



The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

Vayeshev: The Temptation of Joseph

When we first hear about Joseph, he comes across as an arrogant teenager, a seventeen-year-old who tells tales about his brothers, and brags about dreams in which his siblings and even his parents bow to him.

But this is merely Joseph's starting point. In time, Joseph gains the moniker "Hatzaddik." How so? The Talmud tells us that it was a result of Joseph's principled resistance to the temptation of Potiphar's wife:

It was told of Joseph the virtuous (Yoseph Hatzaddik) that the wife of Potiphar every day endeavored to entice him with words — The garments she put on for him in the morning, she did not wear in the evening, those she had put on in the evening, she did not wear in the morning.

She said to him: Yield to me! He said: No.

She said: I shall have you imprisoned. He said: The Lord releases the bound.

She said: I shall bend thy proud stature. He replied: The Lord raises those who are bowed down. She said: I shall blind your eyes. He replied: The Lord opens the eyes of the blind.

She offered him a thousand talents of silver to make him yield to her, to lie with her, to be near her, but he would not listen to her. (Yoma 35a)

In this account, we witness the extraordinary pressure that this married woman, his master's wife, is applying to the youthful Joseph. A good-looking 17-year old; one wonders what he had to lose! And yet he resists. Whereas this Talmudic midrash pins Joseph's refusal purely in the realm of the divine, the biblical text see Joseph eloquently expressing his refusal on the grounds that it would be a double violation: 1. an affront to the trust and good faith that his master had shown him, and 2. a sin against God.

But how clear-cut was Joseph's test? A careful look at the biblical account demonstrates how tough Joseph's challenge was:

And it came to pass after these things, that his master's wife cast her eyes upon Joseph and she said, 'Lie with me.' But he refused [va-yema'en] and said unto his master's wife: 'Behold, my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my charge... he has kept nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. . . How can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?'

And it came to pass, as she spoke to Joseph day after day, that he hearkened not unto her, to lie by her or to be with her.

And it came to pass on a certain day, when he went into the house to do his work, and there was none of the men of the house there within, that she caught him by his garment, saying: 'Lie with me.' And he left his garment in her hand and fled outside. (Gen. 39:7-12)

Three times we have the word “Vaye-hi”, translated here as “And it came to pass”. This is indicative of three scenes, a triple progression. In the first instance, we see Joseph's lengthy refusal. In the second segment, we see that Potiphar's wife's seductions became a daily occurrence, a persistent pressure, and we witness Joseph's firm distance from this woman. In the third segment, we witness that the house was empty, and this is the scene where things come to a breaking-point.

Each scene needs unpacking.

In the first “scene” note how lengthy Joseph's statement is! Is he being polite, trying to explain to his mistress why he cannot comply, or is he possibly struggling with this enticement, with the temptation? After all, if he wished to refuse, he could simply have said a single word - “No!” In fact, there is an initial refusal - “But he refused [va-yema'en]” - BEFORE this long response. The trope on this word is the *shalsholet*, a wavering note, “the music of ambivalence”ⁱ which eloquently expresses Joseph's inner turbulence. Joseph is severely tempted, but he refuses. And only afterwards he clarifies his moral thinking, beautifully articulating his moral stand. This wordy answer offers a window into Joseph's soul as he clarifies his own inner thinking, clearly rebuffing his mistress's sexual advances on moral and religious grounds.

In the second scene, Potiphar's wife persists. It is difficult to conceive of the pressure that she applied “day by day.” But now, Joseph is resolute - “he hearkened not unto her” - he simply avoids her, ignores her. He won't even “be with her,” in other words, he makes sure that he is never alone in her presence nor does he engage her in private conversation. This state of affairs continues for some time.

Until **the third scene**: On this day, “when he went into the house to do his work, and there was none of the men of the house,” Joseph and Potiphar’s wife are alone in the house. How did this state of affairs transpire?

Rav and Shmuel [differ in their interpretation]. One said that it really means to do his work; but the other said that he went to satisfy his desires. (Yoma 36b)

Two Talmudic sages debate this verse. Rav says that Joseph went to do his ordinary work, but this time, Potiphar’s wife had him all alone. He was trapped. Shmuel disagrees. Why was Joseph allowing himself to “be with her” in an empty house? Now! Today, Joseph had crumbled under the pressure; it was all too much, and knowing that they were alone, he intended to acquiesce to her seductions. Both sages have strong proof in the text. For Rav: “she caught him by his garment”; for Shmuel: “he left his garment in her hand.” We can well imagine that maybe there is truth in both opinions.

However, at the critical moment, Joseph knows that this is wrong, and he runs away, even though it will probably cost him his freedom, or his life. When the Talmud puts threats like incarceration, blinding and physical disfiguration in the mouth of this seductress, we can well imagine that these were real scenarios between aristocracy and slaves.

From where did Joseph draw the strength to resist?ⁱⁱ We need to refer back to Joseph’s original statement. His morality *bein adam lechavero* – the betrayal of his master – and *bein adam lemakom* – “it would be a sin to God” – his integrity and principles anchor him. This is just one critical moment in life where Joseph is put to the test, and passes with formidable fortitude, to become Yoseph Hatzaddik.

Questions for Discussion:

Here in Israel, and in the US, in the Jewish and general world, we have been subject to well publicized situations of politicians, rabbis and others, who have overstepped sexual lines. Our teenagers are listening. Maybe we have to talk about sexual harassment with our children.

- What are the ways to avoid sexually compromising situations? (Joseph ensured that he was never alone with his seductress)
- Do people in power sometimes abuse that power?
- For ourselves too, as adults, we too must be aware that sexuality and sexual temptation are a real part of the world, and to ensure proper protocols to avoid temptation, misunderstanding and the like, and ensure that our language and conduct secure a safe environment at work and at leisure, so that we do not sin, neither to our fellow, nor to God.

This might just be the opportunity to delicately raise the topic around the Shabbat table.

Behatzlacha!

Shabbat Shalom

ⁱ <http://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation-5768-vayera-the-music-of-ambivalence/>

ⁱⁱ A frequently quoted midrash suggests that Joseph was concerned with his place in the Jewish people: “At that moment his father's image came and appeared to him through the window and said: 'Joseph, thy brothers will have their names inscribed upon the stones of the ephod and thine amongst theirs; is it thy wish to have thy name expunged from amongst theirs?’” Possibly the image of his father reminds him as to his high ethical tradition. But as for his place in the future tribes of Israel? – for a young man whose brothers had sold him, that would have probably the last scenario in his mind. From a peshat perspective, this is a tough read.