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The Presentation of the Unconscious in Three Biblical Narratives

Abstract

In this paper, I offer a psychoanalytic reading of the biblical narratives of Joseph, Moses, and Saul that demonstrates the biblical authors' deep knowledge of the unconscious. In each one of these narratives, the protagonist's unconscious feelings, resulting from family dynamics, are displaced onto society. This displacement is presented by interweaving a specific noun or verb with the divine and social strands of the narrative. Thus, the protagonist's unconscious is communicated to the reader while being safeguarded from the awareness of both protagonist and reader.

To cite as:

Yael Greenberg, 2019, "The Presentation of the Unconscious in Three Biblical Narratives,"

PsyArt 23, pp. 269-285.

Robert Alter has argued that “the biblical writers, while seeming to preserve a continuity with the relatively simple treatment of character of their Mesopotamian and Syro-Palestinian literary predecessors, actually worked out a set of new and surprisingly supple techniques for the imaginative representation of human individuality.” (1981, 115) This paper offers a psychoanalytic reading that demonstrates their virtuosity as manifested in the presentation of the unconscious in the narratives of Joseph, Moses, and Saul. I will demonstrate that in these narratives, a specific noun or verb is used in order to portray the displacement of feelings engendered by the family on to society.

Joseph

The narrator informs us that Jacob “loved Joseph best of all [*mikol*] his sons, for he was the child of his old age. [. . .] And when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any [*mikol*] of his brothers, they hated him so that they could not speak a friendly word to him.” (*Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary* 2001, Gen 37:3-4) Jacob’s predilection for Joseph prompts him to appoint Joseph overseer of his brothers. This configuration, in which Joseph is entrusted with all the affairs of an authority figure, representing it vis-à-vis its subordinates, will be repeated at various stages in Joseph’s life. At each point, the narrator uses the noun *kol* (“all” or “the whole”) to indicate the displacement from the nuclear family on to society, even as he attributes Joseph’s success to God’s benevolence. This displacement is in evidence in the house of Potiphar, Joseph’s Egyptian master:

When his master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord lent success to everything [*vekhoh*] he undertook, he took a liking to Joseph. He made him his personal attendant and put him in charge of his household, placing in his hands all

[*vekhōl*] that he owned. And from the time that the Egyptian put him in charge of his household and of all [*kol*] that he owned, the Lord blessed his house for Joseph's sake, so that the blessing of the Lord was upon everything [*bekhōl*] that he owned, in the house and outside. He left all [*kol*] that he had in Joseph's hands. (Gen 39:3-6)

On the realistic level, the word *kol* is insisted upon repeatedly in order to indicate the comprehensiveness of the responsibility entrusted to Joseph by his Egyptian master. (Alter 1981, 107-9) On the unconscious level, however, it indicates the displacement of the triadic configuration established within the family: Joseph is once again the representative of an authority figure vis-à-vis its subordinates. This configuration is repeated when Joseph is in prison for the spurious charge of having seduced Potiphar's wife:

The Lord was with Joseph: He extended kindness to him and disposed the chief jailer favorably toward him. The chief jailer put in Joseph's charge all [*kol*] the prisoners who were in that prison, and he was the one to carry out everything [*kol*] that was done there. (Gen 39:21-22)

The displacement from the family to the outer world is subtly hinted at also when Pharaoh appoints Joseph overseer of the whole land of Egypt after he had successfully interpreted Pharaoh's dreams: "Since God has made all [*kol*] this known to you, there is none so discerning and wise as you. You shall be in charge of my court, and by your command shall all [*kol*] my people be directed. [. . .] I put you in charge of all [*kol*] the land of Egypt." (Gen 41:39-41) The word *kol* hints at the displacement from the family to the outer world once again when Joseph, in an attempt to alleviate his brothers' guilt, tells them, "It was not you who sent me here, but God;

and He has made me a father to Pharaoh, lord of all [*lekhoh*] his household, and ruler over the whole [*bekhol*] land of Egypt.” (Gen 45:8)

The reiteration of the tiny noun *kol* at various stages of Joseph’s life indicates to the reader--through associative thinking--that the familial configuration is displaced on to society. Associative thinking and displacement are processes that govern the unconscious. By using them as structural devices, the biblical author communicates Joseph’s unconscious to that of the reader by means of their common language, which is likely to be understood only by the unconscious of the reader.

The biblical author’s keen awareness of the unconscious is manifested in Joseph’s youthful dreams, as well as in the mature Joseph’s ability to interpret the dreams of others. In the ancient Near East, dreams were regarded as a means of divine communication that foretold events. (Chaim Potok 2001, 227) Joseph’s dreams are portentous, but they also express his hidden wishes and self-perception. Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg has pointed out that Joseph’s narcissism and “dangerous unawareness of the inner worlds of others” (1996, 253) lead him to recount his dreams of future glory to his jealous brothers. In Joseph’s first dream, he and his brothers are binding sheaves in the field when suddenly his sheaf stands upright, and the brothers’ sheaves bow low to it. In the second dream, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars bow down to him.

When Joseph recounts his second dream to his father and brothers, his father berates him: “Are we to come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow low to you *to the ground?*” (Gen 37:10; my italics) In relating his dream, Joseph did not utter the phrase “to the ground.” By adding it, Jacob echoes the manner in which he himself had bowed to his brother Esau when Jacob met Esau after years of exile. (Potok 2001, 228) Jacob had been fearful that Esau still

harbored murderous feelings toward him for having stolen the birthright from Esau, so he “bowed low to the ground seven times.” (Gen 33:3) Through the repetition of the phrase “to the ground,” the biblical author indicates that Jacob’s apprehension of Esau is now reactivated: he unconsciously understands that the murderous hostility that had existed between himself and Esau is now echoed in the fraternal tensions between Joseph and his brothers. The phrasal repetition is used in order to render Jacob’s unconscious while safeguarding it from the awareness of both Jacob and the reader.

Zornberg (1996, 253) has noted Joseph’s transformation from a youth who is blind to his brothers’ feelings into a young man who is aware of the emotions of others: while in prison, the mature Joseph demonstrates sensitivity to the feelings of his fellow prisoners, Pharaoh’s Chief Cupbearer and Chief Baker. This sensitivity is displayed, says Zornberg, when Joseph asks them, “Why do you appear downcast today?” (40:7) They answer that they are perturbed by the dreams they have had. Based on their character as revealed by their dreams, Joseph can foretell that the Chief Cupbearer will be reinstated by Pharaoh whereas the Chief Baker will not. (Nehama Leibowitz 1976, 425-6)

When Joseph brings his family to Egypt, he urges his brothers not to divulge to Pharaoh that they are shepherds, “for all shepherds are abhorrent to Egyptians.” (Gen 46:34) And yet, when Pharaoh asks the brothers what their occupation is, they answer forthwith, “We your servants are shepherds, as were also our fathers.” (Gen 47:3) This astounding non sequitur can be best understood on the unconscious level: although Joseph and his brothers have reconciled, their father’s arrival in Egypt reactivates the fraternal tensions, which are played out with Pharaoh as a father-figure.

Moses

Moses was the liberator and lawgiver of the Israelites. After forty years in the desert, Miriam, Moses's sister, who had saved his life in his infancy and led the people with him in the victory song at the Red Sea, dies. At this juncture, the Israelites find themselves without any water. They reproach Moses and Aaron for not providing them with water, as they had done when there was no water at the beginning of the wilderness wanderings. In the earlier incident, Moses had feared that he would be stoned by the people. Now, fearing for their lives, Moses and Aaron seek refuge in the Tent of Meeting. God commands Moses to take his rod, assemble the people together with Aaron, and speak to the rock in order to provide water for them. Moses and Aaron assemble the people in front of the rock and ask scornfully, "Listen, you rebels [*morim*], shall we get water for you out of this rock?" (Num 20:10) Instead of speaking to the rock, Moses strikes it twice with his rod, and water issues from it. God deems the behavior of Moses and Aaron sinful, and they are condemned to die in the wilderness.

There is no consensus among preeminent biblical scholars as to the real nature of Moses and Aaron's sin. Rashi (1040-1105) points out that Moses's striking the rock, rather than speaking to it, diminished the greatness of the miracle. Rambam (1135-1204) states that Moses was punished for losing his temper with the people and striking the rock in exasperation with them. And Ramban (1194-1270) contends that Aaron was punished because, after the first strike, he could have stopped Moses from repeating his error but did not do so; he faults both Moses and Aaron for presumptuously ascribing the miracle to themselves by using the first-person plural "we" when they address the people. (Harold Kushner 2001, 885)

The blows to the rock and the scornful attitude towards the people are indicative of Moses's rage. Throughout his life, he reacted violently whenever his anger flared up. As a young

man, he impulsively killed the Egyptian taskmaster who had incurred his wrath by mishandling a Hebrew slave, and, on his descent from Mount Sinai, he smashed the tablets upon seeing the people worshipping the Golden Calf. Zornberg rightly avers that the blows to the rock constitute Moses's regression to this modality. (2001, 519)

What triggers Moses's regression? The answer lies in the noun *morim* that he uses to address the people. This word straddles two senses. As used by Moses, it means "rebels," but with a change of vowels it reads "Miriam," suggesting that Moses's behavior "has as much to do with losing Miriam as with his frustration with the Israelite people." (Ora Horn Pruser 2008, 931) Following Miriam's death, the lack of water and the people's discontent make more acute Moses's anger at being "abandoned" by her. Furthermore, her death triggers Moses's pent-up rage against her for having earlier on initiated the challenge to his leadership: "Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman he had married." (Num 12:1) Although both Miriam and Aaron are the subjects of this verse, the feminine singular *vatedabber* is used, indicating (according to a general biblical usage that allows a singular verb when one of the elements of a compound subject is considered the primary actor) that Miriam had initiated the rebellion. This explains why she alone was punished. (Potok 2001, 833)

The noun *morim* that Moses uses to address the people constitutes a bridge between his unconscious and the outside world, since it stands for both Miriam and the obstreperous Israelites. The use of this noun enables the narrator to present Moses's rage in such a way that it is understood by both protagonist and reader only on the unconscious level. The displacement of Moses's unconscious rage against his sister on to the entire community renders him unfit in the eyes of God to lead the people into the Promised Land.

Saul

In this section of my article, I will demonstrate that King Saul's oedipal rage against his son Jonathan leads to his precipitous downfall. A first hint of Saul's unconscious feelings is given in the narrator's depiction of the battle of Geba, in which Jonathan had killed the Philistine prefect, the highest Philistine authority in the territory occupied by the Philistines:

Jonathan struck down the Philistine prefect in Geba; and the Philistines *heard* about it. Saul had the ram's horn sounded throughout the land, saying: "Let the Hebrews *hear*." When all Israel *heard* that Saul had struck down the Philistine prefect, and that Israel had incurred the wrath of the Philistines, all the people rallied to Saul at Gilgal. (*Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures, The New JPS Translation According to the Traditional Hebrew Text* 1988, 1 Sam 13:3-4; my emphasis)

The first part of Saul's announcement ("Let the Hebrew hear") is rendered in direct speech, whereas the continuation appears in indirect speech, creating a gap in the narrative. As we read the words "all Israel heard," we expect the continuation to be "that Jonathan had struck down the Philistine prefect." We accept the attribution of the heroic deed to Saul because he is the person with supreme command. However, later events support an alternative interpretation: Saul, who feels upstaged by his son's military prowess, arrogates Jonathan's well-deserved recognition. This act marks the beginning of Saul's precipitous downfall. The narrator avoids rendering Saul's utterance in full in order to obfuscate his culpability, which will become evident later on. [Alter's translation (2019, 1 Sam 13:4)--"All Israel heard, saying, 'Saul has struck down the Philistine prefect'"--obscures Saul's culpability even further, because it renders Saul's proclamation as echoed by the people.] The root *shin-mem-ayin* ("to hear" or "to listen to"),

which is insistently reiterated in this passage, had been used earlier on in the narrative to present the oedipal conflict between the priest Eli and his sons:

Now Eli was very old. When he *heard* all that his sons were doing to all Israel, and how they lay with the women who performed tasks at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, he said to them, “Why do you do such things? I [*hear*] evil reports about you from the people on all hands. Don’t, my sons! It is no favorable report I *hear* the people of the Lord spreading about.” [. . .] But they [*did not listen to*] their father’s plea. (1 Sam 2:22-25; my emphasis)

Through the reiteration of the root *shin-mem-ayin* (“to hear” or “to listen to”), the biblical author creates an associative link between the two passages in the mind of the reader, who unconsciously understands that, just like the relationship of Eli and his sons, the relationship of Saul and Jonathan is determined by the oedipal conflict.

Prior to the next battle, in Gilgal, the prophet Samuel tells the king to wait seven days until he comes to perform the pre-battle sacrifice. Saul waits until well into the seventh day, and, when the men begin to desert, he decides to perform the sacrifice himself. Samuel appears after the sacrifice has been made. (Scholars surmise that he is late due to his lingering opposition to the establishment of the monarchy that has displaced his own authority.) On his arrival, he castigates Saul: “The Lord will seek out a man after His own heart, and the Lord will appoint him ruler over His people, because you did not abide by what the Lord had commanded you.” (1 Sam 13:14)

On the realistic level, “the prophet pulls the rug from under him, on grounds which are at least open to dispute.” (J. P. Fokkelman 1986, 690) On the unconscious level, however, Saul is punished for acting on his oedipal jealousy. The punishment that Samuel metes out--Saul’s

imminent replacement by a better leader--is the realization of the king's fear of being displaced by his son. Saul's oedipal fear is externalized through Samuel's prophecy that he will be supplanted by a better leader: the unconscious is camouflaged by the divine and social strands of the narrative.

Next, in the battle of Michmas, Jonathan leads the charge against the Philistines, bringing about the Israelites' victory. He takes his armor-bearer into his confidence, but not his father, although the latter has the supreme command. (Fokkelman 1986, 48) The narrator does not reveal the reason for this, but we may surmise that Jonathan does it out of resentment against his father for having arrogated Jonathan's previous feat. On his part, Saul's fear of his son as a rival has been multiplied tenfold by Samuel's prophecy, and his jealousy turns into murderous rage. While Jonathan is away, Saul takes a count of the troops and finds out that his son is missing. Saul vows: "Cursed be the man who eats any food before night falls and I take revenge on my enemies." (1 Sam 14:24) Dorothy Zeligs rightly contends that the vow of fasting imposed on the army is unconsciously a way of punishing the troops for accepting Jonathan as a hero. (1974, 132) The vow is also unconsciously a way of punishing his son: Saul knew that Jonathan was absent and would, in all likelihood, not hear his vow. Indeed, Jonathan, who "*had not heard* his father adjure the troops" (14:27; my emphasis), unwittingly breaks the ban by eating some honey that he had found in the woods. Thus, the tension between father and son is presented once again through the verb *shin-mem-ayin* ("to hear" or "to listen to"). Ironically, Eli's sons do not listen to their father because of their lasciviousness, whereas Jonathan does not listen to his father due to the latter's own machinations. Informed of his father's oath, Jonathan publicly criticizes him: "My father has brought trouble on the people. [. . .] If only the troops had eaten today of spoil captured from the enemy, the defeat of the Philistines would have been greater still!" (14:29-30)

By imposing the vow of fasting on the troops in Jonathan's absence, Saul had set up his son. Now, God is angry and rebuffs Saul's appeals for help, so Saul vows, "As the Lord lives who brings victory to Israel, even if [the rebuff] was through my son Jonathan, he shall be put to death!" (14:39) Just as in the battle of Geba Saul had appropriated his son's military victory, he now deflects culpability by laying the blame for God's anger at him on his son. Furthermore, Saul's words betray his unconscious wish for his son's death: he can bring himself to publicly acknowledge Jonathan's military prowess only if it is coupled with his son's demise. When Jonathan admits to having tasted from the honey, Saul is bent on killing him, but is dissuaded from doing so by the troops.

Saul's moral turpitude stands in stark contrast to the humaneness that he had shown at the beginning of his reign: when some of his men wanted to kill his opponents, he declared, "No man shall be put to death this day!" (11:13) Saul's stunning reversal is a measure of the transformation that he has undergone as a result of the oedipal conflict.

In the following battle, Saul fails to obey God's injunction to annihilate all living things in the Amalekite camp in revenge for their having massacred the Israelite stragglers on their way from Egypt to Canaan. The narrator states that "Saul and the troops spared Agag and the best of the sheep, the oxen, the second-born, the lambs, and all else that was of value." (15:9) Alter points out that, despite the plural subject, the verb "spared" appears in the singular in the Hebrew (*vayahmol*), indicating (in conformity with the general biblical usage mentioned earlier) that it is Saul who did the sparing, with the people merely following his lead. (1992, 150)

Why does Saul deviate from God's command? Biblical scholars have conjectured that, in sparing the best of the spoil, Saul is motivated by greed, and that the Amalekite king is kept alive due to the hope that some further profit can be obtained from him. However, a close look at the

text reveals that Saul's actions are once again motivated by the oedipal conflict. Samuel's excoriation of the predation of the Amalekite spoil--"Why did you [not listen to] the Lord and swoop down on the spoil in defiance of the Lord's will?" (15:19)--includes two subtle allusions to the oedipal struggle. First, the verb *shin-mem-ayin* ("to hear" or "to listen to"), which has signaled the oedipal conflict throughout the narrative. Second, the verb *vata'at* ("to pounce" or "to swoop down"), which, as noted by Alter (1999, 90), was used also to depict the revolt of the troops against Saul's vow of fasting--"The troops pounced [*vaya'at*] on the spoil." (14:32) The verbal repetition creates an associative link in the reader's mind between the two episodes. The reader unconsciously understands that Jonathan's diatribe against his father for having imposed the fast on the troops ("If only the troops had eaten today of spoil captured from the enemy, the defeat of the Philistines would have been greater still!") is seared into Saul's memory, and that, desperate to prove that he is still an able military leader (a prerequisite for kingship), he allows the men to eat from the Amalekite spoil. The sparing of the Amalekite king is also determined by the oedipal conflict: Saul, who had been told that he would be dethroned, identifies with the Amalekite king who has just lost his kingship, and consequently keeps the latter alive.

When Samuel arrives, Saul initially declares falsely, "I have fulfilled the Lord's command" (15:13), prompting the prophet to ask sardonically, "Then what [. . .] is this bleating of sheep *in my ears*, and the lowing of oxen that I *hear*?" (15:14; my emphasis) The two references to the faculty of hearing indicate that Saul's oedipal feelings have trumped God's injunction. Saul replies, "They were brought from the Amalekites, for *the troops* spared the choicest of the sheep and oxen for sacrificing to the Lord your God. And *we* proscribed the rest." (15:15; my emphasis) As pointed out by Meir Sternberg (1987, 507-8), Saul redistributes the credit and the blame: he is prepared to share with his subjects the credit for the destruction

(“we”), but none of the guilt of having spared the animals. When pressed further by Samuel, he takes all the credit for himself--“I performed the mission on which the Lord sent me: I captured King Agag of Amalek, and I proscribed Amalek” (15:20)--and lays all the blame for the looting on the troops, who “took from the spoil some sheep and oxen--the best of what had been proscribed--to sacrifice to the Lord your God at Gilgal.” (15:21)

Saul’s behavior vis-à-vis the troops parallels his attitude toward his son. Just as he had appropriated Jonathan’s military success and laid on him the blame for God’s anger, he now claims credit for the troops’ success and assigns to them blame for the transgression against God. Clearly, Saul’s oedipal rage against his son has been displaced on to the troops.

Even when Saul finally admits his wrongdoing, he insists on the culpability of the troops: “I did wrong to transgress the Lord’s command and your instructions; but I was afraid of the troops and I [listened to them].” (15:24) Ironically, Saul’s use of the verb “to listen to” indicates that the displacement of his oedipal animus informs his relations with both God and the people, leading to his final rejection by God: “The Lord has this day torn the kingship over Israel away from you and has given it to another who is worthier than you.” (15:28)

Saul’s oedipal fear of being supplanted by his son is now realized in the figure of David:

When Saul saw David going out to assault the Philistine, he asked his army commander Abner, “*Whose son* is that boy, Abner?” And Abner replied, “By your life, Your Majesty, I do not know.” “Then find out *whose son* that young fellow is,” the king ordered. So when David returned after killing the Philistine, Abner took him and brought him to Saul, with the head of the Philistine still in his hand. Saul said to him, “*Whose son* are you, my boy?” And David answered, “The son of your servant Jesse the Bethlehemite.” (17:55-58; my emphasis)

On the realistic level, Saul's question refers merely to David's lineage, whereas on the unconscious level, he perceives David, "with the head of the Philistine still in his hand," as the son who has just committed parricide. The narrator creates parallels between Saul and Goliath, on the one hand, and Jonathan and David, on the other. Both Saul and Goliath are extremely tall: Saul is "a head taller than any of the people" (9:2), and Goliath is "six cubits and a span tall." (17:4) Both Jonathan and David are courageous and resourceful. When Jonathan gives David his cloak, tunic, sword, bow, and belt, the displacement of Saul's murderous oedipal rage on to David is complete. And, indeed, when the women chant, "Saul has slain his thousands; David, his tens of thousands!" (18:7), Saul, "much distressed and greatly vexed" (18:8) at being dwarfed by David, exclaims, "All that he lacks is the kingship!" (Ibid.)

Conclusion

This psychoanalytic reading of the narratives of Joseph, Moses, and Saul has demonstrated the biblical authors' deep knowledge of the unconscious, which led them to develop a consummate technique for the presentation of the displacement of feelings engendered by the family on to the outer world. By using associative thinking and displacement as structural devices, the biblical authors communicate the protagonist's unconscious to that of the reader by means of their common language, which is likely to be understood only by the unconscious of the reader. The main building block of this technique is a specific noun or verb that is used as a bridge between the unconscious of the protagonist and the outer world. Interestingly, John Northam (1973, 189) has shown that in *Little Eyolf* (1894), Henrik Ibsen employs the noun "anything" and the verb "to gnaw" as bridges between Little Eyolf's unconscious and outer

society. The boy unconsciously understands that, since he is the one who is “gnawing” in the house, he should be removed by the Ratwife, so he follows her to his death.

In the three biblical narratives discussed, the unconscious undergirds the divine and social strands of the narrative, and they, in turn, serve to obfuscate it. Joseph’s remarkable ascent in Egypt, which is attributed to God, is grounded in the displacement of family dynamics on to the outer world. Likewise, the downfall of Moses and Saul, ascribed to their transgressions against God, is predicated on the displacement of feelings engendered within the family. The interweaving of the unconscious with the divine and social strands of the narrative enables the biblical authors to communicate the unconscious of the protagonist to the reader while safeguarding it from the awareness of both protagonist and reader.

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