

נקמת הגר

אבנר רמו

Many years after the combat of Rephidim (Ex 17:8-16), Moses tells the Israelites:

זכור את אשר-עשה לך עמלק בדרך בצאתכם ממצרים.
אשר קרך בדרך, ויזנב בך כל-הנחשלים אחריך-ואתה עיף ויגע; ולא ירא אלהים.
והיה בהניח יהוה אלהיך לך מכל-איביך מסביב, בארץ אשר יהוה-אלהיך נתן לך נחלה לרשתה--
תמחה את-זכר עמלק מתחת השמים; לא תשכח.

“Remember what Amalek did to you by the way as you came forth out of Egypt;
How he met you by the way, and smote the hindmost of you, all that were enfeebled in your rear, when you was faint and weary; and he feared not God.
Therefore it shall be, when *YHWH* your God have given you rest from all your enemies round about, in the land which *YHWH* your God gives you for an inheritance to possess it, that you shall blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven; you shall not forget” (Deu 25:17-19).

The urge for revenge (vendetta), may pass from generation to generation also in a single clan or a family.



Expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael. Gustave Dore (1832-1883)

Hence it is not unlikely that the descendants of Hagar and Ishmael had distinctly remembered the unmerited expulsion of their ancestors from Abraham’s house, and were always looking for an opportunity to exact revenge.

Joseph, the first-born son of Rachel, was the favorite of his father Jacob (Gen 37:3). Now we hear:

ויראו אחיו כי-אתו אהב אביהם מכל-אחיו-וישנאו אתו; ולא יכלו דברו לשלם.

“And when his brethren saw that their father loved him more than all his brethren, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him” (Gen 37:4).

This hate reached such a proportion that some of Joseph’s brothers **“conspired against him to slay him”** (Gen 37:18). Yet the oldest of Jacob’s sons Ruben said:

אל-תשפכו-דם--השליכו אתו אל-הבור הזה אשר במדבר, ויד אל-תשלחו-בו

“Shed no blood; cast him into this pit that is in the wilderness, but lay no hand upon him” (Gen 37:22).

Soon after:

ויקחהו-וישלוכו אתו הברה; והבור רק אין בו מים.

וישבו לאכל-לחם, וישאו עיניהם ויראו, והנה ארחת ישמעאלים באה מגלעד; וגמליהם

נשאים נכאת וצרי ולט-הולכים להוריד מצרימה.

ויאמר יהודה אל-אחיו: מה-בצע כי נהרג את-אחינו וכסינו את-דמו.

לכו ונמכרנו לישמעאלים, וידנו אל-תהי-בו

“And they took him, and cast him into the pit--and the pit was empty, there was no water in it.

And they sat down to eat bread; and they lifted up their eyes and looked, and, behold, a caravan of Ishmaelites came from Gilead, with their camels bearing spicery and balm and ladanum, going to carry it down to Egypt.

And Judah said to his brethren: What profit is it if we slay our brother and conceal his blood?

Come, and let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him” (Gen 37:24-27).

However, immediately after these verses we find an alternative plot:

ויעברו אנשים מדינים סחרים, וימשכו ויעלו את-יוסף מן-הבור, וימכרו את-יוסף

לישמעאלים בעשרים כסף; ויביאו את-יוסף מצרימה.

“And there passed by Midianites, merchantmen; and they drew and lifted up Joseph out of the pit, and sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. And they brought Joseph into Egypt” (Gen 37:28).

While we do not know which of these plots is the genuine one, both of them indicate that **“Ishmaelites”** were involved in the transaction that finally landed Joseph as a property of **“Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh's, the captain of the guard”** (Gen 37:36; 39:1).

Prior to his death Jacob gathers his sons for bestowing on them his last benedictions. To his son Joseph he says:

בן פרת יוסף, בן פרת עלי-עין; בנות צעדה עלי-שור.

וימררהו ורבו; וישטמהו בעלי חצים.

“Joseph is a fruitful vine, a fruitful vine by a fountain; its branches run over the wall.

The archers have dealt bitterly with him, and shot at him, and hated him” (Gen 49:22-23).

The English translation of these enigmatic words does not adhere to the Hebrew text. The Greek translation of these verses does not fare much better and the Talmudic sages' interpretation of them is allegoric.

However, some of the Hebrew words of verse Gen 49:22 resonate with those describing Hagar after she ran away from her abusive mistress Sarai:

וימצאה מלאך יהוה על-עין המים-במדבר: על-העין, בדרך שור.

“And the angel of *YHWH* found her by a fountain of water in the wilderness, by the fountain in the way to Shur” (Gen 16:7).

We also read that as Hagar's son Ishmael grew up, he became: **רבה קשת** - “an archer” (Gen 21:20).

We may wonder whether in his words to Joseph, Jacob is hinting that the Ishmaelites, who obviously knew that their ancestors were wronged by Sarai, and must have loathed her offspring, were more than happy to deliver her great-grandson Joseph to Egypt and sell him there to be a slave. Furthermore, they may have sold Joseph not to a random buyer, but to household that would extend the suffering of Joseph even further.

We are told that Joseph was sold to **פּוֹטִיפָר סָרִיס פְּרֵעָה** and these words were translated to English as: “**Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh's.**” However, the Hebrew word **סָרִיס** (*saris*) has also another meaning: “**eunuch**” (e.g. 2 Ki 9:32; Is 56:3).

At this point in the narrative the writer of the Book of Genesis found it necessary to mention: **ויהי יוסף יפה-תאר ויפה מראה** - “**And Joseph was of beautiful form, and fair to look upon**” (Gen 39:6), apparently for explaining to the reader why Potiphar's wife lusted for him, in particular if her husband was indeed an eunuch.

One day as he fled, Joseph left his garment in her hand (Gen 39:11-12),

ויהי כראותה כי-עזב בגדו, בידה; וינס החוצה.

ותקרא לאנשי ביתה ותאמר להם לאמר, ראו הביא לנו איש עברי לצחק בנו: בא אלי לשכב עמי, ואקרא בקול גדול.

“When she saw that he had left his garment in her hand, and was fled forth;

Then she called to the men of her house, and spoke to them, saying: See, he had brought in a Hebrew [man] to us to mock us; he came in to me to lie with me, and I cried with a loud voice” (Gen 39:13-14).

We should notice that until this moment the only Hebrew person mentioned in the Book of Genesis was **אברם העברי** - “**Abram the Hebrew**” (Gen 14:13).

Furthermore, prior to the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael from Abraham's house we read:

ותרא שרה את-בן-הגר המצרית, אשר-ילדה לאברהם-מצחק.

“And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, making sport” (Gen 21:9).

It is not clear how the English translator determined that the Hebrew **מצחק** (*metsakheq*) means “making sport” and such an understanding is not supported by the Greek translation of this verse. However, we should notice that this Hebrew word is from the same root as the one used by Potiphar’s wife: **לצחק** (*letsakheq*) - “**to Mock.**”

Apparently, the words **עברי** - “a Hebrew” and **מצחק** - “mocking” remained etched in the memory of the offspring of Hagar and her son Ishmael. Now Potiphar’s wife, apparently a loyal member of this clan, who was just rejected by another descendent of Sarah, is quick to use them for getting Joseph arrested (Gen 39:20).

Later, when Joseph revealed his true identity to his brothers he said:

ועתה אל-תעצבו ואל-יחר בעיניכם, כי-מכרתם אתי, הנה: כי למחיה שלחני אלהים לפניכם.
“And now be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that you sold me hither; for God did send me before you to preserve life” (Gen 45:5).

However, if here the word **למחיה** (*lemikhyah*) is a letter-deletion error of **למחילה** (*lemekhylah*), then Joseph was telling his brothers that he landed in Egypt as “**atonement**” for the unjust expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael from their ancestral home.