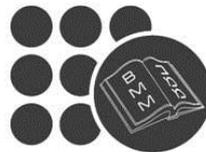


The Pit and the Rope: Recovering Joseph Part I



Credit to: Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg and Amnon Melzer

Opening Quote: Paul Celan – Psalm

No one kneads us again from earth and loam,
no one evokes our dust.
No one.

Praised be your name, no one.
For your sake we wish
to bloom.
Against
you.

A nothing
were we, are we, will
we be, blossoming:
the nothing's-, the no one's rose.

Source 1: Bereishit 37:22-24

And Reuben said to them, "Do not shed blood! Cast him into this pit, which is in the desert, but do not lay a hand upon him," in order to save him from their hand[s], to return him to his father.

Now it came to pass when Joseph came to his brothers, that they stripped Joseph of his shirt, of the fine woollen coat which was upon him.

And they took him and cast him into the pit...

Source 2: Bereishit 41:21-22

And they said to one another, "Indeed, we are guilty for our brother, that we witnessed the distress of his soul when he begged us, and we did not listen. That is why this trouble has come upon us."

And Reuben answered them, saying, "Didn't I tell you, saying, 'Do not sin against the lad,' but you did not listen? Behold, his blood, too, is being demanded!"

Source 3: Ramban to 37:22 and 42:21

The Torah tells us what Reuven said to them and they listened to him, but he told them other things originally and they didn't accept them, as he says later "Did I not tell you saying, 'Don't sin against the boy' and you didn't listen!" and when he saw that they didn't hear him to leave him alone, he said to them, "in any case, don't shed blood with your hands" and he did not say "his blood", because he reasoned that he must not appear that he was saying this out of love for Joseph.

They considered the cruelty worthy of a greater punishment than the sale, because their brother, their own flesh, was crying out to them and they showed him no compassion. And the Torah didn't mention that there, either because:

- It is obvious that a person cries out to his brothers when he falls into their hands for evil, and he will make them swear by their father's life, and do everything that he can to save his life.

Avivah Zornberg was born in London and grew up in Glasgow, Scotland, where her father was a Rabbi and the head of the Rabbinical Court. She studied with him from childhood; he was her most important teacher of Torah. She holds a BA and PhD in English Literature from Cambridge University. After teaching English literature at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, she turned to teaching Torah. For the past twenty-five years, she has taught Torah in Jerusalem at Matan, Yakar, Pardes and the Jerusalem College for Adults. Dr. Zornberg also holds a Visiting Lectureship at the London School of Jewish Studies. She travels widely, lecturing in Jewish, academic and psychoanalytic settings.

Paul Celan was born in Czernowitz, Bukovina in 1920. In 1942 Celan saw his parents deported to Auschwitz. He survived the Shoah in other camps but never recovered from his ordeal and in 1970 committed suicide. Celan's highly acclaimed work is powerful, highly original, often ambiguous and deeply tragic.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם רְאוּבֵן אֶל תִּשְׁפְּכוּ דַם הַשְּׁלִיכוּ אֹתוֹ אֶל הַבּוֹר הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר בְּמִדְבָּר וַיֵּד אֶל תִּשְׁלַחוּ בוֹ לְמַעַן הֲצִיל אֶתוֹ מִיָּדָם לְהַשִּׁיבוֹ אֶל אָבִיו:

וַיְהִי כַּאֲשֶׁר בָּא יוֹסֵף אֶל אָחָיו וַיִּפְּשִׁטוּ אֶת יוֹסֵף אֶת כְּתֹנֶתוֹ אֶת כְּתֹנֶת הַפְּסִים אֲשֶׁר עָלָיו:

וַיִּקְחֵהוּ וַיִּשְׁלַכוּ אֹתוֹ הַבְּרָה...

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל אָחָיו אֲבָל אֲשָׁמִים אָנַחְנוּ עַל אָחִינוּ אֲשֶׁר רָאִינוּ צָרַת נַפְשׁוֹ בְּהִתְחַנְּנוֹ אֵלֵינוּ וְלֹא שָׁמַעְנוּ עַל כֵּן בָּאָה אֵלֵינוּ הַצָּרָה הַזֹּאת:

וַיַּעַן רְאוּבֵן אֹתָם לֵאמֹר הֲלוֹא אָמַרְתִּי אֵלֵיכֶם לֵאמֹר אֶל תִּחַטְּאוּ בְּיַד וְלֹא שָׁמַעְתֶּם וְגַם דַּמּוֹ הִנֵּה נִדְרָשׁ:

והכתוב סיפר מה שאמר להם ראובן ושמעו אליו, אבל דברים אחרים אמר להם מתחילה שלא קבלו ממנו, כמו שאמר להם (להלן מב) הלא דברתי אליכם לאמר אל תחטאו בילד ולא שמעתם, וכאשר ראה שלא שמעו לעזבו אמר להם, אם כן אל תשפכו דם בידכם. ולא אמר "דמו", כי הראה עצמו שלא יאמר כן לאהבתו חשבו להם האכזריות לעונש גדול יותר מן המכירה, כי היה אחיהם בשרם מתחנן ומתנפל לפניהם ולא ירחמו, והכתוב לא סיפר זה שם, או מפני שהדבר ידוע בטבע כי יתחנן אדם לאחיו בבואו לידם להרע לו וישביעם בחיי אביהם ויעשה כל אשר יוכל להציל נפשו ממות, או שירצה הכתוב לקצר

- Or because the Torah wanted to spend less time describing the brothers' shameful behaviour.
- Or because it is the way of the Torah to be brief in one place and expansive in another.

בסורחנם, או מדרך הכתובים שמקצרים במקום אחד ומאריכים בו במקום אחר

Source 4: Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg: The Murmuring Deep: Reflections on the Biblical Unconscious

I suggest that Joseph's anguish by the pit goes unrecorded precisely because the brothers did not hear it. No testimony can be offered to cries that fell on deaf ears. Only after twenty-two years, and triggered by an almost fortuitous set of circumstances, the brothers suddenly hear for the first time how their brother cried for his life.

Source 5: Bereishit 37:33 and Rashi there

He recognized it, and he said, "[It is] my son's coat; a wild beast has devoured him; Joseph has surely been torn up."

וַיִּכְרָה וַיֹּאמֶר כָּתְנֵת בְּנֵי חַיָּה רָעָה אֲכָלְתָּהּ; טָרְף טָרְף יוֹסֵף

a wild beast has devoured him: [This means that] the Holy Spirit flickered within him: Potiphar's wife will ultimately provoke him. Now why did the Holy One, blessed be He, not reveal it (the truth) to him? Because they (the brothers) excommunicated and cursed anyone who would reveal [it], and they included the Holy One, blessed be He, with them...

חיה רעה אכלתהו: נצנצה בו רוח הקדש, סופו שתתגרה בו אשת פוטיפר. ולמה לא גלה לו הקב"ה, לפי שהחרימו וקללו את כל מי שיגלה, ושתפו להקב"ה עמהם

Source 6: Midrash Tanchuma, Vayeishev 2

The brothers said, "Let us sell him to the Ishmaelites who will carry him off to the end of the wilderness." So they sold him for twenty silver pieces— that is, two silver pieces each, enough to buy shoes for their feet. But can you imagine that such a beautiful boy was sold for only twenty silver pieces? But when he was thrown into the pit, terror of its serpents and scorpions transformed his face— all colour fled and it turned green. That is why he was sold for only twenty silver pieces for ten pairs of shoes.

They said "Let us make a ban between us that none of us will ever speak of this to our father Yaakov". Yehuda said to them "Reuvein is not here, and the ban is only binding if 10 are party to it". What did they do? They included the Holy One, blessed is He, in that ban that He would not tell their father. Since Reuvein came down at down to that pit to bring him out and did not find him, he tore his clothing and wept. He returned to his brothers and said "the boy is not there, and ! Where will I go?" They told him what they did and about the ban and he was silent.

אמרו לכו ונמכרנו לישמעאלים, הן מוליכין אותו לקצוות המדבר עמדו מכרוהו בעשרים כסף לכל אחד מהם שני כסף לקנות מנעלים לרגליהם, וכי תעלה על דעתך שנער יפה כמותו נמכר בעשרים כסף, אלא כיון שהושלך לבור מתוך פחד נחשים ועקרבים שבו נשתנה זיו פניו וברח ממנו דמו ונעשו פניו ירוקות לפיכך מכרוהו בעשרים כסף בעבור נעלים

אמרו נחרים בינינו שלא יגיד אחד ממנו ליעקב אבינו, אמר להם יהודה ראובן אינו כאן ואין החרם מתקיים אלא בעשרה, מה עשו שתפו להקב"ה באותו החרם שלא יגיד לאביהם, כיון שירד ראובן בלילה לאותו הבור להעלותו ולא מצאו קרע את בגדיו ובכה חזר לאחיו אמר להם הילד איננו ואני אנה אני בא, הגידו לו את המעשה ואת החרם ושתק

Source 7: Bereishit 41:51

And Joseph named the firstborn Manasseh, for "God has caused me to forget all my toil and all my father's house."

וַיִּקְרָא יוֹסֵף אֶת שֵׁם הַבְּכוֹר מְנַשֶּׁה כִּי נִשְׁכַּח אֵלַי אֶת כָּל עֲמָלִי וְאֵת כָּל בֵּית אָבִי:

Source 8: Bereishit 42:7

And Joseph saw his brothers, and he recognized them, but he made himself a stranger to them, and he spoke to them harshly...

וַיֵּרָא יוֹסֵף אֶת אָחָיו וַיִּכְרַם וַיִּתְנַכֵּר אֲלֵיהֶם וַיִּדְבַּר אֲתָם קָשׁוֹת...

Source 9: Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg

This reflexive verb suggests a more-than-tactical move of self-disguise on Joseph's part. Within himself, he becomes alien to himself. For Joseph has experienced a primal scene of horror that has, effectively, annihilated him as witness to his own experience. Testimony has become, in a real sense, impossible; where there is no imaginable "Thou" to whom to tell the story, one cannot say "Thou" even to oneself. God Himself falls mute, turns His face aside. (My discussion of Joseph's implication in traumatic silence owes much to Felman and Laub's account of the Holocaust survivor experience of "a secret order that is sworn to silence.") The muteness that is born of the pit is, I suggest, the muteness of Joseph unable to send word to his father of his survival. Joseph escapes the pit, all the pits of his life, and rises irrepressibly to success: at least in the eyes of the observer, "God is with him." But his traumatic history is beyond access. Accompanied by an amnesia, it has not been integrated into consciousness.

Ultimately, Joseph's history raises the question, "What does it mean to survive?" If he has, in some essential way, missed the experience of his own death and survival, how is he to return to life and to language?