JOSEPH AND HIS BROTHERS: SIBLING RIVALRY REVISITED

JEFFREY M. COHEN

(Reprinted with permission of Jewish Bible Quarterly. Publ. in vol.49(no.2) April-June 2021, pp. 103-108)

Joseph, at the age of seventeen years, was a shepherd together with his brothers; He was a youth with the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah…and Joseph brought back their evil report to his father (37:2). This disarmingly simple verse is replete with ambiguity. First, the difficulty of harmonising the two statements: 'he was a shepherd *together with his brothers*,' and 'he was a youth (*v'hu na'ar*) *with the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah.'*

'His brothers' clearly refers to the principal sons - the offspring of Jacob and Leah - namely, Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar and Zebulun. Joseph and his younger brother, Benjamin,[1] also enjoyed the status of principal sons - offspring of Jacob and his other full wife, Rachel - yet, the rivalry between the two wives served as a catalyst for the bitterness that characterised the deteriorating relationship between their respective children, exacerbated by Joseph's claim to leadership. 'The sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah,' on the other hand, were invested by birth with a lower familial and social status.

The verse in question appears self-contradictory, therefore, as Joseph could not have been 'together with his brothers' of the Leah clan - enjoying the freedom of minding the flocks in the fields - while being at the same time 'with the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah,' the family of the handmaids, whose centre of activity was around the homestead!

Another ambiguity is provided by the phrase *dibbatam ra'ah*, literally, *'their* evil report,' which leaves open the identity of the pronominal suffix, *tam*: Does it refer to evil perpetrated by 'his

brothers' of the Leah clan, or by 'the sons of the handmaids', or by both groups in concert?[2] Or does it refer to more general reports of evil happenings in the area, which Joseph would relay to his father either for his diversion or for his security awareness?

Then there is the problem of the phrase *v'hu na'ar*, 'and he was a youth,' which is unclear in this context. Having already been told in the previous phrase that 'Joseph was seventeen years old,' the statement that 'he was a youth' is clearly tautologous. Hence the Midrashic interpretation, 'he behaved like an immature youth – styling his hair and making up his eyes to make him look attractive.'[3] On the phrase 'with the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah,' Rashi observes, 'he constantly sought out their company, and, because the other brothers despised them, he befriended them.'

One non-Midrashic way of resolving the above issues is to translate our verse thus: *Joseph was aged seventeen years when he joined his brothers in looking after the sheep; Now, during his (earlier) youth with the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpha, he had brought back an evil report of them to his father.*

The implication of this nuanced rendering would be to confine the issue of the evil report exclusively to the sons of the handmaids, as underscored by the juxtaposition of the latter two phrases. This would also provide a rationale for their later alienation from Joseph and their alliance with the other brothers in his kidnapping and sale.

This rendering of the verse would also be in line with Ibn Ezra's attempt to explain away the problem of *na'ar,* interpreting it as 'an attendant,' in which sense it occurs in other passages, such as the description of Joshua as the *na'ar* of Moses' (Ex. 33:11) and Jonathan's instruction to his *na'ar* to run and find the arrows he had shot (I Sam.20:36). He adds that, 'because of his youth, the sons of the handmaids made Joseph ''attend on them'' as their lackey.

Such ill-treatment was, in Ibn Ezra's opinion, the essence of the 'evil report' that he brought to their father.'

Ibn Ezra's interpretation does not strike us as wholly convincing, however, given that the Leah clan would hardly have concerned themselves with any internal squabbles involving the others. It is also highly unlikely that such an issue would have justified such a pejorative term as an 'evil report!'

It is also highly unlikely that the children of the handmaids would have had the temerity to treat Joseph in such a way, given their consciousness of their father's deep love for him on account of his being the son of Jacob's sorely-missed deceased wife, Rachel, as well as because of his reliance on Joseph as 'the son of his old age' (v.3).

Furthermore, given that the sons of the handmaids would have been involved in the domestic chores around the home, father Jacob would have been able to monitor at close quarters the family dynamic and especially their attitude towards his beloved Joseph. He would never have countenanced, therefore, the sort of treatment of him as suggested by Ibn Ezra.

This all brings us back to an interpretation of the word *na'ar* in its usual sense of 'a youth', with the preposition *et,* 'together with', denoting a warm fraternal relationship, an interpretation favoured by the 19th cent. Italian scholar, Samuel David Luzzatto.[4]

Ramban offers a novel and penetrating insight into the sibling strife reflected in the verse under review. He interprets our verse as reflecting two interrelated struggles: one between Joseph and the offspring of the handmaids; the other between him and the brothers of the Leah clan.[5]

He quotes Rashi's interpretation regarding the close friendship that existed between Joseph and the sons of the handmaids, but raises the objection we have already indicated, namely that, if that were indeed the case, we would surely have expected the latter to have leapt to their beloved Joseph's aid when he was threatened, kidnapped and sold by the Leah clan!

He counters any suggestion that their inaction may have been occasioned by a fear of challenging the rest. After all, he argues, they constituted four of the brothers (Dan, Naphtali, Gad and Asher), who, together with Reuven – Joseph's firm defender[6] – and Joseph himself, would have represented a firm verbal opposition, and, if it came to it, a strong physical deterrence. But, as the text affirms, they all formed a united front in their ill-treatment and sale of Joseph.

Ramban is led, therefore, to the more popular view, as suggested by our opening banner translation, that Joseph's 'evil report' was directed at *all* the brothers, including the children of the handmaids. From the reference to Joseph as having spent his early youth in the company of the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah he also takes it for granted that Jacob would have specifically instructed the latter— but not the Leah clan— to protect the youthful Joseph and make sure that he never left their side. Ramban assumes, therefore, that it was, crucially, *from them* and their habit of sharing with him their sense of hurt at the harsh and discriminatory treatment they were receiving at the hands of the Leah clan, that Joseph gleaned the information that formed the core of his 'evil report' to his father. Samson Raphael Hirsch follows this interpretation of Ramban, but without accreditation.[7]

Hence it was that, *by leaking that report*, Joseph not only alienated the Leah clan - the real culprits - but also the sons of the handmaids who would have been blamed by, and inevitably made to suffer at the hands of, the Leah clan for having disclosed to the young Joseph the ill-treatment they were suffering, and which would inevitably place them in bad odour with their father. And for that reason it was less difficult for Joseph's erstwhile friends and protectors, the sons of the handmaids, to dissociate themselves from the anti-Joseph conspiracy. Thus, 'poor, poor, Joseph' was left out on a limb, with none to come to his aid.

For the Leah clan, however, that issue of the evil report would have been but the tip of the iceberg which released all their sup-

pressed jealousy at their father's demonstrated love for, and partiality towards, Joseph, which they would have deeply resented given their own seniority in age and equality of status as children of a principal wife. Add to this their inevitably repressed depth of feeling for their mother, Leah, who, notwithstanding her seniority of age, was treated as an inferior and unloved wife throughout her married life – a relationship that their father Jacob had allowed to be perpetuated in his treatment of them in relation to their younger brother, Joseph!

Thus, the sibling antipathy that characterised relations between Joseph and the Leah clan went much deeper, and was far more psychologically complex, than the issue of 'the evil report' that finally destroyed the bond between him and the children of the handmaids.

PSYCHOLOGY OF SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS

Ramban's expansion of the episode of Joseph and the Leah clan's rivalry, to include the hitherto unrecognised issue of his strained relationship with the sons of the handmaids, impinges on the broader subject of the psychology of sibling relationships, one that has attracted considerable academic attention over the past few decades.[8]

One of its conclusions is that children are more likely to become the victims of abuse by a sibling than by any other family member.[8] Although the biblical episode sheds no direct light on the relationship between the Leah clan and the sons of the handmaids, yet, Ramban's insights and the Midrashic tradition that the 'evil report' had to do with the former's verbal abuse of the latter—calling them by the demeaning term 'slaves'— is directly pertinent. It also supports our contention that the curious change of attitude on the part of the sons of the handmaids towards Joseph may have been triggered by the physical abuse and reprisals they experienced at the hands of the Leah clan for having disclosed details of their ill-treatment to Joseph.

While our reference to 'physical abuse and reprisals' might be perceived as going well beyond the fairly innocuous Midrashic description of the actions of the Leah clan, namely that 'they *slighted* the sons of the handmaids (*m'zalz'lin hem bivnei ha-shefachot*) by calling them slaves,'[9] we have noted, above, how Rashi describes that relationship as far more intensely fraught, stating that Joseph had befriended the latter 'because the Leah clan *despised them* (*l'fi shehayu echav* ***m'vazin*** *otan*).'[10] Such a mind-set covers a multitude of sins, with violence a clear probability!

Indeed, the degree of the mental and physical abuse that the Leah clan was capable of employing was well demonstrated later to the sons of the handmaids when they were drawn into the former's conspiracy against Joseph. We may assume, therefore, that, were it not for that coercion, the sons of the handmaids would have been able to find it in their hearts to forgive Joseph's misdemeanour.

NOTES

1. It will be noted that Benjamin was born after Jacob had left Bet El, on his way to Ephrat. Joseph would then have been about eight years old, at the most. Thus, at the time of Joseph's strife with his brothers, Benjamin, a mere nine-year old, could not have been in a position to offer any assistance to his older brother.
2. Samson Raphael Hirsch refers to this ambiguity of the phrase '*their* evil report.' See his *Commentary on the Pentateuch*: *Genesis* (tr. Isaac Levy), on Gen. 37:2.
3. Mid. *Ber. Rabb*. 84 (7).
4. See S. D. Luzzato, *Peirush ShaDaL ad loc*.
5. See *Peirush ha-RaMbaN al ha-Torah* (Jer.: 1959, Mosad HaRav Kuk), p.205-207.
6. See Gen. 37:21-22.
7. See Hirsch, *ad. loc*.
8. See Alison Pike, Tina Kretschmer and Judith T. Dunn, ''Siblings – friends or foes?'', The Psychologist, vol.22:6 (June 2009), p. 496ff.; Gene H. Brody, ''Sibling relationship quality: its causes and consequences,'' See, *Annual Review of Psychology*, vol. 49 (1998), 1-24
9. See n. 3.
10. See Rashi *s.v. et b'nei Vilhah* (Gen. 37:2)