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**WAS YOSEF ON THE SPECTRUM?  
UNDERSTANDING JOSEPH THROUGH TORAH, MIDRASH, AND  
CLASSICAL JEWISH SOURCES: A REVIEW**

*John Elder Robison\**

In this fascinating study, law professor and Hebrew scholar, Samuel Levine, asks if Joseph from the Bible was autistic.<sup>1</sup> Autism is a common neurological difference that influences behavior. We can see how autism influences behavior in the autistic population living today, and it's reasonable to suppose autism had a similar influence on our ancestors. Autism is ubiquitous now, and there is no reason to suppose autism was any less common in Joseph's day, even as it was unknown by any diagnostic label. Human cognitive diversity is certainly well documented throughout written history.

People are affected very differently by autism. Some autistic individuals are profoundly disabled; Joseph is clearly not in that group. Other manifestations of autism have a milder effect, unrecognized as such until about 25 years ago. Levine asks if Joseph was a member of that latter population—different, but not visibly disabled. Might that explain some of his more inscrutable actions?

Autism—as we now know it—is defined as a set of behavioral differences that appear in people of all races and at all intellectual levels. People with autism tend often to have heightened senses. They may pick out detail others miss, which may affect the person in myriad ways. The autistic person may appear extraordinarily sensitive, or even disabled; overwhelmed by what others consider the normal hubbub of life. Autistic people can be extremely logical, contrasting sharply with others who are guided by emotions and feelings.

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\* John Elder Robison is an autistic adult who studies autism and neurodiversity through history. He has served on World Health Organization steering committees to develop definitions of autism, and is a member of the board of INSAR, the professional society for autism researchers. He is the neurodiversity scholar at the college of William & Mary, and an advisor to the Center for Neurodiversity at Landmark College.

<sup>1</sup> See SAMUEL J. LEVINE, *WAS YOSEF ON THE SPECTRUM? UNDERSTANDING JOSEPH THROUGH TORAH, MIDRASH, AND CLASSICAL JEWISH SOURCES* (2019).

Science shows us that autism has a strong heritable component, with some genetic markers leading back tens of thousands of years. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), at least 1 in 34 boys exhibit traits of autism today.<sup>2</sup> We have no way to know if autism was equally common in biblical times, but data suggests autism has followed myriad threads in the human genome for a long, long time.

As an autistic person, I found Levine’s arguments about Joseph and autistic behavior well-reasoned and fascinating, but I also understood some of the pushback the book received. Can any modern-day person bestow an autism diagnosis on someone who lived and died thousands of years ago? While some people reject that idea out of hand, others (myself included) see more nuance.

Most people would agree that we can form general conclusions about a person from the historical record. Were they wise, insightful, or even feeble-minded? Kind or cruel? Evidence often exists to answer those questions. Whether we can bestow a medical diagnosis, for a condition that was unknown in Joseph’s day, is another matter.

In reading Levine’s book, I don’t think he intended to bestow a medical diagnosis. Rather, I think he uses the words “autistic” and “on the spectrum” to describe a neurotype—something we are just beginning to describe, but which has been part of humanity forever.

The most widely recognized use of the word “autistic” is the medical one—to describe the withdrawal into oneself that is associated with the medical disorder called autism. In his analysis, it is clear that Levine is not talking about Joseph withdrawing in that way. Instead, he analyses depictions of Joseph and considers his sometimes-inscrutable behavior in light of how modern-day people of the autistic neurotype behave.<sup>3</sup>

For example, people of the autistic neurotype are often socially unaware, and they fail to read the intentions of others, or properly interpret their statements. Levine argues that Joseph exhibits this in his interactions with his brothers.<sup>4</sup> Levine’s reasoning makes sense, and it comports with my own experience of people with the autistic

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<sup>2</sup> See *Autism Spectrum Disorder*, NAT’L INST. MENTAL HEALTH, [https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/autism-spectrum-disorder-asd.shtml#part\\_154899](https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/autism-spectrum-disorder-asd.shtml#part_154899) (last visited Nov. 4, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> See LEVINE, *supra* note 1, *passim*.

<sup>4</sup> See *id.* at 13-55.

neurotype today. An autistic person would be very likely to behave today just as Joseph was said to behave with his brothers. For a non-autistic person to behave that way could seem inexplicable.

While medical autism diagnoses are only given to 1-2% of the population, the broader autistic neurotype is much more common, affecting at least 5% of the population. Autism as an obvious extreme disability is fairly rare. Milder autistic traits that manifest as eccentricity or difference are more common than most people realize.

When looking at earlier interpretations of Joseph's behavior, Levine's consideration of possible autistic influence makes as much sense to me as anything I read earlier. When faced with an inexplicable behavior we may say it is unknowable, or we can continue the search for explanations, which Levine has done.

By doing so, he has illuminated Joseph's interactions with a new light, which can only deepen our understanding. Some of Levine's critics see his work as a blasphemous judgement of Joseph, or believe he is beyond our understanding as mere mortals.

I do not read Levine's words that way. Saying a person appears to be of the autistic neurotype is not a criticism or judgement. The autistic neurotype is an attribute which, if understood, is key to understanding that person. We don't hesitate to consider how other attributes may have shaped historical figures. Historians debate the role of growing up in a seafaring family, or being a devout Catholic, or the influence of an overbearing father. When it comes to human development, autism is at least as influential as any of those things and deserves equal consideration.

When we consider Joseph through Levine's proposed lens of autism as neurological difference, we may better understand his actions. When this book is read in the spirit its author intended, I think it makes a contribution to interpreting a significant historical figure.