

את אחי אנכי מבקש

*My Brothers I Seek: Reflections on Fraternal Hatred*

I.

The gravity of fraternal hatred, in classic rabbinic literature, can quite literally, not be overstated. In a famous passage, known to virtually every Jewish school child, if the first Mikdrash was destroyed on account of the concomitant violation of three cardinal sins, the second was destroyed on account of baseless fraternal hatred, *sinat chinam*, establishing an equivalency between the latter and the three former.

The conviction is sufficiently deep that even in contexts in which it seems as if other attributions are being made for the destruction which occurred and the exile we currently experience, fraternal hatred is still brought back into the foreground by the Rishonim. Indeed, in one such case, in which R. Yochanan ascribed the destruction of Jerusalem to an unwillingness to compromise in litigation, Tosafot counter that R. Yochanan's contention is to be understood as in addition to fraternal hatred<sup>1</sup>.

Of course, the roots of this sin run back to our sedra itself. The inclusion, in somewhat distinctive versions, of the story of the עשרה הרוגי מלכות in both the liturgy of Yom Kippur and Tisha B'Av, especially in the case of Yom Kippur, in which the cause for the martyrdom of the elite rabbinic figures is the sale of Yosef, underscores the extent to which the sin of fraternal hatred has never been eradicated, nor expiated.

The particular narrative surrounding Yosef's is as complex as it is profound. The backdrop of the tragedies and rivalries of Rachel and Leah, Yaakov's bereavement and subsequent favoring of Yosef, Yosef's own precociousness, and provocations, the family history of selection and banishment are all material to the story, and resonate both morally and halakhically.

Moving back still further, the Yosef narrative is manifestly the culmination of fraternal strife stretching back to the first Biblical brothers, and, continuing, in different iterations, between Avraham

---

<sup>1</sup> Certainly, one might ascribe a causal relationship between the two factors, in so far as animus may underlie rigidity. This author heard this suggestion in the name of R. Mordechai Willig.

and Lot<sup>2</sup>, Yitzchak and Yishmael, and of course, the immediate generational antecedent, Yaakov and Esav.

And yet, whether one adopts the majority position that the brothers literally sold Yosef, or perhaps, identifies with Rashbam's position, that they were prepared to do so, on Yehuda's suggestion, but were beat to the act by the Midianites, the sale of Yosef remains the primordial national sin.

Its repercussions are at once immediate and far reaching. Yehuda, the protagonist of the sale, must drink of the bitter chalice of watching his own sons demonstrate cruelty to each other, ואי, and experience a double measure of the bereavement he seemingly inflicted on his father. More broadly, the sin culminates, of course, in enslavement in Egypt itself.

## II.

From a normative standpoint, the three times that the Torah tells us that the brothers hated Yosef find expression in an explicit restriction against fraternal hatred in Kedoshim, followed by a mandate towards fraternal love:

לא תשנא את אחיך בלבבך הוכיח תוכיח את עמיתך ולא תשא עליו חטא: לא תקם ולא תטר את בני עמך  
ואהבת לרעך כמוך אני ה'.

Both the Bavli as well as Sifrei explicitly state that the restriction in question does not relate to behavioral manifestations, such as verbal or physical aggression, or cursing, but concerns deep animus of the heart. Likewise, Ibn Ezra amplifies this point, noting the inverse nature of the prohibition of hatred and the mandate of fraternal love, after which, almost reflexively, he stresses the gravity of hatred, in light of the aforementioned rabbinic observation regarding destruction of the Second Mikdash. Malbim further accentuates this point by deliberating between an אויב and a שונא, the latter, the subject of our verse, being, in his reading, completely ensconced within one's heart, having no necessary outward behavioral manifestation.

In principle, as the Torah relates to the prohibition of fraternal hatred as it concerns אחיך, Chazal considered whether, on account of deviant behavior, it would be, alternatively, permissible, or even obligatory, to bear hatred towards a fellow Jew. Rambam accepts the latter, more extreme possibility, normative, but qualifies it in three critical ways.

---

<sup>2</sup> Of course, Avraham was Lot's uncle. Yet, repeatedly, the Torah refers to Avraham's conception of Lot as his brother, אנשים אחים אנהנו.

First, Rambam only accepts a mandate to despise a fellow Jew if one has not only witnessed him committing an untoward act, but first warned him of it, **וְהִתְרַה בּוֹ וְלֹא הָזִיר הָרִי זֶה מִצְוָה לְשָׂנְאוֹ**. Second, Rambam only mandates fraternal hatred as a temporary measure, until the person repents of his misdeeds, **וְהִתְרַה בּוֹ וְלֹא הָזִיר הָרִי זֶה מִצְוָה לְשָׂנְאוֹ עַד שֶׁיַּעֲשֶׂה תְּשׁוּבָה וְיָשׁוּב מִרְשָׁעוֹ**. This caveat seems particularly significant in light of basic psychological reality that conditional animus is of a very different quality than the unconditional variety. Even as one experiences it, one knows that it is reversible, and that the object of one's hate is capable of redemptive and purgative change.

Finally, Rambam rules that even during the intermittent phase in which animus is not only permissible but required, one must still extricate this deviant Jew from a situation that might become life threatening, **וְלֹא יִנְחֲנוּ נֹטָה לְמוֹת שְׂמָא יִשְׁהָה בְּשָׂבִיל מְמוֹנוֹ וְיִבּוֹא לִידֵי סִכָּנָה. וְהִתְוֹרָה הַקְּפִידָה עַל נַפְשׁוֹת יִשְׂרָאֵל. בֵּין רָשָׁעִים בֵּין צַדִּיקִים**.

Assuming this Jew, deeply lost though he may be, still subscribes to the foundations of Jewish belief, our basic orientation, Rambam concludes, is one of *imitatio dei*, to seek to return those for whom the Almighty waits, **אֲנִי נֹאֵם ה' אֱלֹהִים אִם אֶחָפֵז בְּמוֹת הָרָשָׁע כִּי אִם בְּשׁוּב רָשָׁע מִדְּרָכּוֹ וְחָזַר מֵאַחֲרֵי שְׂהָם נְלוּיִם אֶל ה' וּמֵאַמִּינִים בְּעֶקֶר הַדָּת. שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (יחזקאל לג יא) "אֲמַר אֲלֵיהֶם חִי" אֲמַר אֲלֵיהֶם חִי**.

Moreover, in a justly celebrated passage in *Hilkhot Mamrim*, Rambam takes an even more conciliatory position, noting that even theological deviants, assuming they are merely following in the ways of previous generations of deviation, are to be treated with all of the rights and privileges of those of our brothers and sisters in good standing. Far from a license, or mandate, to despise such deviants, Rambam requires the opposite, gentle patience and encouragement, guiding them along the path of repentance, **אֵלּוּ שְׂאֵמֵרנוּ הָאוֹתִיזִים בְּדַרְכֵי אַבּוֹתֵם הַקְּרָאִים שְׁטָעוּ. לְפִיכָךְ רָאוּי לְהַחֲזִירוֹ בְּתִשְׁבּוּבָה וּלְמַשְׁכֵּם בְּדַרְכֵי שְׁלוֹם, עַד שֶׁיִּחְזְרוּ לְאִתְּנָה הַתּוֹרָה**.

### III.

With respect to the prohibition of fraternal hatred itself, and its relationship to the subsequent two clauses in the verse, namely **בְּשִׂיאת חֹטֵא** and **תּוֹכַחָה**, two distinct approaches appear in the classical sources. According to Targum Onkelos, there is no necessary relationship between the first clause and the latter two. In contrast, Targum Yonatan assumes the first clause concerns deliberately concealing one's malice, which is countered by the obligation to remonstrate with one's fellow.

Rambam, for his part, endorses both readings as correct. Initially, Rambam cites, on the basis of the aforementioned rabbinic sources, the restriction against bearing animus in one's heart *per se*,

explicitly contrasting the one who does so with one who strikes or curses his fellow. It is this form of שנאה which Rambam prohibits in ספר המצות<sup>3</sup> as well, citing the Sifrei regarding the locus of hatred in the heart, and ending with a note of caution, שנאת הלב הוא חטא חזק יותר מן הכל.

Subsequently, Rambam elaborates on how it is the path of the ‘wicked’, such as Avshalom, to conceal hatred. Rather, the Torah requires that we address these issues with the injuring party, in the hopes of achieving rapprochement. Rambam then pivots to the connection between the second and third clauses, noting that a natural outer boundary of תוכחה, in many cases, is causing embarrassment, especially in its initial phases, and depending, to a degree, on whether the offense was personal, or related to the Divine plane, בין אדם למקום.

Consistent with his second doctrine, Rambam concedes that if malice is not a fait accompli, and that the offended party can allow the offense to slide, either out of a sense of compassion for an offending agent who may not be in his right mind, or simply because the offense is mitigated by the boorish standing of one’s antagonist, no rebuke is required. After all, where there is no internal animus, remonstrance is no longer essential, לא תקפידה תורה אלא על המשטמה, as the Torah only concerned itself with malice.

### III.

Ramban, like his illustrious predecessor, presents both options with respect to the verse. However, in presenting the second reading, that of a link between the three clauses in the verse, Ramban, contra Ramban, conceptualized חטא עליו תשא ולא תשא as an outer boundary of rebuke, but rather, as an expansion of the first clause, אלא תשנא את אחיך בלבבך בעשותו לך שלא כרצונך אבל תוכיחנו מדוע, that is, a restriction against concealing hatred in one’s heart.

Remarkably, Ramban has identified two distinctive components to the Torah injunction against hatred of one’s fellow in a single verse. First, a restriction against such hatred *per se*, לא תשנא את אחיך בלבבך. Second, a restriction against actively allowing such hatred to fester, rather than choosing a path of engagement in the hopes of reconciliation, לא תשא עליו חטא.

<sup>3</sup> See Sefer HaMitzvot Lavin 302.

<sup>4</sup> Ramban’s definition of חטא עליו תשא as a deliberate choice to avoid reconciliation by eschewing dialogue is fully consistent with Chazal’s working definition of a שונא in halakha, with implications for accidental murder, testimony, and serving as judge: not having spoken with a person for three days out of malice. See Mishnah Sanhedrin 3:5.

While circumstances may conspire to cause an initial reaction of hatred, overcoming one's capacity to judge favorably, Ramban incisively notes, we are still possessed of a critical choice. We may choose to engage our fellow Jew, with a certain basic optimism about their essential nature, that they will apologize for the offense and seek forgiveness, *כי בהוכיחך אותו יתנצל לך או ישוב ויתודה על חטאו ותכפר לו*. Alternatively, we may actively choose to hold onto the hatred, allowing an admittedly precarious situation to degenerate further.

#### IV.

With an eye to returning where we began, Ramban's dual approach to the prohibition of *לא תשנא* may shed considerable light on the Yosef narrative. *Ab initio*, when Yosef enjoyed his father's unique affection, the Torah tells us that the brothers hated Yosef, and found themselves unable to speak to him. In the terminology of Ramban, they not only violate *לא תשנא*, but, in their deathly silence, *לא תשא עליו חטא*.

Subsequently, with the additional provocation of the dream, and Yosef's sharing its existence with them, the brothers' hatred intensifies, *ויוסיפו עוד שנא אותו*. When Yosef insists on sharing the substance of the dream with them, the brothers', finally, break their silence, rhetorically asking Yosef if his urge to dominate them, as they perceive it, could ever be sated, *המלוך תמלוך עלינו אם משול תמשול בנו*. In their exasperation and frustration, an opportunity emerges.

Sadly, it was to be a missed opportunity. Yosef does not seize the moment to apologize, to reconcile with his brothers, something his father would seek, belatedly, to arrange. The result is a further intensification, *ויוסיפו עוד שנא אותו על חלומותיו ועל דבריו*.

The tragedy which ensues, even as Yosef, on his father's instruction, seeks his brothers welfare, *את אחי אנכי מבקש*, is woven into the fabric of our national identity.

As such, Ramban's conceptualization of the dual nature of the prohibition of *שנאת*, one, which proscribes the condition itself, and one which prohibits deliberately holding onto the malice, and instead, seeks to encourage engagement and reconciliation, points us

in the direction of asking not merely how hatred developed but why it was maintained. It compels us to consider the opportunities, so often missed, on both sides, for engagement, reconciliation, and rapprochement.

It reminds us that even when 'passions have strained', opportunities for reconciliation remain possible, if we have the courage, and faith in the goodness of the other, to engage them.