

Personal Challenges Generated by Divine Symmetries

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The three themes in Parashat Matot are very much integrally related to one another. The Parasha begins with a discussion of various aspects of vows (BaMidbar 30:2-17), followed by a description of the war with Midian and how the spoils of war were to be purified and distributed (Ibid. 31:1-54), and concludes with the negotiations between the tribes of Reuven and Gad and the rest of the Jewish people to allow them to settle outside of the land of Israel, on the other side of the Jordan River (Ibid. 32:1-42.) It was the spoils of the war with Midian that enriched these two tribes, (Ibid. 31:9) “And the children of Israel...all of their animals and all of their herds... they took as spoils”, (Ibid. 32:1) “And the extensive herds belonging to the children of Reuven and the children of Gad were very great, and they saw the lands of Ya’azer and the land of Gilad, and behold the place was a place for herds,” which in turn led them to make a verbal commitment to earn the right to take possession of these lands by serving in the vanguard of the Jews who would invade and conquer the land of Israel (Ibid. 32:20-42.)¹

A Midrash ties the fortunes of the Midianim and the two tribes of Reuven and Gad together not only materially, but also theologically:

BaMidbar Rabba 22:8

This is what the verse said, (Tehillim 75:7-8) “It is not because of travelling to the east or to the west, and not because of travelling to the desert or the mountains (that leads to one becoming enriched) but rather God is the Judge, He Lowers this one and that one He Raises ” ...²

And so Chana says, (I Shmuel 2:6-7) “God Causes death and Gives life, Sends down to the Netherworld and Raises up, God Causes inheritance and Enriches, He Lowers and ‘Af’ (even) Raises.” What is indicated by the phrase “Af Meromeim”? With “Af” (in addition to being translated as even/also, “Af” can also connote anger, upset, which is the homiletical point in this Midrash) that He Brings to this one, He Raises that one.

¹ RaMBaN, who posits in his commentary on Beraishit 12:6, that an important frame of reference for Beraishit is the principle, “Ma’asei Avot Siman LaBanim” (the deeds of the fathers presage what will happen to their descendents), could point to the following parallel in Beraishit to the events that are recorded in Parashat Matot:

Beraishit 12:16; 13:2 Avraham was enriched by Pharoah in exchange for taking Sara as a wife, including sheep, cattle and donkeys.

“ 13:5 Lot shared in this wealth.

“ :6 Lot wanted his own land for his animals.

“ :9-11 Avraham makes an agreement with his nephew for them to settle in separate places.

² The language “Zeh Yeshafel VeZeh Yarim” in this verse from Tehillim is obviously the basis for the final phrase in the haunting Rosh Hashana liturgy, following on the heels of R. Amram’s “U’Netaneh Token” prayer, “Who will live and who will die...who will become impoverished and who will become enriched, “Mi Yishafel U’Mi Yarum” (who will be lowered and who will be raised)?”

Whereas the initial portion of the Midrash merely attributes responsibility for and ability to God when it comes to determining a particular individual's or group's financial condition, the next section suggests that various people and peoples are bound together, i.e., one person's loss directly leads to another person's gain.³ Such a perspective is then illustrated in this same Midrash by an anecdote:

A Roman noblewoman asked R. Shimon ben Chalafta: How long did it take the Holy One, Blessed be He, to Create the universe?

He said to her: Six days, as it says, (Shemot 20:10) "Because for six days God Made the Heaven and the earth."

She asked him: From that time until today, what is He Doing?

He said to her: He Sits and Makes "ladders".⁴ ⁵ He Raises this one and he Lowers that one.⁶ For this reason it is said, "God is the Judge, He Lowers this one and that one He Raises."⁷

³ A Halachic manifestation of such an idea is reflected in Mishna Sanhedrin 4:1. Whereas a trial at which someone's life is at stake always begins with the presentation of the reasons why the individual being judged should be exonerated rather than convicted. This reflects the bias in Jewish law of preferring that 99 guilty individuals go free rather than having even a single innocent person be wrongly convicted. However, such an approach is impossible in a monetary trial where the two litigants are at odds with one another. A finding in favor of one by definition has to be to the detriment of the other. Consequently, in this type of trial, there never can be a preference of opening up the deliberations with the considerations of exoneration, because such arguments will simultaneously be detrimental to the other side.

⁴ At first glance, a "ladder" is merely a conveyance that allows an individual to either climb up or down. Yet the connotation of "ladder" in the Midrash appears to be that for every individual that is able to rise, there is someone else who must descend, as if the two are tethered together. The Midrash appears to posit that there is a "Law of Conservation of Material Resources" that requires that the set amount of wealth and possessions in the world maintains an eternal equilibrium. The biblical reference that comes to mind wherein a ladder with this exact quality is depicted is Yaakov's dream at the beginning of Parashat VaYetzeh:

Beraishit 28:12

And he dreamt and behold a ladder standing on the ground with its head in the Heavens. And behold, Divine Angels were ascending and descending upon it.

Indeed, one of the interpretations of the vision cited by RaShI maintains that a changing of the Angelic guard that accompanied Yaakov on his journeys, was taking place since he was leaving Israel to travel to Charan. The angels assigned to the protection detail in the land of Israel were ascending, to be replaced by the descending group charged with protecting Yaakov outside of Israel.

⁵ In addition to the hypotheses that God has been Making "ladders" and/or Shidduchim (see fn. 5), the Rabbinic imagination suggests a different possibility in Avoda Zora 3b:

Said R. Yehuda in the name of Rav: The day (daylight?) is comprised of twelve hours. During the first three, the Holy One, Blessed be He, Sits and Engages in Tora study; the second three is when He Sits in judgment of the entire world. When He Sees that the world will be found deserving of destruction, He Rises from the Throne of Judgment and Moves over to the Throne of Compassion; during the third three, He Sits and Provides sustenance to the world; during the fourth three, He Sits and Plays with the Leviathon...

⁶ A more well-known Midrash in VaYikra Rabba presents the question and the noblewoman's reaction to R. Yose ben Chalafta's (a slight variation in the name of the Rabbi whom the woman was questioning) explanation as focusing on a matter other than the interrelationships of financial situations:

You should know, that when God Desired to enrich the children of Reuven and Gad, He Threw down the Midianites before the Jewish people, in order that the children of Reuven and Gad should become enriched...

R. Elimelech Bar Shaul⁸ suggests that Reuven and Gad's "raised position" proves to be short-lived, because instead of utilizing their new-found wealth to enhance their spirituality and contributions to the Jewish people, they did just the opposite.

With respect to the children of Gad and Reuven, the wealth that came into their possession did not become a blessing, but the opposite of a blessing. They became enamored of possessions for the possessions' sake, their wealth became for them an end in itself to the point that because of the money/possessions/herds, they chose to dwell at a distance from their brothers, outside of the chosen Land. And now, compared

VaYikra Rabba 8:1

... From that time until today, what is He Doing?

He said to her: He is Making matches...i.e., the daughter of so-and-so (should marry) so-and-so...

She said to him: That is all? Even I can do this! I have many male servants and many female servants and I can pair them off with one another in no time!

He said to her: If it seems easy in your eyes, it is as difficult to the Holy One, Blessed be He, as the splitting of the Sea of Reeds.

He left her and went on his way.

What did she do? She sent and brought 1000 male servants and 1000 female students and she lined them up in rows.

She said to them: So-and-so will marry so-and so; so-and-so will marry so-and-so.

She mated them in a single night.

The next morning, they came to her. This one had a head injury; this one's eye had been taken out; this one's elbow was crushed; and this one had a broken leg. This one said: I don't want him as a husband. And this one said: I don't want her as a wife.

Immediately she sent for and brought to her R. Yose ben Chalafta.

She said: Rabbi! Your Tora is true. It is beautiful and praiseworthy. Properly you said all that you said...

Although the subject matter of the two versions of the give-and-take between R. Shimon ben Chalafta/R. Yose ben Chalafta and the noblewoman are essentially different, a commonality can nevertheless be detected, with respect to the fact that just as the economic standing of various people are intertwined with one another, so too an individual's quality and experience of life is very much a function of the spouse with whom he ultimately chooses to spend his life.

⁷ While it is hard to view the interpretation that God Makes "ladders" as serving as a model for the actions of human beings who are Commanded to "Walk in God's Ways" (e.g., Devarim 28:9), i.e., people are not usually in the position where they can determine who is deserving of wealth and who is not (while the "Robin Hood model may come closest to such a process, one can't escape the fact that this constitutes a Mitzva HaBa'ah BeAveira [a positive action that comes about via a prohibited action]), certainly the activity of trying to help people find appropriate marriage matches is an honorable activity, however fraught with difficulty such a pursuit may be. And as for the source in Avoda Zora, this idea very much provides emulatable models for human beings—Tora study, serving as a compassionate judge, providing food and support particularly for those who are unable to obtain these things for themselves, and even some sort of regular physical recreation.

⁸ Min HaBe'er, Moreshet, Tel-Aviv, 5725, p. 166.

to their brothers, the theme of “this one He Brings down and this one He Raises up,” applies to the tribes of Reuven and Gad (they are the ones who are brought down by their reprehensible choice.)^{9 10}

Therefore, R. Bar Shaul’s insight adds an additional wrinkle to the Midrash about God Making “ladders.” Not only are risings and fallings connected to one another, they also constitute individual tests for those suddenly finding themselves in situations previously not experienced or even imagined. What Reuven and Gad were going to do with their windfall of wealth, as well as how the Midianites’ defeat, displacement and loss of possessions were going to impact their nation and future possibilities, are as much part of the Divine Plan as the particular synergy that lands them in their respective situations.

⁹ The fact that Reuven and Gad became corrupted by their wealth is not always recognized due to what Moshe tells them once they agree to the arrangement whereby they will first fight alongside the rest of the Jewish people until Canaan is conquered before they will be given outright title to the lands on the other side of the Jordan:

Bamidbar 32:22

And the land will be conquered before HaShem and they you will return (to the lands on the other side of the Jordan) and you will be “Neki'im” (lit. clean, free of obligation, free of responsibility) from HaShem and Yisrael, and this land will be to you as an inheritance before God.

Originally Moshe had been concerned that the refusal of Reuven and Gad to live in Israel could spark a repetition of the sin of the spies (Bamidbar 14:1-5), whereby the entire nation would once again get “cold feet” because of the impression that the land was uninhabitable for the Jews (see Bamidbar 32:8-15). However, as long as these tribes were ready to participate in the conquest of the land, Moshe felt that the rest of the Jews would not draw the wrong conclusions regarding the possibility of their successfully conquering the land. Yet, even if where these tribes wished to settle would not adversely effect the feelings of the rest of the people to the land once they did their part in the land’s conquest, that does not mean that their decision should then be celebrated. Even if they would no longer be placed in the category of “Macht'im” (causing others to sin), that does not mean that they themselves, by making this request and carrying it out, were not “Chotim” (sinners) with respect to God’s Plan for the Jewish people.

¹⁰ In addition to an inordinate emphasis upon materialism, one can see a metaphysical shortcoming on the parts of Reuven and Gad as well. The Rabbis explain why Moshe so desperately wished to enter the land:

Midrash Tannaim on Devarim 3:25

...And why was Moshe so upset that he couldn’t enter the land of Israel? Was it in order to eat from its produce? Was it to benefit from its silver and gold? But rather this is what Moshe said: Master of the Universe! Many Mitzvot You have Given to the Jewish people through me and they can’t be properly performed except in the land of Israel, as it is said, (Devarim 6:1; 12:1) “These are the statutes and the laws that HaShem your Lord Commanded you to teach you to do them in the land that you are crossing there in order to inherit it.” I wish to enter with them and perform with them the Commandments in order that I will receive reward in the World to Come...

Consequently, the decision of the two tribes to live in Chutz LaAretz meant the preclusion of their fulfilling Commandments in a manner that would have helped them maintain their connections to God and the rest of the people. It is not surprising therefore that I Chronicles 5:26 records how they were the first of the tribes to experience exile from their land.

Finally, understanding the metaphor of “ladders” in a way that posits that not only is there a certain symmetry that informs the events of the world, combined with Reuven and Gad almost immediately misusing their raised status and consequently eventually being similarly lowered, suggests that when one individual/group is reduced and at the same time another is raised, that such a duality is not necessarily meant to remain static, but continues to be fluid. In other words, just as when Reuven and Gad were enriched, they had to earn the right to retain their new-found wealth—would “new wealth” last long enough to become “old wealth”?—the same could be said regarding the Midianim, i.e., they may be lowered at this point, as a result of their role in organizing the plot to attack Jewish morality and monotheism,¹¹ but that does not have to be the end of the road for them.¹² Just as in Parashat Nitzavim, the Jews’ hitting “bottom” hopefully will serve as a catalyst for repentance and personal improvement (Devarim 30:1-9), the same pattern could potentially apply to others who may finally see the error in their ways after suffering dislocation and loss of influence. Isn’t that the eschatological vision encapsulated in Zecharia 14:9, “And God will be the King over the entire earth. On that day God will be One and His Name will be One,”—a day will come when everyone, Jew and non-Jew alike, will achieve spiritual enlightenment?

The story of the tribes of Reuven and Gad expands upon the phenomenon of Divine Symmetry that William Blake so evocatively expressed in 1794 by his classic poem, “The Tyger”:¹³

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand¹⁴ or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?...

When the stars threw down their spears,
And water’d heaven with their tears,
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?...

¹¹ BaMidbar 25:17-8.

¹² While the Talmud assumes that it is no longer possible to identify Midianim, or for that matter Moavim, Mitzriyim and even Amalekim—

Berachot 28a

R. Yehoshua said to him: Do you think that Amon and Moav are still dwelling in their places? Sancherev, the king of Assyria, already rose up and mixed together all of the nations, as it is said, (Yeshayahu 10:13) “And I have removed the boundaries of nations, I plundered their treasures, like a mighty one I have subdued their kings”

Nevertheless individuals and even entire groups of people will hopefully pull themselves together at some future point in time regardless of their present social, economic and technical status.

¹³ The Norton Anthology of Poetry, ed. Ferguson, Salter, Stallworthy, W.W. Norton, New York, pp. 743-4.

¹⁴ While I would capitalize references to Divine Actions, since Blake did not do so in his poem, I will defer to his punctuation.

The poet is noting the symmetry that exists literally between predators and prey, carnivorous and herbivorous animals, creatures in the wild compared to those that are domesticated, and on a more symbolic level, overall good and evil.¹⁵ The Midrash suggests that not only do all of the diverse creatures of the world emanate from the same Source and exist in some sort of biological ecological balance, but the events that effect human beings are also organized according to some overarching symmetry. But there is a significant difference between any symmetry that applies to lower animals, insects and the rest of the natural world, and the apparent balance that some might claim similarly applies to people. The possible parallelism of human symmetry to that of the rest of creation, and ultimate rejection of such an equation by our primary sources, is articulated in a discussion between an apostate teacher and his loyal student:

Chagiga 15a

Acher (Elisha ben Avuya) asked R. Meir after he “went out to bad culture” (lost his faith): He said to him: What is meant by the phrase, (Kohelet 7:14) “Also this corresponding to that God Made”?

He said to him: Whatever the Holy One, Blessed be He, Created, He Created something corresponding to it. He Created mountains, He Created valleys; He Created seas, He Created rivers.

He said to him: R. Akiva, your teacher, would not have explained in this way. But rather He Created righteous people, He Created evildoers; He Created the Garden of Eden, He Created Geihinom. If the evil doer is found guilty, he takes his portion and the portion of his colleague in Geihinom.

Although R. Meir does not attempt to refute his teacher at this point, the continuation of the story in the Talmud depicts the student continually attempting to influence his teacher to repent, even after Acher dies!, in effect refuting the idea that man is fated to immutably be good or evil, predestined to end up in the World to Come or the Netherworld. Naturally, an individual who is unwilling to try to change will gravitate to a world-view that change is impossible; he might conveniently claim that changing what has been Decreed from Above will interfere with the world’s “fearful symmetry.” However, the concept of repentance maintains that the possibility for return, change, and renewal remains as long as a human being possesses free will, a quality that is deeply bound up with people being Created in the Image of God. All things being equal, there may be symmetry; man has the capacity to respond to new situations and change for the better—or not.

¹⁵ The prophetic answer to Blake’s (rhetorical?) question is found in Yeshayahu 45:7:

He Forms light and Creates darkness, He Makes peace and Creates evil. I am God Who Makes all of these.