**SALT – PARASHT VAYESHEV**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah in Parashat Vayeishev tells of Yosef’s experiences in Egypt, where he was brought as a slave. He worked for a nobleman named Potifar, whose wife desired an intimate relationship with Yosef and attempted to lure him. Yosef resisted her daily advances, until one day, when they were home alone, Potifar’s wife grabbed hold of Yosef’s clothing, whereupon Yosef fled from the house. Potifar’s wife proceeded to falsely accuse Yosef of attempting to rape her, and he was imprisoned.

The Gemara in Masekhet Sota (36b) comments that the reason why nobody else was home that day is because it was a pagan festival, and the entire household went to the house of idol worship. Potifar’s wife said to herself, in the Gemara’s words, “There is no day like today for Yosef to succumb to me,” and so she feigned illness and remained home, confident that she would succeed in her seduction efforts.

The simple reading of the Gemara’s account is that, quite simply, Potifar’s wife felt this occasion offered her a special opportunity because everybody else left the house, and so she and Yosef were alone. From Rashi’s comments to this verse, however, an additional explanation emerges. Rashi writes that this was “a special day, **a day of frivolity**, a holiday for them, when they all went to the house of idol worship.” Curiously, Rashi found it necessary to add that this festival was characterized by “*tzechok*” – merrymaking and gaiety. Rav Eliyahu Diskin ([*Nachal Eliyahu*, Parashat Vayeishev, 5771](http://beinenu.com/sites/default/files/alonim/520_09_81.pdf)) creatively suggests that this, too, was part of Potifar’s wife’s plan. Beyond the simple fact that nobody was in the house that day, there was also a general atmosphere of lightheaded frivolity. Rav Diskin references a tradition attributed to the Vilna Gaon that ancient pagan worship always involved wanton sexual indulgence, such that the aura throughout Egyptian society on that day was one which lent itself to promiscuous behavior. This environment, Potifar’s wife felt, would make Yosef especially prone to succumbing to her advances that day.

The aura in which we find ourselves has a significant impact upon us. The Gemara in Masekhet Kiddushin (30b), amidst its discussion of how Torah study helps us overcome our *yetzer ha-ra* (evil inclinations), cites Rabbi Yishmael’s famous teaching, “If this despicable one [the *yetzer ha-ra*] confronts you, drag him to the study hall…” It is perhaps noteworthy that Rabbi Yishmael does not simply state that one who is beset by sinful desires should engage in Torah study, but rather advises such a person to go to the *beit midrash* (study hall). This might mean that the strategy to counter our negative impulses is not simply learning, but placing ourselves in an environment that encourages spiritual devotion. Just as the promiscuous aura of Egypt posed an especially difficult challenge to Yosef who faced the lures of Potifar’s wife, conversely, the intellectual and spiritual energy of the *beit midrash* helps empower us to resist temptations and remain consistently devoted to God.

At the same time, the story of Yosef shows that we are capable of withstanding the pressures placed upon us by our surroundings. Potifar’s wife had hoped that the promiscuous aura of Egypt that day would have the effect of breaking Yosef’s determination, but she was wrong. Yosef was strong and committed enough to adhere to his values even in the face of overwhelming pressure. We must strive to “drag him to the study hall,” to place ourselves in environments which encourage religious devotion, while also cultivating the strength and resolve to faithfully cling to our principles and beliefs even when we find ourselves in spiritually hostile environments that challenge our commitment.

Sunday

We read in Parashat Vayeishev of the unsuccessful attempts made by the wife of Yosef’s master, Potifar, to lure him to an adulterous relationship. Yosef resisted her advances, until finally, on a day when they were alone, Potifar’s wife took hold of his garment, whereupon he fled from the home.

The Torah tells that on that day, Yosef arrived in the house “*la-asot melakhto*” – “to perform his work” (39:11). The Gemara in Masekhet Sota (36b) famously cites two views among the *Amoraim* as to the meaning of this phrase. One view accepts the simple reading, that Yosef came to tend to his usual duties as Potifar’s servant. The other view, however, contends that Yosef had actually come to do inappropriate “work” – to satisfy his desires and accede to Potifar’s wife’s advances.

Yet a third interpretation of “*melakhto*” appears in the *Yalkut Shimoni* (146), which claims that Yosef came to “read and review what his father taught him.” According to the Midrash, it seems, Yosef set aside time each day as part of his regular schedule to review the teachings he had learned from his father, Yaakov, before he was sold as a slave, and this is the “work” that Yosef came to do when Potifar’s wife confronted him.

The Satmar Rebbe (*Divrei Yoel*) draws a link between this comment of the *Yalkut Shimoni* and the Gemara’s famous description (there in Masekhet Sota) of Yaakov’s image appearing to Yosef and pleading with him not to succumb. The Gemara relates that “his father’s image appeared to him in the window” and warned of the eternal consequences of the sinful act which Yosef was tempted to commit, and Yosef then desisted. In light of the comment of the *Yalkut Shimoni*, the Satmar Rebbe notes, this could be explained to mean that Yosef had his father’s image before him because he had just been reviewing what his father had taught him. The Talmud Yerushalmi (Shabbat 1:2) states that when one studies Torah and encounters a teaching of a *Tanna* or *Amora*, he should try to imagine that the sage is present at that moment, teaching him the information. When Yosef reviewed his father’s teachings in his mind each day, he in a sense saw his father in front of him, and this image empowered him to resist the temptation of Potifar’s wife’s advances.

One of the many benefits of learning Torah is that we put ourselves in the company, so-to-speak, of spiritual giants. Even we do not consciously imagine that the sages whose words we study are sitting in front of us, nevertheless, on some level, we share their world and engage with them throughout the process. The more we expose ourselves to these righteous figures, the more time we spend with them and the more attention we give to them – the more we will be impacted by them, and the more their values and teachings will guide us. Just as Yosef was empowered by his father’s image which he beheld through learning the information he taught him, so are we empowered, enriched and uplifted by the personalities of the sages whose Torah we imbibe over the course of our studies.

Monday

In the beginning of Parashat Vayeishev, the Torah introduces the story of Yosef and his brothers by describing Yosef as shepherding together with his brothers, adding, “*ve-hu na’ar et benei Vilha ve-et benei Zilpa*” – “and he was a youth with the sons of Bilha and the sons of Zilpa.” Apparently, although Yosef worked as a shepherd together with all his brothers, he had some special relationship with the sons of Bilha and Zilpa, the maidservants whom Yaakov had married. The verse concludes, “Yosef brought evil tidings about them to their father.”

Rashi explains this verse to mean that Yosef forged a special relationship with the four sons of the maidservants because the other brothers – the six sons of Leah – would ridicule them and treat them disrespectfully. The final clause of the verse – “Yosef brought evil tidings about them to their father” – is understood by Rashi to mean that Yosef reported about Leah’s sons. According to Rashi, the term “*dibatam*” (“tidings about them”) modifies not the sons of the maidservants, who were just mentioned, but rather the other brothers. Yosef informed of Yaakov of various misdeeds which he witnessed Leah’s sons committing, including their mistreatment of the maidservants’ sons.

The Ramban questions Rashi’s explanation, noting that the story of Yosef’s sale as a slave seems to indicate otherwise. If Yosef had befriended the maidservants’ sons to protect them from the other brothers, and even reported to their father about the other brothers’ mistreatment of them, then we would expect the maidservants’ sons to come to his assistance when the other brothers sought to kill him and then sold him as a slave. The Ramban adds that Reuven, the oldest of Leah’s sons, opposed the plan to kill Yosef (37:21-22), and thus Yosef had five brothers – the maidservants’ four sons, and Reuven – to defend him. They were six, whereas the hostile brothers numbered just five, such that they should have succeeded in resisting the five brothers who wanted to kill and then sell Yosef. And besides, the Ramban writes, in telling of the brothers attempting to kill and then selling Yosef, the Torah always speaks of “his brothers,” giving no indication whatsoever that this crime was committed only by some brothers. The clear implication is that all of Yosef’s brothers (besides, of course, Binyamin, who was still young and at home) participated in selling him as a slave. This seems inconceivable if Yosef had forged a special bond with the maidservants’ sons in order to protect them.

The Ramban therefore presents the opposite approach, claiming that the tensions actually began first between Yosef and the maidservants’ sons. When the Torah says that Yosef “was a youth with the sons of Bilha and the sons of Zilpa,” it means that Yaakov had assigned the sons of Bilha and Zilpa the role of overseeing Yosef and caring for him. Therefore, Yosef was always in the company of these four brothers. And it was about these four, the Ramban explains, that Yaakov reported to their father, thus arousing their resentment. In the subsequent verses, the Torah tells how the rest of the brothers, too, resented Yosef because of the preferential treatment he received from Yaakov. According to the Ramban, then, the tensions began with the maidservants’ resentment of Yosef for his bringing reports about them to Yaakov. Later, Leah’s sons also despised him, and they all conspired to eliminated him.

Rav Eliyahu Mizrachi, in his work on Rashi’s commentary, defends Rashi’s explanation, suggesting that the maidservants’ sons turned against Yosef despite their debt of gratitude to him. Yosef’s favored status in the family, as well as his dreams of leadership which he shared with his brothers, affected all of them equally, such that the sons of the maidservants joined Leah’s sons in the effort to eliminate Yosef even though he had protected them from Leah’s sons.

Rav Yehoshua Ib Shuib, in his published sermons, defends Rashi’s interpretation differently, suggesting that the maidservants’ sons were unable to oppose Leah’s sons. Although the maidservants’ sons, together with Yosef and Reuven, outnumbered those who sought to eliminate Yosef, nevertheless, their de facto position of inferiority vis-à-vis Leah’s sons did not allow them to stand up to Leah’s sons, and thus they were powerless to defend Yosef.

Tuesday

The Torah in Parashat Vayeishev tells of the dreams which Yosef dreamt that foretold his future stature of leadership in the family. He first dreamt that he and his brothers were binding sheaves of grain, when suddenly their sheaves prostrated before his. In his second dream, he saw the sun, the moon, and eleven stars – clearly alluding to his eleven brothers – bowing to him. The Torah relates that Yosef informed his brothers and his father about the dreams, whereupon “his father scolded him,” asking, “What is this dream that you dreamt? Will I, your mother and your brothers bow down on the ground to you?!” (37:10).

Rashi, commenting on the words “*va-yig’ar bo*” (“he scolded him”), writes, “Because he was bringing hatred upon himself.” As the *Nachalat Yaakov* commentary explains, Yaakov did not scold Yosef for having such dreams – something which was not in his control – but rather for sharing them with his brothers. The only effect of his relaying this information was to fuel their resentment toward him. Yaakov therefore reprimanded Yosef for telling the family about the dreams instead of keeping them to himself, thereby intensifying his brothers’ hostility.

It has been suggested that Rashi’s comments here might shed light on his comments later in Chumash, regarding the special sacrifices offered by the *nesi’im*, the leaders of the tribes, upon the dedication of the *Mishkan* at Sinai. As the Torah tells in Parashat Naso (Bamidbar, chapter 7, which is read each morning of Chanukah), all the *nesi’im* brought the identical series of offerings, which included a goat as a *chatat* (sin offering). Rashi (Bamidbar 7:22) cites Rabbi Moshe Ha-darshan as explaining that this goat was offered to atone for the sin of *mekhirat Yosef* – the brothers’ having sold Yosef as a slave. They slaughtered a goat and dipped Yosef’s cloak in its blood to make it appear as though he was attacked by animal (Bereishit 37:32), and so their descendants offered a goat as an atonement offering when the *Mishkan* was consecrated. The question arises as to why, if this is the reason for the *chatat*, even the leaders of the tribes of Efrayim and Menashe brought a *chatat*. Efrayim and Menashe, of course, were Yosef’s sons, and thus these tribes certainly had no reason to atone for *mekhirat Yosef*, as their ancestor was the victim, not the perpetrator. One answer given is that Yosef indeed bore some degree of responsibility for this unfortunate incident, because, as Rashi comments, he fueled their hostility by telling them of his dreams. Of course, this did not justify the brothers’ drastic measure of selling him as a slave, but it did cast upon Yosef a level of guilt. Therefore, even Yosef’s descendants were required to atone for the sin of *mekhirat Yosef*. (This explanation is brought by Rav Moshe Scheinerman, in his *Ohel Moshe*, Parashat Naso. Rav Scheinerman notes that this does not explain why the leader of the tribe of Binyamin also brought a *chatat* to celebrate the *Mishkan*’s dedication, given that Binyamin played no role whatsoever in the sale of Yosef. Evidently, Rav Scheinerman writes, the tribe of Binyamin brought the same series of sacrifices as the other tribes in order to maintain the spirit of unity engendered through the tribes’ bringing identical offerings.)

When a conflict arises, even if one feels confident that he is correct, this does not necessarily mean that he bears no responsibility for the situation. Yosef was clearly the victim of his brothers’ hostility, but he is still criticized for failing to do his part to defuse the tensions. Even if we feel we have been wronged, we are nevertheless expected to react wisely and in a manner that serves to calm, rather than exacerbate, the hard feelings, to whatever extent possible. Just as Yosef was held partially accountable for his brothers’ hatred, so must we see ourselves as responsible to ease tensions whenever we can, even when we feel that we have been wronged.

Wednesday

We read in Parashat Vayeishev of Yosef’s being sold as a slave and brought to Egypt, where he was purchased by an Egyptian nobleman named Potifar. The Torah relates, “The Lord was with Yosef, and he was a successful man; he was in the home of his Egyptian master” (39:2). The simplest understanding of this reference to Yosef’s “success,” seemingly, is that Yosef succeeded in the tasks assigned to him by his master. Indeed, the Radak explains this verse to mean that “in everything which he involved himself with while working for his master, there was success.” This reading is supported by the next verse, which tells that Potifar saw “that the Lord was with him, and that everything he did, the Lord made successful in his hand.” Later (39:6), the Torah tells that Potifar entrusted all he had with Yosef, likely because he saw that everything Yosef did succeeded, and so he felt confident assigning Yosef over everything in his home. As the Ramban writes, “His actions were always successful, more so than all people, and thus he [Potifar] knew that he did this because of God.”

Rav Zalman Sorotzkin, however, in his *Oznayim La-Torah*, suggests an additional insight into this verse. He explains that Yosef’s “success” is expressed in the conclusion of the verse – “he was in the home of his Egyptian master.” This seemingly superfluous phrase, Rav Sorotzkin writes, might be understood to mean that Yosef accepted his condition, and focused his attention and energies on the present rather than the past. Instead of wallowing in sorrow and self-pity, thinking about his home and his family and bemoaning his misfortune, he planted himself mentally and emotionally “in the home of his Egyptian master.” Yosef fully accepted the fact that Providence had brought him to Egypt work as a slave, and so he committed himself to fulfill this mission – as unpleasant as it was – to the best of his ability. And this, Rav Sorotzkin suggests, was Yosef’s “success.” Our “success” is measured not in absolute terms, by any sort of objective metric, but rather by the extent to which we make the most of whatever situation we find ourselves in. Yosef achieved “success” because “he was in the home of his Egyptian master,” because he made the decision to make the most of his undesirable circumstances.

The story of Yosef is one with which all of us, to one extent or another, can identify. We have all dreamt dreams which could not be fulfilled due to circumstances beyond our control. We have all found ourselves thrown off the course we had charted, ending up in places and situations we did not anticipate or want. Yosef teaches us that we can achieve great success wherever we are, in whichever conditions are thrust upon us, by accepting everything that happens as the will of God and all the challenges we face as the divine mission assigned to us at that moment.

Thursday

We read in Parashat Vayeishev the troubling story of *mekhirat Yosef*, how Yosef’s brothers conspired to kill him, and ultimately sold him as a slave to merchants traveling through Canaan to Egypt. The brothers initially decided to simply kill Yosef, but Reuven convinced them to instead throw Yosef into a pit where he would be left to die, rather than kill him directly (37:21-220. The Torah makes it clear that Reuven presented this idea as a strategy, as he had planned to later retrieve Yosef from the pit and bring him home. Reuven’s plan did not entirely succeed, however, as Yosef was lifted from the pit and sold as a slave. (The commentators differ as to whether Yosef was lifted from the pit by passing merchants without the brothers’ knowledge, or whether the brothers lifted him from the pit and sold him to merchants after Reuven had left the area.)

The Midrash (*Vayikra Rabba* 34:9, *Yalkut Shimoni* 2:690) makes an enigmatic remark about Reuven’s partially successful attempt to rescue Yosef:

…Had Reuven known that the Almighty would write about him, “Reuven heard [his brothers’ plot] and saved him from their hands,” he would have carried him [Yosef] on his shoulders and brought him to his father.

The Midrash appears to express that had Reuven known at the time that this story would be recorded in the Torah, and would be read and studied for eternity, he would not have stopped at strategizing to have his brothers cast Yosef into a pit instead of directly murdering him. He would have instead proudly and confidently brought Yosef home safely in outright defiance of his brothers. Many writers have sought to explain the Midrash and unearth the message it seeks to convey.

Rav Yechezkel of Shinova (*Divrei Yechezkel*) suggests that the Midrash understood that Reuven hesitated because he felt his motives were insincere. After having sinned with Bilha (35:22), Reuven found himself shunned by his father (see Divrei Ha-yamim I 5:1), and he realized that rescuing Yosef from the other brothers would go a long way towards repairing the relationship with Yaakov. As *mitzvot* must be performed sincerely and driven by pure, genuine motives, Reuven was reluctant to proceed, suspecting that he acted with vested interests in mind. The Midrash thus comments that had Reuven known that the Torah would write, “Reuven heard and saved him from their hands,” indicating that he acted genuinely, out of a sincere desire to rescue his endangered brother, he would not have entertained doubts or hesitated.

This Chassidic teaching warns against perfectionism and the tendency to refrain from embarking on bold endeavors out of fear that the result will be flawed. We are encouraged to aspire and to work towards realizing our aspirations despite the likelihood of a deficient outcome. Even if we have good reason to fear that the result will be less than perfect, we should not hesitate, but rather commit ourselves to work hard and achieve to the best of our ability with confidence and determination.

Friday

The Torah tells that Yosef was brought to Egypt where he was sold as a slave to an Egyptian nobleman named Potifar. During the period Yosef worked for Potifar, we read, “The Lord was with Yosef, and he was a successful man…” (39:2).

The simple meaning of the phrase “The Lord was with Yosef,” seemingly, is that God granted Yosef special assistance and assured the success of all his undertakings as he tended to his tasks. Rav Tzvi Hersh Kalischer, however, in his *Sefer Ha-berit* commentary, explains this verse differently, as referring to Yosef’s awareness of God’s presence. As the Rama famously writes in his first glosses to the *Shulchan Arukh*, we are to strive to live with a constant cognizance of God’s presence and watchful eye, recognizing that He sees everything we do at every moment of our lives. This awareness, the Rama writes, will help ensure we avoid wrongdoing, because, in the Rama’s words, “a person’s sitting, movements and affairs when he is alone in his home are not the same as when he is in the presence of a great king…” The more aware we are of God’s presence, the more we will ensure to conduct ourselves properly and in accordance with His will at all times. Rav Kalischer thus suggests that “*Va-yehi Hashem et Yosef*” (“The Lord was with Yosef”) means that Yosef remained cognizant of God, and this prevented him from compromising his beliefs and principles. Others in his place would likely be expected to begin embracing Potifar’s faith, practices and lifestyle in an attempt to earn his favor and goodwill. Yosef, however, continued seeing himself as a servant of God, even after becoming a servant of an Egyptian nobleman. “*Va-yehi Hashem Yosef*” – he maintained his commitment to God’s service despite being forced into the service of Potifar.

In reward, Rav Kalischer writes, “he was a successful man” – God made all his undertakings successful so that he would please his master. Instead of earning Potifar’s admiration and favor by becoming like him, Yosef did so through the superior quality of his work, which was graced with God’s special blessing.

Over the course of our lives, we have numerous different “masters” – obligations and responsibilities to various types of people to whom we are accountable, and needs which we have and must meet. Yosef shows us that regardless of whom we serve, we must always remain mindful of our status as *avdei Hashem*, loyal servants of the Almighty, and conduct ourselves accordingly, making His service our highest priority at all times.