a pit in the wilderness, the brothers presumably returned to their campsite in the vicinity of Dothan to eat. On this reading, there is no reason to assume that Reuben was absent. The Torah never states that he left his brothers prior to their meal.

When Reuben hears Judah's proposal to sell Joseph, he realizes that he must act quickly if he is to rescue Joseph and return him to their father. Before he can do so, however, something unexpected happens: "When Midianite traders passed by, they pulled Joseph up out of the pit. They sold Joseph for twenty pieces of silver to the Ishmaelites, who brought Joseph to Egypt" (37:28).

According to Rashbam, the subject of the verbs describing Joseph's removal from the pit and his sale is the Midianite traders, not Joseph's brothers. A group of local Midianite traders (*soharim*) happened to pass by, presumably heard Joseph's cries, and pulled him out of the pit. They subsequently sold him to the Ishmaelites, whose caravan was traveling to Egypt.

The presence of both Midianites and Ishmaelites in the narrative thus makes excellent sense. The local traders and the long-distance caravan merchants perform different functions. There may also be a broader literary significance to their involvement. Descendants of Hagar and Keturah, who live on the fringes of the Land of Israel, become instrumental in advancing the story of

the family destined to inherit the land.

Meanwhile, the brothers are still eating, sufficiently far from the pit that they neither see nor hear what has transpired. Reuben is the first brother to discover that Joseph is missing. The Torah twice employs the verb *va-yashov* (returned): Reuben returns to the pit (37:29), and then returns to his brothers (37:30). If the brothers were eating alongside the pit, why would Reuben need to return to them? The language of the narrative supports Rashbam's reconstruction.

The brothers now face a dilemma. They do not know what has happened to Joseph, but they need to account for his disappearance. They therefore implement part of their original plan. When they initially contemplated killing Joseph, they intended to tell their father that a wild animal had devoured him (37:20). Now they dip Joseph's garment in blood and send it to Jacob, who reaches precisely that conclusion (37:31–33).

Rabbi Elhanan Samet adduces further support for Rashbam's interpretation. When the brothers later experience difficulties in Egypt, they recall their cruelty toward Joseph: "Alas, we are being punished on account of our brother, because we looked on at his anguish, yet paid no heed as he pleaded with us" (42:21).

Reuben responds that they now are being held accountable for Joseph's blood (42:22). Their conversation suggests that they believe Joseph is dead. This passage makes particularly good sense if the brothers never knew what happened to Joseph after they threw him into the pit.

Of course, Rashbam's interpretation does not absolve the brothers of moral responsibility. They had contemplated killing Joseph, ignored his pleas, agreed to sell him, and deceived their father. That they did not carry out the sale themselves hardly diminishes the gravity of their conduct.

III. The Narrator and His Characters

Rashbam's interpretation appears considerably more compelling than the conventional reading of Genesis 37. Why, then, do Rashi and so many other commentators maintain that the brothers sold Joseph?

The strongest evidence for their interpretation comes several chapters later. When Joseph reveals his identity to his brothers, he declares, “I am your brother Joseph, he whom you sold into Egypt” (45:4). He then reiterates that they sold him (45:5).

Rashbam explains that Joseph means that his brothers *caused* him to be sold into Egypt. Although this interpretation is plausible, it does not appear to be the most natural reading of Joseph’s words.

Rabbi Menachem Leibtag offers a particularly illuminating solution. As readers, we have access to information that the individual characters within the narrative do not possess. We must resist the temptation to assume that the characters know everything that we know.

Consider Jacob’s reaction upon seeing Joseph’s bloodstained garment. He concludes that a wild animal has devoured Joseph (37:33). We know that Jacob is mistaken, since the narrator has informed us otherwise. Jacob, however, reaches an entirely reasonable conclusion on the basis of the evidence available to him.

Might Joseph similarly have reached a reasonable but erroneous conclusion? From Joseph’s perspective, his brothers had thrown him into a pit and ignored his desperate pleas. Suddenly, a group of Midianite traders appeared, removed him from the pit, and sold him into slavery. Joseph had no way of knowing that the Midianites happened to be passing by. He understandably assumed that his brothers had arranged the sale.

When Joseph declares that his brothers sold him, therefore, he is expressing what he sincerely believes happened. His words need not contradict the Torah’s account of what happened.

Conclusion

The debate between Rashi and Rashbam illustrates the extraordinary sophistication of biblical narrative. The Torah enables us to view events from multiple perspectives, while its characters frequently must act on the basis of incomplete information.

The irony of Rashbam’s reading is especially poignant. Jacob believes that Joseph has been killed. The brothers may believe that Joseph is dead. Joseph

believes that his brothers sold him. Each reaches a conclusion without knowing the full story.

Only the reader, guided by the Torah’s narrative, is in a position to appreciate the larger picture. Distinguishing between the perspective of the narrator and those of the characters is one of the most important tools in the study of biblical narrative. It also offers an enduring lesson in humility: Even when we have good reason to believe that we understand what has happened, there may be dimensions of the story of which we remain entirely unaware.