

ZEBULUN AND ISSACHAR AS AN ETHICAL PARADIGM

by

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A paradigm, it has been remarked (Blank, 1974, pp. 111f.), can be either a boring linguistic model or a rather exciting literary image with its own evolutionary history.¹ Ethical models often rely upon paradigms as a means of inspiring certain types of behavior patterns. Often, however, paradigms seem to conflict. In later Judaism this conflict often revolved around the tension between the paradigm of the pious doer of *hesed*, deeds of lovingkindness, and the paradigm of the scholar. Norman Lamm (1971, pp. 212–246) has investigated this tension. He suggests that the Musar Movement, while attractive, has problematic implications for normative Judaism. It holds up the model of ethical piety in contrast to that of Torah scholarship. He contends that the great leaders in Judaism managed to combine a sensitivity to morality—that which lies beyond the line of the law—with intensive scholarship and dedication to the letter of the law itself. The ideal should be, he suggests, the scholar who makes room for deeds of love only when they do not conflict with the primary duty of Torah study.

This ideal and the tension it reflects found expression in rabbinic exegesis through the paradigm of the partnership between Issachar and Zebulun. The relationship between these two was inferred from two ancient poems, both of which are obscure and have presented modern scholars with problems of interpretation as any of the modern commentaries demonstrate: Genesis 49 and Deuteronomy 33 (see for example Speiser, 1964 and Von Rad, 1966). The rabbis saw in the former text a division of labor: Zebulun, setting out on the seas, was a merchant; Issachar, accepting servitude as an ox accepts its yoke, was emblematic of the scholar swaying to the study of Torah. The two passages in

1. The framework of this study is in debt to Professor Blank who traces the continuities in the paradigm of the suffering prophet from the prayers of Jeremiah through the servant image in Second Isaiah and the anger of Jonah. Though he focuses on continuity and this study looks at discontinuity, it should be seen as a tribute to and appreciation of his work.

question are important and need to be considered further. Rabbinic reflection, however, also found the relationship between Issachar and Zebulun adumbrated in other biblical passages which are often neglected in this discussion. These passages will provide the first focus of investigation.

A passage in Num 7:18–29 provided an occasion for rabbinic reflection (see *Numbers Rabba* 13:16–17 and *Midrash Haggadol* ad loc.). The passage enumerates the offerings brought by the various tribal leaders at the dedication of the tabernacle in the wilderness. After the leader of the tribe of Judah, who was first quite naturally because of that tribe's association with Davidic royalty, the second leader to bring an offering was from Issachar and the third from Zebulun. The rabbinic exegesis explained that Issachar earned this honor because of a dedication to Torah. Zebulun was granted an only slightly less important place because his commerce supported Issachar's study. The discussion in *Bamidbar Rabba* concludes that what is most important is the action—in this case study—rather than the actor—in this case Issachar. Thus both Issachar and Zebulun are “partners” in study since the act would have been impossible without both material support and spiritual activity.

The intricate connection between Zebulun and Issachar is alluded to in other rabbinic passages (see *Genesis Rabba* 98:12, 99:10; *Berakhot* 5a) which refer both to Jacob's blessing (Gen 49) and to the blessing of Moses (Deut 33). Zebulun is exalted for having donated the profit of his commercial ventures to Issachar's study. Zebulun's success is due to his practice of subventing the study of Torah, to his being one of “the supports of the Torah” who thus discover the “tree of life.” Issachar the scholar takes precedence: because of his scholarship Zebulun is rewarded. While Zebulun's activities are praised, his good fortune is entirely due to Issachar. The priority of scholarship as a means to success is, thus, established.

Later tradition took this theme and elaborated this meaning. The conflicting valuations of study and work have already been examined in earlier passages. In this study the way in which a particular biblical image was used to intimate this conflict will be explored. The image was expanded to refer to hopes beyond this life as well as to relative success in practical experience. Not only did Zebulun succeed in this world because of his association with Issachar, but also in the world to come. The partnership between the two tribes teaches that “he who supports a student of the Torah is . . . granted wealth in this world and a portion in the world to come.” (*Zohar* I:241b). The idea of reward in the world to come which plays an important role in this theme is

introduced by Jewish mystics in order to emphasize the value of supporting Jewish scholarship. The Zohar, however, makes it clear that Issachar's choice is the more worthy. Issachar, accordingly, is castigated when apparently abandoning study for the sake of commerce. The words of Gen 49:15 are taken as a reproof indicating that Issachar turned from the learning of Torah to engage in business (Zohar I: 242a–b). Although a merchant gains merit by supporting a scholar, scholarship is of far higher value than any type of commerce, no matter how worthy its motivation may be.

This same theme occurs in *hasidic* literature. A *hasidic* commentary on Deut 33:18 notes that Zebulun is said to rejoice when setting out to sea (Hakohen, 1956, p. 579). Such a remark seems odd. Most merchants rejoice when their ships return from a voyage. Only when the trip is over does the trader know whether the venture has been successful. Why then is Zebulun rejoicing? The answer is that he rejoices because he knows that Issachar is studying the Torah. His joy is grounded not in his commercial venture but in the promise of a place in the world to come which his intention has guaranteed. The true merit of Zebulun is that he has recognized the priority of scholarship. Although engaged in commerce, Zebulun's actual hope is not commercial but spiritual. Because of this spiritual orientation, Zebulun values scholarship above business. He rejoices at the true wealth of human life, learning, not at the superficial wealth, that is, practical gain and commercial success.

The ethical paradigm provided by the examples of Issachar and Zebulun is a distinctive one. The human being is presented with a choice—that between commerce and study. To be human is to decide which of these alternatives to follow. The human world, however, is a complex one. Often the choice for study is impossible as a realistic option. The ethical pattern admits this reality and suggests that if one cannot be a scholar oneself, then one demonstrates the choice for study by supporting those who are scholars. Since, however, the true purpose of being human is engagement in Torah, the scholar always takes priority over the merchant. The true model of a human life is that person who abandons commerce and lives entirely devoted to learning and studying the Torah of God.

II

The paradigm of the partnership between learning and commerce was only one way in which Jewish thinkers understood the image of Issachar and Zebulun. The ethics of cooperation was sometimes supplanted by an ascetic ethics. A subordinate theme in the ethics of

learning is a denigration of the material world. The choice for scholarship is exalted and the choice for commerce is rejected. That rejection receives loving attention in another strand of Jewish ethical thinking. The sixteenth century Jewish moralist Ephraim Solomon ben Aaron Luntschitz is noted for his polemic against wealthy communal leaders (Bettan, 1931–1932, pp. 443–480; Luntschitz, 1964; Zipperstein, 1983, pp. 72–74). When Luntschitz turned his attention to the relationship between Issachar and Zebulun he drew not only upon the traditional emphasis on the value of scholarship but also added his own vehement denunciation of wealth. In his commentary on Gen 49:13 he admits that Zebulun takes precedence, since he is separated from his possessions. He uses the opportunity, however, to launch into a polemic against wealth. He notes that money is a disadvantage, since it has value only when expended, while Torah is retained even when shared with others. Accumulating Torah means accumulating lasting benefits, but accumulating riches only brings increased worries.

In his homiletical works Luntschitz returns to this theme more than once (Luntschitz, 1964, pp. 12–23, 320–336). Zebulun's joy at giving charity is a materialistic one—by giving of one's wealth one ensures material success. The truly religious act is giving of oneself—doing deeds of lovingkindness. These acts win eternal life, not merely mundane success. The story of Issachar and Zebulun shows that the real purpose of giving charity is for the support of poor scholars. The distinguishing differences between the scholar and the nonscholar is that the former lives a spiritual life and the latter a material one. This point is made by dividing human beings into two types: the people of matter and the people of form, a distinction that finds its way into *hasidic* thought through the writings of the Ba^cal Shem Tov. He, however, democratizes this idea in the tradition mentioned above. Both types are needed, according to his view, since matter without form is wild, but form without matter is useless. Luntschitz, however, disagrees with this view. Both types are not equally important, he claims, but, just as matter depends upon form for its reality and life, so too does the nonscholar depend upon the spirituality of the scholar. While the hero is clearly the scholar, the value of the scholar is less that of being learned than that of being spiritual. For Luntschitz, Jewish ethics is an ethics of spirituality in opposition to the gross materialism of normal human life. Here the paradigmatic relationship between the scholar and the merchant lies in the former's ability to resist the temptations of worldliness. The biblical paradigm becomes the basis for a rejection of the merchant rather than for the cooperation envisioned by some rabbinic exegesis.

III

A still different evocation of Issachar and Zebulun occurs in the *ḥasidic* writings of Rabbi Naḥman of Bratzlav, although, like Luntshitz and against the Ba'al Shem Ṭov, he exalts Issachar above Zebulun. Indeed, his writings certainly evince the same themes and concerns as those of Ephraim Luntshitz. He echoes the same concern that money is but the source of worries and that spirituality must have ethical priority in Jewish religious life. In this vein he expands upon the theme of Issachar and Zebulun. Unlike Luntshitz, Bratzlaver's teachings emphasize not only ascetic spirituality but active involvement in the world as well. This difference shapes his interpretation of the paradigm presented by Issachar as does the ḥasidic institution of the *ṣaddîq*, the spiritual leader who is crucial in the divine plan for cosmic redemption.

The traditional material emphasizes scholarship and the importance of the scholar within the value system of Judaism. Luntshitz stresses the primacy of spiritualism in the face of materialism. Rabbi Naḥman shows in a methodical and careful manner how Issachar should be given primacy of place as a paradigm of the *ṣaddîq* whose cosmic task is so high and exalted that it far outweighs all other considerations (see Naḥman of Bratzlav, 1982, 60:1).

Rabbi Naḥman exalts the scholar as more essential to society than the merchant and as representative of a higher human ideal. According to his interpretation of the paradigm of Issachar, the scholar is a valued and productive member of the economic order. The scholar does not stand outside of the economic system; rather, he is integral to it. The view that the scholar is a parasite living off patronage is a misconception, according to Rabbi Naḥman. Issachar, for example, is presented as having been wealthy in his own right. Rabbi Naḥman quotes the Aramaic translation of Gen 49:14 to prove that Issachar was rich in the goods of this world. There is no reason to think that Issachar's scholarship prevented his involvement in the commercial world. He, no less than Zebulun, was engaged in business. Issachar, however, has an advantage over Zebulun: he recognizes that business and success is not the purpose of life. The merchant needs the scholar to teach the lesson that wealth is extrinsic to human happiness. The scholar does not depend upon the merchant either for success in this world or bliss in the world to come. The merchant, however, must look to the scholar in order to escape the trap of materialism in this world.

The paradigm of the rabbis suggested that the scholar needed the financial support of the merchants. Rabbi Naḥman denies this idea. The

paradigm of Issachar and Zebulun proves for him that while the merchant is dependent upon the scholar, the scholar is independent of the merchant. Rabbi Naḥman's suspicion of the material world of commerce leads him to suggest that the scholar remains untouched by and free from the temptations of the marketplace. This freedom provides a spirituality and religious piety that exalts the scholar and enables him to play a cosmic role of ultimate value to all humanity and all creation.

Such freedom, however, might mean that the scholar faces less of a temptation than the merchant. If the criterion for ethical worth lies in compassion and fellow-feeling, then the scholar has less chance to develop such sympathy than the merchant. If the central value is concern for others, for what the rabbinic tradition called *ṣedāqāh*, then the merchant may be better prepared than the scholar. One could suggest that Zebulun is of higher ethical status because his sacrifices are greater than Issachar's. The merchant is subjected to daily temptation; the ethics of business involve continual decision making. Perhaps the equality of Issachar and Zebulun devolves from this greater temptation placed before the merchants. Such is not the case, according to Rabbi Naḥman. His reply is based upon a special view of *ṣedāqāh*, a particular brand of lovingkindness, that of giving charity to those who are needy.

Rabbi Naḥman understands *ṣedāqāh* as an attitude, as a willingness to give to others out of a sense that God provides for all. *ṣedāqāh* is not necessarily a concrete act, it can be an acceptance of one's own lot, a resignation to one's position in life. From this standpoint poverty is as great a temptation as Rabbi Naḥman sees *ṣedāqāh* as an attitude which can be demonstrated by teaching, no less than by supporting others. The merchant gives evidence of this attitude through resisting the temptation to abandon learning. Both actions are equally ethical, both bear witness to the attitude of *ṣedāqāh*. The pursuits of both scholar and merchant can, thus, be undertaken in the spirit of *ṣedāqāh*. The ethical value attested to need not entail the struggles of a life devoted to business. Both the merchant and the scholar suffer the same temptations and can rise to the same level of ethical attainment. Rabbi Naḥman has integrated the traditional view which exalts scholarship with the traditional emphasis on *ṣedāqāh*. Just because the scholar is more elevated than the merchant, he is better able to practice *ṣedāqāh*, the true *ṣedāqāh* of giving of self to others. The scholar can sacrifice himself to the merchant by teaching the merchant the irrelevance of material goods. While Issachar and Zebulun, scholar and merchant, are equal in the spheres of practical life and ethics, this is not so in the realm of the spirit. Spiritually the status of Issachar is higher than that of Zebulun because it comes

closer to the ideal vision of human life that Rabbi Naḥman cherishes. The activity of Issachar is interior, hidden, recondite. He pursues the life of the spirit rather than that of the body. As such he fulfills the true task of a human being—that of redeeming sparks of holiness. While Zebulun may redeem such sparks, he does so unknowingly. Issachar's role in the cosmic drama is more self-conscious and therefore more elevated than that of Zebulun.

The paradigm of Issachar as cosmic redeemer plays a significant role in Bratzlaver's theology. It is a prototype of the *ṣaddîq* whose exalted spirituality is the means by which his followers gain redemption. The paradigmatic leadership of Issachar is for Naḥman an anticipation of the *ṣaddîq* who is catalyst and inspiration, not only a model for his adherents. Through the *ṣaddîq* spiritual self-perfection becomes possible, in a way that is not naturally given either through the material cosmos within which human beings strive or through innate human nature, positive though that might be. Rabbi Naḥman's use of the theme of Issachar and Zebulun is particularly striking since it offers a peculiarly *ḥasidic* variation on a paradigm utilized by earlier Jewish thinkers.

IV

In more recent times the relationship between Issachar and Zebulun has been treated by the Hebrew writer Shmuel Yosef Agnon (Agnon, 1968, pp. 309–310). This variation on a classical theme has occasioned reflection by at least one thinker who contends that it represents authentic *ḥasidic* ethics—an alter-centered ethics of self-contraction (Rotenberg, 1983, pp. 7–15).² Agnon stresses the inter-human concerns that marked the relationship between Issachar and Zebulun, the paradigm of brotherly love and compassion which they represent.

Agnon presupposes the rabbinic contention that Zebulun traversed the seas as a merchant in order to provide his brother Issachar with the means to study Torah. This presupposition, however, is only the occasion of the story. Its actual location is at the gates of Heaven. Issachar is unable to enter and demands to know why. The record books of Heaven are examined—Issachar has only two days of study accounted to him. Although his life was spent studying, all that study was credited to Zebulun. On two days, however, Zebulun delayed bringing Issachar his

2. Rotenberg's analysis is interesting, particularly his contrast between *ḥasidic* ethics and the Protestant Ethic. His explanation of Agnon's story, however, suffers from a lack of attention to detail. His suggestion of a monolithic *ḥasidic* ethics is also suspect since he fails to recognize variations among divergent *ḥasidic* groups.

merchandise. Those two days were credited to Issachar. The irony of this situation should not be lost on anyone who knows the traditional use of Issachar as a symbol of scholarship and the exalted place he holds in rabbinic thought. Agnon has reversed the traditional values and made scholarship less pious than the support given to it! (See Band, 1968, p. 274). The tradition does not usually give the priority to Zebulun. While Zebulun does win his share in the world to come through supporting Issachar, the latter does not usually lose his through accepting this support. Agnon's tale seems to be ironic: if you don't earn something yourself, it doesn't belong to you. Great scholarship gotten at the expense of others is not your own. Agnon is really writing a polemic against patronism. Here is a variation on the Zionist theme of A. D. Gordon: butter made from borrowed milk does not belong to you. The ethics of being supported by others, the ethics of alter-centered cooperation, seems held up to ridicule in the tale. Issachar is the paradigm of the pietist who lives off charity contributions and seems to occasion only mockery and derision.

This ironic reading of the tale, however, is only part of the story. There is, eventually, a happy ending. Both Zebulun and Issachar do get into Heaven. How does this occur? The rationale is not that the work of the scholar and the work of the merchant are both needed. Complementary activities are irrelevant in the tale. The central point Agnon is stressing is that of compassion. When Issachar stands at the gates of heaven and finds that he cannot enter, he sighs a great sigh. Zebulun, resting comfortably in his portion of the world to come, hears the sigh and thinks, "Surely that is the sigh of my brother Issachar," and comes to investigate. When he finds out what has happened. Zebulun suggests that he change places with his brother. "All that I have is just because of you," he says, and he offers to stand outside the gates of Heaven while Issachar takes his place. Issachar, who had been complaining but a moment before, now changes his tune. He refuses to enter into Heaven at the expense of his brother. At that point God intervenes. "Issachar and Zebulun," the divine declares, "since you contracted yourselves (have undergone *šimsûm*) and demonstrated your love for one another, I too will contract and make room for both of you in Heaven." The point Agnon is stressing is that contraction of self takes place because of love. When human beings make sacrifices for each other, then they become worthy of salvation.

Agnon's paradigm of Issachar and Zebulun is a paradigm of compassion, of *hesed*. Salvation had been interpreted by the hasidim as dependent upon the cosmic efforts of the *šaddîq*, by other pietists as

dependent upon ascetic spirituality, by rabbinic leaders as dependent upon scholarship. Agnon's point is different. He contends that brotherly love is the key to salvation; cosmic redemption is achieved through the willingness to forfeit one's own bliss for the sake of another. Compassion for those in need, rather than the value of your own contribution to human life, is the essential merit affirmed.

V

Agnon's story draws upon an important principle in Jewish thought: the importance of lovingkindness or *hesed*, in Jewish ethics. Agnon has made such lovingkindness central to Jewish ethics. To be ethical means to make concern for others the basic priority in decision-making. Salvation depends upon placing the other before the self, on making the sacrifices that *sedāqāh* requires. *Sedāqāh* may mean sacrificing one's material wealth, as Zebulun does for Issachar. It may also mean sacrificing one's eternal bliss for another—again as Zebulun tries to do in paradise. Whatever form such *hesed* may take, it has at its heart giving priority to the other over the self. For Agnon this type of action is the basis for ethical worth. The true goal is developing personal sensitivity and a willingness to sacrifice one's own happiness for the sake of others. This individualism and concentration on improving the self forms a link between the ideals of a modern Hebraic writer and those of the medieval Jewish philosophers and mystical ascetics. Willingness to give up one's own bliss for others is central. This interpretation of *hesed* as the primary ethical standard which forms the basis for understanding moral paradigms in Jewish literature has much to commend it and an impressive rooting in Jewish tradition.

A story collected by Moses Gaster (1968, p. 348) is strikingly similar to Agnon's tale. The story relates how a certain person lived an extremely wicked life. He appeared before the heavenly court and pleaded that he needed another chance. God, being lenient, allowed him to have that chance. This time, however, he was even more wicked than before. Again he was given a chance, and again he repeated his wickedness. On the third time, however, he happened to be present when a group of Jews were meeting for prayer. Only nine men were there, and he was needed to provide the tenth man for the quorum, for the *minyān* (Agnon has an interesting tale concerning the making of a *minyān* in the same volume that contains "Issachar and Zebulun"). When he died this time it was together with the *ṣaddîq* who had been part of the *minyān*. In Heaven it was determined that for his one good deed—participating in the *minyān*—the wicked man could spend one hour in bliss. It was also

determined that, because he had performed one minor infraction of Jewish law, the *ṣaddîq* would need to spend one hour in Gehinom (Hell). The wicked man was overcome with compassion and offered the *ṣaddîq* his one hour in bliss so that the *ṣaddîq* need not suffer even a short time. God was impressed with the loving generosity of the wicked man and therefore granted him a life of bliss in Heaven as a reward. In this tale, as in Agnon's, God is moved to grant salvation to an individual who, like Issachar and Zebulun, makes room for another in the World to Come.

This theme of imitating the paradigm of Issachar and Zebulun points to another paradigm, a more transcendent one. Agnon explicitly has God approving that the two brothers contracted themselves to make space for the other. The word "*šimšûm*" is often used as a technical expression in Jewish mysticism to refer to God's self-contraction for the sake of creating the world (see Scholem, 1961). The ultimate paradigm which Issachar and Zebulun follow, and which those who imitate them emulate, is that of God. This theme of *imitatio Dei* is not uncommon in Jewish ethical reflection. The central concept of *hesed* is often related directly to the principle of imitation of the Divine (see Harvey, 1976; Shapiro, 1975). Agnon's insight may be correct—those who see the essential paradigm of Issachar and Zebulun as being one of mutual lovingkindness are applying the standard of divine ethics to human behavior.

In a way the variety of ethical paradigms derived from the image of Issachar and Zebulun may be understood as variations on the meaning of the divine paradigm. When God is understood as the teacher *par excellence* who spends part of each day teaching Jewish school children, then the ethical paradigm emerging from the relationship of Issachar and Zebulun is one that emphasizes learning. When God's spirituality and separation from this corrupt and material world is stressed, then the paradigmatic importance of Issachar and Zebulun lies in its advocacy of ascetic discipline. When God is the cosmic creator and redeemer who is in partnership with the *ṣaddîq* in the drama of world history, then the paradigm of Issachar and Zebulun falls into the framework of that drama. Sheldon Blank has written that "Succeeding generations do not more accurately recall events of the distant past—they embellish these events with new inventions" (Blank, 1937–1938, p. 346). The transformation in the paradigm of Issachar and Zebulun provides an example of new inventions that embellish events recorded by tradition. Such inventions demonstrate both the variety and evolution of the Jewish ethical tradition.

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