

Vayechi: You will See

Rabbi Eliezer Barany

A charming son is Joseph, a son charming to the eye; [of the] women, [each one] strode along to see him. (Sefer Beresheit 49:22)

1. Earning the Blessing

In this week's parsha, as Yaakov nears the end of his days, he delivers blessings to his sons. The above pasuk is Rashi's translation of the blessing Yaakov delivers to Yosef. Rashi also quotes and explains the translation of Onkeles, with midrashim providing clarification:

There are Midrashim (Genesis Rabbah 78:9) that fit in with the text: When Esau came to meet Jacob all the other patriarchs walked in front of their children to prostrate themselves but of Rachel it states (33:7) “[and afterwards] came Joseph near and Rachel (i.e. Joseph before Rachel) and they bowed down”. Joseph said, “This wicked man has a haughty look (is bold and impudent) he may set his fancy upon my mother”. He therefore stepped in front of her, drawing himself up to his full height, in order to hide her from Esau's eyes. It was in reference to this that his father when blessing him called him a **בן פורת**, a son who grew in size: You, Joseph, stretched yourself to a great height to protect your mother against Esau's glance, therefore you deserved to become great. In accordance with this Midrash the words **בנות צעדה עלי שור** mean they climbed up to get a good view of you when you went forth in the procession as Viceroy over Egypt. They (the Rabbis) gave a further interpretation of it, taking **עלי עין** as **עולי עין**, “raised above the eye”, in the sense that the Evil Eye would have no effect on his children (Berakhot 20a). So, too, when he blessed Manasseh and Ephraim he blessed them, praying that they should become as fishes on which the Evil Eye has no effect.

Rashi quotes a few midrashim that paint a full picture. He provides us with a backstory that he feels is imperative to understanding this blessing. The midrash

explains that Yosef earned an exalted position in Egypt when he stepped in front of his mother to protect her from Esav. He then explains that in line with this midrash, women would want to run to be able to catch a glimpse of Yosef. And then in addition to that, Rashi further explains that the “Evil Eye” had no effect on him.

2. How appropriate?

So we now may understand how he earned this blessing, but what kind of blessing is this? At this time when Yaakov is sharing with his sons the spiritual gifts they are able to attain, Yaakov is telling Yosef that he will be very attractive. How attractive? So much so that all the women of Egypt will want to look upon him.

3. Out of sight out of mind

When looking to an understanding of the “Evil Eye”, this midrash seems all the more perplexing. The Gemara in Pesachim 50b explains that, “*Our Rabbis taught: He who trades in cane and jars will never see a sign of blessing. What is the reason? Since their bulk is large, the [evil] eye has power over them.*” To which Rashi explains, “*Market traders are exposed to the public gaze, and so to the evil eye, which is a potent source of misfortune.*” The Gemara in Bava Metzia 107a explains, “*One may not stand over his neighbors field when its crop is full grown.*” Rashi explains in Beresheit 42:5 that the sons of Yaakov were told to Enter Egypt through separate gates, “*in order that the evil eye should not have power over them.*”

In all of the above examples, and many others are found throughout Talmud and midrash, it seems to be that the “Evil Eye” is in effect when something or someone is at the center of attention. With this in mind, how is it that Yosef is given a blessing to be the center of attention, yet not have the “Evil Eye” rule over him?

4. Jealousy

What difference should there be between an object or person that is the center of attention as opposed to the same object or person that does not draw its attention? We can see from the given cases that when one becomes the center of attention, jealousy will be evoked. Others will see what you are showing off, and an “Evil Eye” will be cast.¹ In fact, Rashi quotes that there is no “Evil Eye” on fishes. What makes them different? They are in the water, not in plain sight.

5. Helping others

What is unique about Yosef that the “Evil Eye” will not have power over him? Why is he different? To this, Rashi provided the reasoning of the midrash. Yosef stepped in front of his mother to protect her from Esav. If we look to this incident, we see that Yosef put himself at the center of attention; he purposely drew the gaze of Esav. However, Yosef’s intent was to merely protect his mother, not to garner attention.

When Yosef received the attention of the women of Egypt, he was the viceroy of Egypt. Somehow, during his years of slavery and imprisonment, he did not gather that kind of following. What was different about him being the viceroy? Certainly being famous, in the public eye, and wearing fine clothing didn’t hurt. However, how did he get to this position? He saved the people of Egypt from a life ending famine. He allowed them to be the powerhouse of the region and ensured their survival, and success! He was a source of consolation.

What is it about these two incidents that serves to make Yosef’s encounter with the “Evil Eye” to be of a different nature? It seems that in both cases, Yosef stood up and helped those in need. He was instrumental in their continued survival. For that, no one could possibly be jealous of him. He stepped in when

¹ The method of how the “Evil Eye” is dispensed is a debate amongst the commentators (is it a tefillah, is there some causal relationship, etc.) and deserves its own article. This point will not be addressed here, rather we are dealing with the effects that are present from the “Evil Eye”.

others did not, and could not. The people recognized that he aided those in need, and that was the only reason he was the center of attention. So much so that even though the women were focused on him, people knew his entire personality was wrapped up in helping others.

6. Tough job, but somebody's gotta do it

We see this same lack of jealousy in regards to the game of Moshe Rabbeinu. The people were not jealous of him or his position, despite constantly complaining. The people did not want to be in his place, to do the work he was involved in.² No one wanted to take over. In fact, when they built the *Egel HaZahav*, they wanted to, “*Come, make us a god who shall go before us, for that man Moses, who brought us from the land of Egypt—we do not know what has happened to him.*”³ The people did not seek to take over his role, they just wanted someone to do it.

We can learn from Yosef, and Moshe, an important lesson. We should utilize the resources we may be blessed with to help others. If our reputation precedes us as a result of this, and not for selfish motives, we have the opportunity to earn Yaakov’s blessing. Through this blessing, he is revealing to us that helping others is the surest way to avoid the “Evil Eye”, to avoid jealousy. Lest we think this blessing is exclusively reserved for Yosef, Rashi explains, quoting the Midrash Tanchuma, that *one might think that he did not include all of them [the tribes] in all the blessings, Scripture therefore states “he blessed them.”*⁴ Each of the tribes received all of the blessings. Hopefully we can learn from this blessing to help others and share in joy, not resentment.

² Even Korach only wanted the status that came with being the Kohen Gadol, not Moshe! See Sefer Bamidbar 16:11. His complaint was against Aharon.

³ Shemot 32:1

⁴ Commentary of Rashi on Sefer Beresheit 49:28