

CANADIAN JOURNAL OF

# Disability Studies

Published by the Canadian Disability Studies Association · Association Canadienne des Études sur l'Incapacité

**Canadian Journal of Disability Studies**

**Published by the Canadian Disability Studies Association**

**Association Canadienne des Études sur le handicap**

**Hosted by The University of Waterloo**

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**Samuel J. Levine (2018). *Was Yosef on the Spectrum: Understanding Joseph Through Tora, Midrash, and Classical Jewish Sources*. Urim Publications Jerusalem, IL. ISBN 978-160-280-322-0**

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What is autism? Although autism is ultimately a diagnostic category, people who exhibit symptoms we now label as autistic are not restricted to the modern era (see e.g. Houston & Frith, 2000). Detailed historical analyses of the concept of autism have described a constellation of symptoms that were formally delineated and medicalized in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but pre-existed contemporary nosologies (e.g. Hacking, 2009; Nadesan, 2005; Waltz, 2013).

People experienced as “different” in their communication and social pragmatics have troubled normative expectations across recorded history. Samuel Levine’s *Was Yosef on the Spectrum: Understanding Joseph Through Tora, Midrash, and Classical Jewish Sources* argues that Joseph, son of Jacob and Rachel from the *Book of Genesis*, was possibly autistic. Diagnosing people retrospectively as autistic raises complex “hermeneutic” or interpretive questions, including the possibility that our selective readings and attributions of recorded histories reveal more about our current concerns than past realities. Yet, while acknowledging this post-modern possibility of non-retrievable origins, the hermeneutic tradition offers a dialogic framework for understanding the mingling of the past and the present using the idea of a textual fusions of horizons (Gadamer, 2011). Roughly, the hermeneutic tradition holds that each reading of a historical text links the past and present, with the potential for a better understanding of the

(“intersubjective” or social) self and its project forward. It is in the spirit of this hermeneutics that Levine’s text finds contemporary relevance.

In modern-day expert formulations, “autism spectrum disorders” are defined by a clinical set of “deficits” including restricted interests, difficulties understanding pragmatic and non-verbal aspects of communications, and problems with executive planning. Sometimes researchers add difficulties with “theory of mind” (the capacity to represent other people’s intentions) to this list. This clinical set of features is not fixed as it changes across time. For example, Leo Kanner included “flat affect,” as an autistic symptom, but that feature has long ceased to be included in clinical formulations (Nadesan, 2005). Contemporary clinical diagnoses of autism are historicized – produced by particular kinds of experts in particular kinds of institutions – but the description of symptoms captures a kind of *social otherness* that is remarked upon in similar, albeit also historicized, ways across time.

Formal contiguities and echoing experiential accounts bridge the past and present in the hermeneutic tradition. Historical accounts resonate in our contemporary readings and ultimately help re-construct our experience of the present and projections into the future. It is precisely this type of hermeneutics that Levine brings to his interrogation of whether the religious figure Joseph was on the autism spectrum. I found his historical interpretations of ancient religious texts to both echo and reveal anew my experiences as a parent of a spectrum child, as well as my experiences as an academic working with spectrum students.

The book is organized into eleven chapters, framed by the introduction and conclusion. The introduction establishes the significance of the biblical narrative of Yosef (Joseph). This narrative is presented not only as a religious text but also as a story of enduring relevance in contemporary life where familiar interpersonal and personal challenges are represented. Levine

offers the possibility that the severity of Yosef's troubles with his brothers and the "peculiarity" of his actions as reported in classical Jewish sources are consistent with what is now commonly referred to in the mainstream as an "autism spectrum disorder".

Chapters One through Eleven delve into the specifics of Yosef's narrative as encoded in religious texts with the intent of explaining oddities and conflicts as symptomatic of the challenges and missteps experienced by someone on the autism spectrum. For example, in Chapter One, Levine points that Yosef is described in the *Midrash Rabbah* as "a *na'ar*," a term ordinarily reserved for a young child, although reportedly seventeen years old at the time. Childhood is a socially constructed period and the extension of this period through the teen years is, in fact, an exclusively modern phenomenon so it is indeed somewhat odd that an older teenager would be described as a young child. Lacking expertise in religious documents I cannot speak to alternative explanations.

What Levine offers is an unorthodox reading of a traditional story. For example, Levine chronicles how Yosef's impulsivity and failure to predict the consequences of his actions, particularly their emotional impacts on siblings, contributed to their conflicts. Although great variation exists across the population with respect to the capacity to represent other minds, people on the spectrum can face challenges decoding non-verbal communication (behaviors) and other people's intentionalities (theory of mind). Levine describes these challenges and illustrates them using Yosef's narrative, pointing out that they created compounding vulnerabilities as the autistic child be scapegoated by false accusations, against which they may be poorly equipped.

Yet, the story doesn't simply establish parallels between Yosef's mishaps with his siblings and contemporary autism diagnostic practices and research findings. Levine also seeks to explicate challenges in understanding that can occur between parents and their autistic

children, pointing out that parents often fail to recognize the nature and extent of social challenges facing their children. This is illustrated by Yaakov (Yosef's father), who was reportedly oblivious to the intense sibling rivalry resulting in Yosef being kidnapped and sold by his brothers. Levine writes: "As a result, tragically, they [parents] may deny or remain unaware of their own responsibility for the consequences they could have prevented, and instead accept responsibility for outcomes that were simply not their fault" (p. 55).

The argument being developed about vulnerabilities does not, however, eclipse the satisfying acknowledgment of self-growth and social acceptance as Yosef's way of being in the world helped save Pharaoh's people. The capacities of many autistic people to focus intently and steadfastly pursue knowledge or objectives in the world are well established, as illustrated in our contemporary milieu by Temple Grandin (1995). Levine affirmatively chronicles Yosef's personal growth, disclosing how it was energized by acceptance and social recognition of achievements. Levine talks in terms of channeling talents and managing deficits (p. 96), leading to historically momentous achievements. The tale of Yosef's personal growth is enduringly relevant, not simply for people on the spectrum and their families, but for everyone.

In sum, I found this book extremely readable. It was also very cathartic to read, as a description in parable form, about the seemingly timeless experiences of social challenges and personal and community growth, with lessons for us all. I was *not* interested in the question of truth, defined in terms of lost origins when I read Levine's book, but rather the hermeneutic fusion of horizons. I found the hermeneutic living present in the sense that the telling of an ancient parable illuminated and affirmed personal experiences with the reverberating message of growth for us all.

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