MASCULINITY AND THE HANUKKAH HERO: TOWARD A NEW INTERPRETATION OF BIBLICAL GEVURAH

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The story of masculinity, heroism, and Hanukkah has been told countless times in the past century. Depending on who is talking, it is variously recounted to champion a return to pre-rabbinic biblical values (think David Ben Gurion) or, more recently, as a call to recover a “softer” rabbinic model of masculinity (with Daniel Boyarin in Unheroic Conduct). However, a closer examination of the biblical term gevurah, at least as it appears in one seminal biblical passage, suggests that both narratives are oversimplified, and that the claim that the Bible champions the warrior is more complex than is often contended.

Beginning with biblical gibborim such as Samson, Saul, and David, and throughout most of the biblical period, physical prowess was seen as heroic and worthy of emulation. It was almost exclusively associated with masculinity (thus gever and gevurah share the same root). As recorded in I Maccabees, Hanukkah initially celebrated the physical heroism of the Maccabees. Later, the Talmudic rabbis pivoted, downplaying the military victory in favor of the spiritual miracle of the oil. This shift, scholars such as Boyarin contended, reflected a fundamental rabbinic ambivalence about the ideal of the male-as-warrior. Owing to a mix of political realism and a radical reconceptualization of Jewish life in exile, the Rabbis sought to redirect the locus of Judaism toward the themes of spiritual worship and divine intervention. In fact, the shift from the early biblical conception of heroism from physical strength to moral power began earlier, the hero no longer defeats his enemies on the battlefield, but “conquers his evil inclination” (Avot 4:1) and pursues victory in the study hall.

The rabbinic view of the hero dominated throughout the exilic period until the rise of Zionism at the turn of the twentieth century. Countering the image of the physically degenerate Maccabees as warrior-heroes, that the classical biblical paradigm of the soldier was restored.

Of course, both of these narratives are oversimplified. The rabbis, for all their ambivalence about taking up arms against the Romans and their embrace of Torah study as a new ideal of masculine religiosity, maintained the prohibition against women bearing arms, which according to cultural norms were still viewed as “masculine items” (Nazir 59b). Additionally, Maimonides maintained at least the theoretical view of the Messiah as a military-spiritual leader. Perhaps most important, the rabbinic house of study, far from a place of gentlemanly discourse, has been not unfairly described as a site of verbal “violence,” substituting for the battlefield where most rabbis no longer waged their wars (Jeffrey Rubenstein, The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud, chap. 3).

But it is not just the rabbinic period that resists key aspects of this storyline, but even the idealization of the biblical warrior-hero - both its definition and its celebration - that requires reconsideration. Given that the term gibbor is generally understood to be the biblical term for gevurah, we therefore...
turn to this phrase is search of insight into the biblical definition and valuation of the *gibbor*.

All 221 biblical uses of the root G-V-R in regard to human beings appear exclusively in reference to physical warriors. By contrast, in regard to divine *gevurah*, while the term sometimes similarly depicts God as a warrior, on other occasions it refers more generally to God’s ability to perform anything He desires. This raises the key questions, what exactly are the definition and attendant characteristics of divine *gevurah*, and what are its implications for the human *gibbor-gever*?

As a case study, we will examine one key section to which the Talmud draws our attention:

For the Lord your God is the God of gods and the Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God [ha-kel ha-gadol, ha-gibbor, ve-hanora] who shows no favor and takes no bribe, but upholds the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and befriends the stranger, providing him with food and clothing. (Deuteronomy 10:17-18, with rough parallels in Jeremiah 32:18 and Nehemiah 9:32)

The plain meaning of these verses make an essential point about God’s actions as a *gibbor*. A Talmudic passage in Megillah 31a underscores this verse’s implications for developing a biblical view of *gevurah*:

Rabbi Yohanan said: Wherever you find the might [*gevurato*] of the Holy One, Blessed be He, you find His humility. This matter is written in the Torah, repeated in the Prophets, and stated a third time in the Writings. It is written in the Torah: “For the Lord your God is the God of gods and the Lord of lords” (Deuteronomy 10:17), and it is written afterward: “He executes the judgment of the fatherless and widow” (Deuteronomy 10:18). It is repeated in the Prophets: “thus says the High and Lofty One that inhabits eternity, Whose name is sacred” (Isaiah 57:15), and it is written afterward: “with him that is of a contrite and humble spirit,” (Isaiah 57:15). It is stated a third time in the Writings, as it is written: “Extol Him Who rides upon the clouds, Whose name is the Lord” (Psalms 68:5), and it is written immediately afterward: “A father of the fatherless, and a judge of widows” (Psalms 68:6).

This passage declares a fundamental principle, illuminating *peshuto shel mikra*: in all three sections of the Bible, it is precisely where we encounter God’s strength [*gevurah*] that we find His humility, as manifest in His preparedness to lower Himself and care for the needy.

Yet the use of *gevurah* in the passage in Megillah is unusual. While the continuation of the first verse does use the term *gevurah*, the latter two do not, instead describing God as “dwelling on high” (Isaiah) and “riding in the clouds” (Psalms). Why does the Gemara go out of its way to use the term “*gevurato*” of the Holy One, Blessed Be He instead of, for instance, “*gedulato*”?

Indeed, when referencing the Gemara, some commentators, including Keli Yakar, Shelah, Netziv, and Rabbi Lamm, substitute the language “*gedulato*” for “*gevurato*.” After all, the common denominator between the three texts would seem to be that despite his exalted nature, God descends to be present with the needy. The word “*gedulah*,” a more generic term for greatness, would seem a more fitting appellation for this characteristic than “*gevurah*,” which generally denotes physical might.

We might simply infer from these commentators that the Talmud was imprecise in its terminology. But this interpretation is difficult. With one exception, all available manuscripts of the Gemara have the language *gevurah*. The same holds for the Gemara’s midrashic parallels, such as Yalkut Shimoni (to Deut. 10:17).

Further, this interpretation does not accord with the way the Sages implicitly understood this verse in their construction of the *Amidah*. As noted in another Talmudic passage, the verse in Deuteronomy serves as the framework for the first three blessings of the *Amidah*:

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: Why are the Sages of those generations called the members of the Great Assembly? It is because they returned the crown of the Holy One, Blessed be He, to its former glory. How so? Moses came and said in his prayer: “The great, the mighty, and the awesome God [ha-kel ha-gadol, ha-gibbor, ve-hanora]” (Deuteronomy 10:17). Jeremiah the prophet came and said: Gentiles, are carousing in His sanctuary; where is His awesomeness? Therefore, he did not say awesome in his prayer: “The great God, the mighty Lord of Hosts [ha-kel ha-gadol ha-gibbor], is His name” (Jeremiah 32:18). Daniel came and said: Gentiles are enslaving His children; where is His might? Therefore he did not say mighty in his prayer: “The great and awesome God” [ha-kel ha-gadol ve-hanora] (Daniel 9:4).

The members of the Great Assembly [by including the full phrase ha-kel ha-gadol ha-gibbor ve-hanora in the *Amidah*] came and said: On the contrary, this is the might of His might, that He conquers His inclination that He exercises patience toward the wicked. God’s anger is flared by the gentile nations’ enslavement of His people, yet He expresses might by suppressing His anger and holding back from punishing them immediately. And these acts also express His awesomeness: Were it not for the
The Talmud makes it clear that the themes of “The great, the mighty, and the awesome God,” drawn from our verse in Deuteronomy, serve as the basis for a phrase toward the very beginning of the Amidah. In fact, when we compare Deuteronomy to the prayers, we find that the term “gibbor” is the central phrase of the second blessing of the Amidah. The pointed usage of the term “gevurah” in the second blessing suggests that “gedulah” and “gevurah” are not interchangeable, particularly in the context of the verse in Deuteronomy. Further, the term gevurah in the Amidah seems to have little association with war. God, who is all-Powerful, brings the rain and revives the dead. This seems to have little to do with conquering external, or even internal, enemies.

The text of Shemoneh Esrei, then, suggests that the Gemara Megillah should not be understood as conflating gedulah and gevurah. So why does the Gemara go out of its way to use the term gevurah, and what does this tell about the phrase’s larger significance?

Maharal (Hiddushei Agadot Megillah ibid.) offers an answer that brings us much closer to a satisfying resolution. Maharal explains that while the Talmud acknowledges that the word gevurah only appears in the first of the three verses, it intentionally uses that language to sharpen its larger theme. Typically, a human gibbor remains distant from the needy and downtrodden. This is not so in the case of God, who “brings them closer and provides special care for them.”

In effect, because the term gevurah effectively captures this divine characteristic, the Talmud uses gevurah to cover all three verses. In other words, the Gemara is suggesting that in fact all three verses refer to this quality of gevurah. In human affairs heroism is typically manifest through physical aggression. But biblical gevurah, at least in connection with God, is not strictly tied to warring against an enemy. God exercises such powers in a variety of ways, including His ability to bring rain (gevurat geshamim), revive the dead (mehayeh meitim), and provide salvation (rav le-hoshia). It is to this aspect of God’s power that we appeal in Shemoneh Esrei.

Because God is all-powerful, we beseech him to utilize His powers toward compassionate ends, as manifest in God’s far-reaching capacity to revive the dead.

The prayer, in turn, helps illuminate the Gemara’s choice to depict gevurah instead of gedulah. A gibbor is not just a warrior, but a mighty individual who possesses a degree of superiority over others. It is the title given to one who has achieved a hierarchical relationship with others through strength or another form of supremacy. The greatest example, of course, is God.

But all this is merely the backdrop to the burning ethical question confronting the gibbor: in light of this broader definition of gevurah, how does he interact with others? How does he use his power? He may remain distanced and aloof, as Maharal suggests is the norm, or he may approach and be present with the needy. Will he lord over others or see that his strength is meant to position him to use his power to assist the vulnerable? God does the latter, and it is precisely this trait that is reinforced in Torah, Prophets, and Writings.

The Gemara in Megillah 31a is therefore very precise: while the term gevurah does not appear in all three contexts, the concept appears in all these places. As the ultimate gibbor, God is hierarchically superior to all humans, yet He opts to exercise this gevurah in relation to the needy by drawing close to them and caring for their needs.

Crucially, by noting that the same theme appears in all three sections of the Bible, the Gemara seems to be emphasizing that this point should not be understood as a rabbinic innovation, but is in keeping with peshuto shel mikra. The passage in Megillah, along with the rabbinic appropriation of this verse as a foundational component of the daily prayer service, suggests that the verse in Deuteronomy offers us a profound insight into the quality of Godly gevurah.

The next verse in Deuteronomy finally emphasizes the most important point of all:

You too must befriend the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (10:19)

God’s behavior must be a model for ours. We too must assist the foreigner, for in that interaction, any non-foreigner is, in our broader definition of one who is less vulnerable, a gibbor.

If Deuteronomy is any indication, physical strength is neither inherently glorified nor vilified in the Torah. The most important part of the Hanukkah story is not the fact that the Hasmoneans were warriors, though that was used toward a positive end and was therefore laudable. Their position as gibborim was, at that time and often in ours, a starting point, a fact of life. The question is what we do with it. The human gibbor may not revive the dead or summon the rains, but must always use his position to not to defeat the innocent but to advocate for the indigent. Above all, like God, he must lower himself to simply be present in the same space as the less fortunate.


2 Ketav Yad Munich 95 actually has gedulato instead of gevuroto. See Hachi Garssinan of the Friedberg Project for Talmud Bavli Variants.
Moses and Joseph’s bones

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In an Chapter 13 of Exodus narrates the events occurring immediately after the Hebrews’ departure from Egypt, revealing important details about their itinerary during this time.1 Verse 19 tells us the following:

Moses took away Joseph’s bones, for [Joseph] had formally adjured the children of Israel, saying, “God will take charge of you and then you will take away my bones from here.”

Commentators2 explain that it was not Joseph's descendants alone who were charged with carrying these bones; by making the “children of Israel” as a whole swear, Joseph gave the responsibility to the entire nation. It is hence understandable that the one who carries the bones is not specifically one of Joseph's descendants.

But why does the verse take the trouble to tell us that it was Moses himself who took the bones of Joseph, rather than someone else?

The answer that we propose is rooted in sources introduced several chapters prior, in the book of Genesis, and harks back to the origins of Joseph's misfortunes.3

The sale of Joseph

Chapter 37 of Genesis describes how Joseph was thrown into a pit by his brothers and sold to the Ishmaelites, who brought him down to Egypt.

Joseph had twelve brothers. Which brothers were involved in the sale? Evidence points to the involvement of at least four brothers.

For two of Joseph’s brothers, Judah and Reuben, we have direct textual proof of their involvement in the unfolding of these events:

Reuben said to them, "Shed no blood! Throw him into this pit that is in the wilderness but lay not your hand on him.” (Genesis 37:22)

Judah said to his brothers, "What good is it if we kill our brother and seal his death? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites and let our hand not be on him, for he is our brother, our flesh!” (Genesis 37:26-27)

The involvement of two other brothers can be deduced from Jacob’s blessings to his sons at the end of his life. Jacob takes this opportunity to admonish Simeon and Levi:

For in their anger they have slain men and for their passion they have struck a bull. (Genesis 49:6)

What is the bull to which Jacob is referring? If we look at Moses’s final blessings to the tribes of Israel, we see that he refers to Joseph using the term “like a firstborn bull is his majesty” (Deuteronomy 33:17). From this blessing, we see that the bull is Joseph’s token animal. It is therefore likely that in his final words, Jacob is also referencing Joseph when he mentions the bull, and is blaming Simeon and Levi for Joseph’s sale.4

While the participation of Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah in the transgression of the sale of Joseph is certain, the extent of the involvement of the remaining seven brothers is unclear. There is no direct textual mention of their implication, and Jacob does not mention this sin in his appraisals/blessings to them.

We have seen that four brothers have sinned. But are all four brothers punished?

Any transgression may require atonement/reparations or punishment, even for seemingly similar actions. For example, someone who kills another person is put to death, a punishment, whereas someone who kills an animal must pay, an atonement/reparation (see Leviticus 24:21). The main difference between atonement and punishment is that the atonement benefits the victim, whereas the punishment does not.

Joseph’s brothers sinned by selling him into slavery. This transgression seems to have been done by a collective, so any punishment and atonement must be borne by the group. But when we look more closely, we find that two pairs emerge within the four brothers whose involvement in the offense is certain: the Reuben-Judah pair and the Simeon-Levi pair. Within each pair, one bears the punishment and the other enacts the reparation.5 This indicates that within each pairing the sins of each of the brothers were in fact somewhat different.6 We will now examine the sins and consequences of each pair more closely.

Reuben and Judah

The relationship between the tribes of Reuben and Judah is one of subtle rivalry. Indeed, all that Reuben and his descendants could have hoped to obtain by birthright, it is Judah who secures through his deeds,7 because Reuben behaved inappropriately on several occasions (see Genesis 49:4).

Reuben’s punishment of losing his position of authority makes sense, considering that within the Joseph story alone he is twice shown to be powerless as a leader of his brothers:

1. His attempt to rescue Joseph was unsuccessful since Joseph was sold in his absence (see Genesis 37:29-30);
2. He was unable to convince his father to let Benjamin go down to Egypt. We can note that his proposal, that his father kill his two children should he fail to bring Benjamin back to him (see Genesis 42:37), makes no sense: if he failed, Jacob would find himself with three missing sons and two more dead grandchildren, in addition to the death of Er and Onan (see Genesis 38). This proposal seems to indicate a form of despair on Reuben's part: he has sunk so low that he cannot offer a rational argument to his father convincing him to entrust his son to him.

Judah enacts the atonement, by displaying his willingness to sacrifice himself so that Benjamin can return to his father (see Genesis 44:33). He makes a physical commitment in order to avoid putting his father through the same ordeal that he brought about the first time with Joseph. Now, Leah's children are willing to sacrifice themselves for Rachel's children. Judah also accepts that Jacob may prefer Rachel's children, and ignores it. Note that in doing this, Judah succeeds in saving his brother Benjamin - thus keeping his promise to his father that he would protect him.

At first glance, these punishments and reparations seem to be disproportionate to the respective involvement of Reuben and Judah. After all, Reuben intended to save Joseph from death! And Judah is the one who suggested and convinced his brothers to accept the idea of selling Joseph! One might have thought that the opposite outcomes should have taken place: atonement for Reuben and punishment for Judah. And yet if we look more carefully at the sale of Joseph and its aftermath, we see why the result was warranted.

What was Reuben's fundamental mistake in his attempt to save Joseph? His main fault was that he did not clarify his intention enough – he was not specific enough with his brethren to avoid any misunderstanding. The brothers' initial plan is to kill Joseph and throw him into a pit to conceal the body. Reuben suggests throwing him directly into the pit instead.

[Joseph's brothers] saw him from afar, and before he came close to them they conspired to kill him. They said to one another, "Here comes that dreamer! Now this, come, let us kill him and throw him into some pit, and then we will say that a fierce beast has devoured him. Then we'll see what happens to his dreams!" When Reuben heard this, he wanted to save him from them. He said, "Let's not take his life." So Reuben said to them, "Shed no blood! Throw him into this pit that is in the wilderness, but lay not your hand on him." It was to save him from their hands and bring him back to his father. (Genesis 37:18-22)

Reuben does not explicitly state his aim of saving Joseph's life. The text tells us this, so as readers we know his good intentions, but his brothers remain unaware. Let us reread Reuben's statement from the point of view of Reuben's brothers. The brothers had just suggested killing Joseph directly. Reuben seems to be saying, "Let us throw him into the pit so that he may die there, and we'll avoid getting our hands dirty. Let us not kill him ourselves, let us not lay hands on him ourselves, let us not spill his blood ourselves." Without any additional information about his intentions – without the "subtitles" that the text gives us through internal focalization on Reuben – we may have construed the sentence in the same way as Reuben's brothers did – that he did not want to kill Joseph directly but rather wanted to let him die in the pit. In the eyes of the brothers, Reuben is not saving Joseph from death.

We know that this is in fact how the other brothers understood Reuben based on Judah's proposal to sell Joseph. Judah tells his brothers, "What good is it if we kill our brother and seal his death?" (Genesis 37:26). Judah is implying that they originally intended to let Joseph rot and die in that pit. Now Judah proposes two things to his brothers: to save Joseph, or at least not kill him, and to sell him to the Ishmaelites, that they may be rid of his presence. The brothers consent. Here, it is Judah who has just saved Joseph from death! It is the first time that he succeeds where Reuben failed. Even though Reuben's intentions were praiseworthy, his performance was not up to the task, causing the chain reaction that led to the sale of Joseph. As for Judah, while he certainly erred in proposing and participating in the sale of Joseph, he did successfully convince his brothers not to kill him - quite a feat in this loaded context. This may justify a more "lenient" treatment than Reuben's.

Let us finish with Reuben's ultimate misunderstanding: having spent three days in Joseph's jail, and after Joseph expresses his will to bring Benjamin to Egypt, this is the dialogue that occurs between the brothers:

And they said to one another, "Truly we are being punished for our brother's sake; we saw his despair when he cried out to us and we were deaf. That is why this misfortune has befallen us." Reuben said to them, "Didn't I say to you at that time: Don't you be guilty of this child! And you did not listen. Well then! Now his blood is required of us." (Genesis 42:21-22)

While all the brothers (and at least those who actually participated in the crime) seem to admit their responsibility, the same cannot be said of Reuben. Worse still, he berates his brothers for ignoring his plea, without ever analyzing himself. Perhaps that is why he was punished twice, losing both the trust of his father and his position of authority: once for being unclear, thus enabling the brothers’ act without his knowledge, and a second time because he did not admit to his mistake.
Within the Reuben-Judah pair, we can now understand why Reuben’s actions warranted punishment, whereas Judah’s actions warranted atonement, although at first glance their sins seem the same. The different consequences stem from the fact that Reuben’s deeds almost got Joseph killed, whereas Judah’s “only” led him to slavery.

Simeon and Levi
There are numerous passages which explicitly give evidence to the fact that Simeon and Levi are a team. First, it is Simeon and Levi who massacre the city of Shechem. Additionally, Jacob begins his admonishment of them at the end of his life by saying that “Simeon and Levi are brothers” (Genesis 49:5), and therefore must be disbanded.

Of the two brothers, Simeon was the one who was punished, being forced to remain in Joseph’s cell until his brothers returned. The text explicitly states that Simeon was in captivity for the whole period between the departure of the brothers from Egypt and their return with Benjamin:

On the third day Joseph said to them, “Do this and you shall live, for I am a God-fearing man. If you are honest men, let one of you brothers be held in your place of detention, while the rest of you go and take home rations for your starving households; but you must bring me your youngest brother, that your words may be verified and that you may not die.” And they did accordingly... [Joseph] took Simeon from among them and had him bound before their eyes. (Genesis 42:18-20, 24)

[Joseph] said, “Be at peace, don’t be afraid. Your God, the God of your father, has made you find treasure in your sacks. Your money had come to me.” And he freed Simeon to them. (Genesis 43:23)

The word פָּויָטצֵי used in the Hebrew text is a word of deliverance; Joseph “brought” Simeon out of his shackles to return him to his brothers. And this imprisonment was not a short one. Simeon remained in jail for a substantial amount of time:

Famine weighed on the country. So when all the grain which they had brought from Egypt was consumed, their father said to them, "Go again and buy us a little food." But Judah said to him, “The man warned us, ‘Do not let me see your faces unless your brother is with you.’ ... If we hadn’t been delayed, we would have come back twice by now!” (Genesis 43:1-3, 10)

Regardless of the conditions relating to his detention, Simeon must have been separated from his father and brothers for a considerable period. And this separation from his family is significant. In addition to being a son and brother, Simeon was also the father of six sons (see Genesis 46:10). Thus, by being imprisoned for this length of time, he experienced the pain of separation both from the perspective of a father (like his father Jacob had experienced with Joseph) and from the point of view of a son (like Joseph to Jacob).

We have shown that Simeon is the brother in the pairing who receives the punishment, but why? There is little compelling data that would provide a satisfying answer to the question. However, by looking at Simeon, Levi, and their respective tribes later on, we see a pattern showing a clear separation of their paths.

Throughout the rest of the Pentateuch, Simeon and his tribe experience a descent:

- Perhaps Joseph imprisoned Simeon to isolate the brother who had demonstrated a greater potential for violence in the past.
- It is Zimri son of Salu, prince of the tribe of Simeon, who defiles himself with the Midianite Kozbi daughter of Zur, thus indirectly defying the authority of Moses and God.
- The count of the tribe of Simeon goes from 59,300 at the beginning of the book of Numbers (Numbers 1:23) to 22,200 during the fortieth year in the desert (Numbers 26:14), a loss of 37,100 people. There were various epidemics that struck the Hebrews during their journey through the Sinai desert, all a result of sin; the large decrease in Simeon’s numbers indicate that they were likely disproportionately affected by these epidemics, implying that they likely disproportionately sinned.
- Simeon is the only tribe not to be blessed by Moses at the end of the book of Deuteronomy.

Meanwhile, throughout the latter part of the Pentateuch, the tribe of Levi is ascendent:

- It was the Levites who all fought for God during the event of the golden calf, resulting in the deaths of three thousand people. While the Levites certainly committed an act of violence, it was in the service of God, demonstrating that their violence can be channeled for a noble purpose.
- The Levites are the ones who serve in the Tabernacle/Temple in place of the firstborn. As a result of this, they are regularly referred to as God’s heritage and are given gifts such as terumah and ma’aser.

If we assume that the descent of Simeon indicates personal lacking and the ascent of Levi indicates personal merit, then it is fitting that Simeon is the one who receives punishment and Levi would be the one who receives atonement.

We have demonstrated that within this pairing, Simeon is the one who receives the punishment, and have attempted to explain why. But what about the other member of the pairing? Levi’s atonement is missing! It is not impossible that Levi made some sort of "atonement" during his lifetime and that of Joseph, but the verses do not mention it, and so it is likely that
a personal atonement had never occurred. Once Levi is deceased, it is logical that the atonement would fall to one of his descendants. And to atone for the sin of removing Joseph from his family, the ultimate reparation to benefit the victim is to ultimately return him (or his bones after he dies) to his home.

**Why Moses**
But Levi had many descendants. Why was Moses specifically the one tasked with carrying out the atonement? There are several clues that can point us in the right direction.

Firstly, although Levi had many descendants, the text emphasizes that Moses is among them. Even before his conception, Moses is connected to Levi; he is introduced to us as the fruit of the union of an unnamed Levite and the unnamed daughter of Levi (see Exodus 2:1). Although they are named elsewhere, at Moses’s birth his parents are not defined by name, but by their tribe, and this tribal connection is passed on to Moses. Even though Aaron is also called “ha-levi” (Exodus 4:14), this occurs immediately after he is called Moses’s "brother"; he is connected to the tribe of Levi because Moses is.

Another clue that it is Moses who will atone for Levi is given at the event of the (non-)burning bush, where God reveals Himself to Moses and asks him to lead His people out of Egypt. Moses’s “brother”; he is connected to Levi because Moses is.

Joseph said to his brothers, "I am going to die. Know that the Lord will take charge of you and bring you back from this land to the land he swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." And Joseph made the children of Israel swear, saying "Yes, the Lord will take charge of you, and then you will take my bones out of here." (Genesis 50:24-25)

Go and gather together the elders of Israel and say to them, “The Lord God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, has appeared to me, saying, ‘I have taken charge of you and of what they are doing to you in Egypt.’” (Exodus 3:16)

Moses’ actions following this command also highlight a connection with Joseph.

Moses returned to Jethro, his brother-in-law, and said to him, "I would like to go away and return to my brothers in Egypt, to see if they are still alive." And Jethro said to Moses, "Go in peace." (Exodus 4:18)

Moses returns to Midian to see Jethro, whose flock he is in charge of. Surprisingly, he asks Jethro’s permission to go and rescue his brothers, and his brother-in-law agrees.

If we examine Moses’s request to return to Egypt, we see that it closely parallels Jacob’s request of Joseph that begins all of Joseph’s troubles:

He (Jacob) said to him (Joseph), "Go and see, please, how your brothers are, how the flocks are, and bring me news of them." So he sent him from the valley of Hebron and he came to Shechem. (Genesis 37:14)

Although the order of phrases between the two verses is not the same, the similarities are numerous:

- The root sh-u-v is used in both verses: Moses comes back (va-yashov) to Jethro, and asks to return (va-ashuva) to his brothers, and Jacob tells Joseph to report information back to him (va-hashiveini);
- The phrase va-yomer lo, “he said to him,” is used in both verses;
- Moses says elakah na, “I would like to go,” and Joseph is commanded lekh-na, “please go”;
- Moses wants to check on ahai, “my brothers,” and Joseph is commanded to check on ahekha, “your brothers”;
- In both stories, an indication of the place of departure and the place of destination is given: Moses departs from Midian and goes to Egypt, and Joseph departs from the valley of Hebron and goes to Shechem;
- Both Moses and Joseph are to “see” their brother’s welfare: Moses says ve-er’eh, “and I will see,” and Joseph is commanded re’eh, “see”;
- The word “peace” is used in both verses: Jethro tells Moses to go le-shalom, – “in peace,” and Jacob commands Joseph to see et shelom “the peace/wellbeing of” his brothers.

In addition to containing linguistic parallels to the specific verse where Joseph is requested to check on his brothers, Moses’s request also contains linguistic parallels to other parts of the Joseph story.

- Ha-odam hayyim – are they alive? The question asking whether someone is alive using this type of language appears in the words of only three characters in the Bible, including Joseph (indirectly in Genesis 43:7, directly in Genesis 43:27 and Genesis 45:3) and Moses here. They are the only ones in the Pentateuch.
- Ve-ashuvah - and I will return: This term appears only six times in the Bible, only two of them in the whole Pentateuch: here, concerning Moses, and in Genesis 50:5, when Joseph tells Pharaoh that he will return to Egypt after burying his father.
- Seneh – bush: this word appears in the entire Bible six times: five during the (non-) burning bush episode, which starts Moses’s journey (Exodus 3:3-4), and the sixth at the end of Moses’s life, when he blesses Joseph’s tribe (Deuteronomy 33:16).
At the end of Moses’s life, we see a final clue that Moses is the one who atones for Levi, one other event that connects him strongly to both Levi and to Joseph. When Moses blesses the tribes at the end of his life, the longest blessings that he gives are to those two tribes. These blessings are significantly longer than the blessings given to the other tribes (see Deuteronomy 33).

Conclusion

Now that we have examined Moses’s connection to Levi and to Joseph, we are able to explain why the text emphasizes that Moses specifically was the one to take Joseph’s bones out of Egypt. Of the known protagonists of the sale of Joseph, only Levi, Moses’s ancestor, had not brought any atonement. Recovering Joseph’s bones and transporting them out from Egypt and into the land of Canaan is the ultimate compensation for the damage Joseph has suffered. Because of Moses’s strong connection to Joseph, it makes sense that he is the one to fulfill this task. While he may have no obligation to do so, by burying Joseph, Moses is “paying” what can be seen as his ancestor’s centennial debt.

We have seen that at first glance the verse about Moses taking Joseph’s bones seems to be a throwaway detail, informing us that the tribes’ promise to Joseph was kept. However, by analyzing the precise terms used, we learn that in fact it hints to much larger implications regarding the character of Moses and his relationship to those who came before him. But this is not the only verse in the Torah with these types of insights hidden beneath the surface. By frequently asking questions and probing the exact uses of words and terms across the Torah, exploring why one term is used rather than another, we will be able to further discover the wonders contained therein.

1 This article is adapted from a chapter of a book of original commentaries on the Pentateuch that will be published in French in 2021, with God’s help. My deep thanks to Myriam Ackermann-Sommer and Avital Harris for their help in translating this commentary, and to Davida Kollmar for her kind review and comments.

2 See Rashi on Exodus 13:19, quoting Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael, as well as Baal Ha-Turim on Genesis 50:25. Rabbeinu Bahya on Genesis 50:25 goes further, saying that Joseph made not only his brothers, but also the future “children of Israel” swear, which explains why when Joseph made his brothers swear, they are referred to as “the children of Israel” rather than “his brothers” (Genesis 50:25).

3 Sefero (Exodus 13:19) makes the simple claim that "Moses was the ruler of the generation, therefore the task fell to him." While this answer is logical and demonstrates Moses’s leadership, it seems too simplistic in view of the emphasis that the text places on the idea that it was Moses himself who carried the bones, not as the leader of the people but as a private individual.

4 In general, there are many parallels between Jacob and Moses. Many of these parallels occur specifically within their respective last words, including the use of token animals and phrases such as le-rosh yosef u-lekodkod nezir ehav (Genesis 49:26, Deuteronomy 33:16) and gur aryeh (Genesis 49:9, Deuteronomy 33:22). It is therefore likely that Jacob and Moses would refer to the same person when mentioning a bull.

5 Note that the Or ha-Haim on Exodus 13:19 also mentions this idea of reparation, based on the term "from here" used by Joseph. Or ha-Haim interprets this phrase not as an indication of the place from where the children of Israel should retrieve Joseph’s bones, but rather as the reason for the retrieval of his bones.

6 This is not to claim that the punishment and reparation is or is not "divine"; intriguingly, God does not explicitly intervene in this specific episode.

7 The theme of the elder getting less than his younger brother(s) is omnipresent in the Torah from Cain and Abel, through Ishmael and Isaac, or Esau and Jacob. Let us note here, however, that this is the first time that the elder loses a position he once held because of his acts AND that the younger one recovers that place because of his acts.

8 It may be that Simeon also had daughters, but the verse does not mention this.

9 The relationship between Moses and Jethro is the subject of debate among the commentators. I argue for the interpretation that they are brothers-in-law in my book.

10 It is unusual to use such a common expression as an element of comparison between verses because of its abundance in the whole Bible. While this expression on its own may not be enough for comparison, it does contribute to the similarity between the two verses when taken in context of the rest of the parallels.
last night, I was in the midst of delivering an online shiur on the subject of Hanukkah and kiddush Hashem. I had reached the words of the Rambam in Hilkhos Yesodei Ha-Torah, the fifth perek, halakhat yud alef, when a text message flashed across my computer screen that simply said, "BDE Rabbi Schwartz." For a split second, I was unsure of what to do - to apologize and cancel the shiur; to share the news that our mentor and guide HaRav Schwartz had passed away and then teach, or simply to plow ahead and deliver the shiur as planned. I wasn't sure. But then, just as quickly, I thought of what Rabbi Schwartz would do. And I decided to say nothing, teach the class, and only afterward did I share the terrible news with those who had joined.

I thought of what Rabbi Schwartz would do... which is something I and so many others who learned from him do so very often. Because just as Yosef ha-Tzaddik saw at that critical moment in life the deyukno shel aviv, the image of his father, and knew what to do; we, so many rabbanim and bo'alei battim in America see the deyukno shel Ha-Rav Schwartz and know what to do.

And so last night, I put aside the tragedy and ignored the incessant vibrations of my phone. Because at that moment, there was nothing I could do other than take a deep breath, move forward, and teach Torah.

For while it is true that Rabbi Schwartz was one of the most compassionate, gentlest, kindest men I had ever met, he was also one of the strongest, determined, and most resolute of men I ever knew. He was a true Litvak. The proud namesake of a talmid of the Rav, Reb Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, zt"l. And he possessed a strength of character that was awesome.

When Rabbi Schwartz would consider an issue carefully and then take a stand, he would not be swayed even if it were controversial. I saw it many times: early on in his days in Chicago when he took a position on the legitimacy of gittin despite the New York Get Law; and then in his stance on brain death; and even his decision to support the very first eruv in the Chicago area but his unwillingness to be involved with the second - because as he told me then, quoting from Reb Yakov Yosef, sometimes the answer to a question is to choose not to answer.

And of course so many of us saw it in his strength during the many years he supported his first Rebbetzin through her illness while serving as the Av Beit of the Beit Din of America, the Av Beit Din of the Chicago Rabbinical Council and still helping with household chores, preserving the Rebbetzin's dignity and always caring for her. And we saw it with his second Rebbetzin as well - may she have a refuah sheleimah.

And I was privileged to see it once in his living room when he asked me to be present as he took a swift but very difficult action to preserve the integrity of the Beth Din. Rabbi Schwartz did what needed to be done: carefully, deliberately, firmly, and with a deep understanding of human nature and the integrity of Halakhah.

Because Rabbi Schwartz was an ish halakhah, a man who was master of Shas and poskim, and yet who possessed an innate understanding that Halakhah is not merely a code, but a guide that must be used to bring people closer to God - as the Rama teaches us with his opening challenge of shiviti Hashem le-negdi tamid, always place God in front of me.

And therefore, Rav Schwartz not only interacted with great rabbanim and poskim, giants of Torah past and present, for whom he had great respect, and which they had for him. But he also treasured his opportunities to meet with people beyond the Orthodox community, creating relationships that, for example, brought the Jewish Federation to rely on the cRc Beit Din to resolve financial issues with immigrants from the Former Soviet Union.

Joining us on missions to Europe and Israel, I remember his pride in visiting Volozhin and the pain he felt in Auschwitz. I remember the joy he brought to elderly Jews in Berdichev and the thrill he had giving a shiur in Hachmei Lublin. And I remember the respect he showed for everyone, that ultimately brought non-Orthodox clergy to rely on our Beit Din for gittin, and then say to me - more than once- how fortunate we were to have Rav Schwartz lead us.

His life was not always easy. His challenges were significant, but so were his achievements. He was the first second generation American talmid hakham to publish hidushei Torah, and it earned the approbation of Reb Aharon Kotler. He was chosen as a member of the very first Kollel of YU. He was a Rav in communities large and small, communities that appreciated rabbanim and communities that tried to change their rabbanim.

And he built, and he created. And he became the gadol ba-Torah that we knew understood our challenges in the field. The man who, if you would ask for his da'at Torah, would inevitably respond, "I don't know what da'at Torah is, but if you want my opinion, let me hear the issues, and I will respond."
Rav Schwartz loved history and languages, and of course, he loved learning. And his knowledge and memory were awe-inspiring.

Just a few brief memories.

Every year before the Shabbat Shuvah and Shabbat ha-Gadol derashah that he would deliver in my shul, I would call him erev Shabbat, and he would give me a list of sefarim he wanted for the shiur. One time, I forgot one of the sefarim he needed. As he spoke, he started looking through the pile of books until he realized, as did I, that I forgot a gemara. He gave me a look, and then he proceeded to quote the gemara and the Tosafot by heart - speaking as he always did without notes and without a watch and precisely for one hour.

And then there was the time when a teacher at Ida Crown was studying with her class Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice. Knowing that Rabbi Schwartz had once taught English literature, I asked him if he would speak to the class about Shylock from a Jewish perspective.

Naively, I thought he would refer to Rav Zevin's famous halakhic analysis of Shylock. But he didn't. Instead, he came, and he began comparing Marlowe's image of the Jew to Shakespeare's. He then spoke about Venetian Jewry's history and ended by describing when he was a student in Yeshiva, and they were given tickets to a Yiddish production of the play. He told the story and then produced a clipping with the review, suggesting that the Yiddish version was even better than the original.

And one painful memory... from a couple of years ago - after the stroke. I was visiting Rav Schwartz at home. He was in bed in the living room. I had come to say hello, tell him a bit of what was going on in the community, and ask him a few questions.

Somewhere in the middle, he turned and asked me for the name of someone we both knew, a Dayan in the Rabbanut ha-Rashit. I told him the person's name. And he thanked me and said that sometimes it feels as if a page in his mind was erased, and he just couldn't remember things he knew he once knew.

Rav Schwartz was one of a kind. An Ish Eshkolot - a polymath who could understand the science of absorption to rule on kashering questions, who could recall comments of his teachers from Rav Mendelson of Newark, to Rav Shatzkes, Reb Dovid Lipshitz, and the Rav, who created relationships that transformed our community, and whose humility, warmth, and authenticity created a kiddush Hashem.

Which brings me back to where I began, to the Rambam I was teaching when the news of Rav Schwartz's passing, flashed across my screen.

Wrote the Rambam in that very Halakhah: That was Rabbi Schwartz. He was our mentor, our guide, our inspiration, and of course, he loved learning. And his knowledge and memory were awe-inspiring.

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