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בס"ד

Parashat Vayesheb Part III Genesis 39 - Yosef Tested

1. Framework

After the interlude concerning Yehudah the story of Yosef resumes. As pointed out in our previous study, the Torah masterfully contrasts the experiences and behavior of these two brothers during the period of their lives following the sale of Yosef and prior to their meeting twenty-two years later.

Yosef was taken to Egypt and purchased by Potiphar, a courtier and chief steward of Pharaoh, a man of high rank and a considerable estate.

The opening and closing portions of our chapter parallel each other and serve as a frame around the chapter's central section, highlighting it. Both the opening and closing sections inform us that Hashem was with Yosef and he was successful in all he did. Both his first master, Potiphar, and toward the end of the chapter his later master, the prison warden, recognize this and come to rely on him to manage all their administrative responsibilities, which he performs most successfully (Gen. 39:3-4; 22-23).

The central section of the chapter details an episode that decisively demonstrates Yosef's worthiness for special Divine consideration. He was subject to a mighty challenge involving a sexual temptation that confronted him on an ongoing daily basis. He successfully resisted although eventually he got into serious trouble because of it and his life was possibly at stake. He ended up in prison. By the end of the chapter it is clear that G-d had intervened on his behalf.

In our chapter's descriptions of Yosef's success, the text pointedly uses G-d's Tetragrammaton name,

Y-H-V-H. It is attested eight times, all in the passage's opening and closing portions, serving as a signifier that Yosef was committed to the Covenant that G-d had established with Abraham, that was to continue through his progeny.* These statements reflect Yosef's living by the standards and values that are defined as "the way of Hashem, to promote righteousness and justice" (Gen. 18:19), the essential characteristics of Abraham that were to be the hallmark of the nation that was to ensue from him.

As these statements are all in the context of his interaction with others, they further indicate that in his way of comporting Yosef fostered respect for the one G-d and for the new conception of religion that Abraham had introduced and began promulgating in the world. In the more naturalistic setting in which the Yosef narratives are drawn, his influence on others to appreciate Hashem through the example of his behavior and in his manner of dealing with them corresponds to the *וַיִּקְרָא בְשֵׁם ה'* (calling out in the name of Hashem) that was so prominent in the lives of Abraham and Yishaq.

Ironically, Yosef's brothers, at home near their father, failed in living up to the covenantal heritage of their family, while Yosef, a slave in an alien country, flourished in that regard. These experiences of Yosef signal that he was indeed the appropriate heir of the mantle of leadership of the family that was now so divided.

When Yosef referred to G-d in the central segment of the chapter, in speaking to Potiphar's wife, he used the generic term for G-d, "*Elokim*," the only time that term appears in the chapter. In that instance, he was trying to persuade a seductress to respect his moral

position and appealed to her appreciation of what was widely acknowledged in the world, including in Egypt, that a violation of the marriage bond was a major transgression. In such a context he employed the traditional term for G-d that she was familiar with.

2. Relating to Potiphar's Wife

The Torah describes Yosef as “beautiful of form and beautiful of appearance” (v. 6), virtually the identical phrase used to describe his mother (29:17) and the only time such a clause is applied to a male in Tanakh. This description appears just before the episode involving Potiphar's wife, as introductory to it, helping to explain her burning desire for him. At some point she approached Yosef, requesting they get together sexually, but he resisted. She persisted in her request over a period of time, but he remained steadfast in his refusal. Clearly, in her obsessive passion this attempted seductress subjected him to constant and extraordinary pressure.

Yosef tries to persuade her that it would be an immoral and sinful act from several angles. His explanation touches upon and combines three fundamental elements. He begins with the issue of loyalty to a trusting master who had done so much for him and placed him in charge of all he possessed except, of course, his wife. That brings up the matter of respect for the rights of a husband, any husband, בְּאִשְׁרֵי אִתּוֹ אִשָּׁתוֹ (“in that you are his wife”). Finally, there is the consideration of the moral wrong attached to adultery, which would be sinning to G-d. Interestingly, he did not include the consideration of what would happen to him if he were caught in a compromised position in which he was truly guilty – undoubtedly, in the high Egyptian society of his master, the death penalty. He was unwilling to grant the slightest credence to the possibility of committing the transgression to be concerned with potential problems that may arise, regardless of the fact that it would be death.

Yosef's omission of the pragmatic argument reminds us of Yaaqob's immediate reaction to his mother's proposal of impersonating his brother, namely, fear of the curse he might receive if his father caught him in the deception (27:11-12). And Yaaqob's early

criticism of Shimon and Levi's action at Shechem also comes to mind. He merely expressed concern that the neighboring populace may join together and retaliate, without pronouncing a moral judgment on the actions themselves (34:30). Eventually, he did condemn Shimon and Levi's fierce anger, presumably referring to their action at Shechem, for their having disregarded the value of human life while under the sway of their rage (49:5-7).

In his self-denial and acknowledgment of the rights of others, the maturing Yosef, who while under his father's protective shelter was vain, self-centered and unreflective, has shown that he had grown into an adult with great humility and lack of selfish motivation. He would not allow considerations of personal gratification to interfere with his commitment to proper conduct.

Potiphar's wife ignored Yosef's arguments. Chastity is virtually unheard of in slave society, especially in the case of a lonely, virile young man. A high-ranking woman as she – who undoubtedly could advance a capable slave's ambitions and provide him various advantages – could not believe that she would ultimately be rejected. A victim of her passions, she had tried to outright tempt him with her explicit solicitations. When she saw that approach failing, she changed her tactics, moderating her requests. “She spoke to Yosef, day in, day out” but Yosef held firm, refusing even her new requests, “to lie next to her, to be with her” (v. 10, see Ibn Ezra). Finally, in desperation she decided to force the issue.

On a particular day that Yosef had come to the house to do his work and no one but the two of them were present (in that wing, as she later calls out to the household help), she made her move. Boldly seizing him by his garment (probably the outer robe men of stature in ancient Egypt would wear at home to be comfortable), she demanded that he submit to her. He was surely aware that rebuffing her this time while she was holding him would be conclusive proof to her that his position was absolutely non-negotiable. She would finally realize that her desire to have him would not ever be fulfilled. Such rejection would trigger her full wrath against him in the manner of powerful and obsessive spurned matrons, who often

become vindictive, a theme particularly popular in ancient Egyptian literature.

Nevertheless, without waiting to be released from her grip and having to remain in a situation of temptation, he chose to leave his garment in her hands and run out partially unclothed. Surely he realized that he was proceeding to a fate that might possibly have been death. But there was no moral option.

3. Aftermath

“She called to the people of her household” and concocted a story of lies, accusing Yosef of attempting to sexually molest her. Speaking to slaves and solicitating their support, she manipulatively said, “See, he [her husband] brought us a Hebrew man to fool with us” (v. 14). Avoiding use of the word “slave” while employing the broad term “us,” she included her servants with her as potential victims. By subtly implying the master of the household lacks proper concern for them all, she identified with the household help and shrewdly buttressed her position with them for whatever it might subsequently be worth.

Upon relating her fabrication to her husband, she modified her words. She placed no blame on him and referred to Yosef pejoratively as “the Hebrew slave” (as if she could not have any interest in such a lowly individual). She spoke of herself as the sole object of “to fool with.” Of course to her servants and husband she changed the incriminating fact of “he left his garment in her hand” to “he left his garment by me.”

Her husband became angry. But although attempted rape of the wife of a high official was generally punishable by death, he chose to place Yosef in prison, and particularly the prison within which the king’s prisoners were confined. The reason for the relatively mild punishment appears to be hinted at in the text – the master did not necessarily believe his wife. But as he was not going to make an issue of it, bringing disgrace on his family, the narrative reflects his position in a subtle manner.

After his wife told him her story in verses 17 and 18, the text belabors the point. It repeats at length in verse

19, “as his master heard his wife’s words that she spoke to him, saying, like these things your slave did to me,” employing what seem to be many unnecessary words. But it is only then that “he became angry” (v. 19). This implies that he did not become angry at the event that was depicted in the story, as would be the normal reaction of a husband who believed his wife was molested by a trusted underling, but rather at his wife’s storytelling. And by stating, “he became angry,” without adding “at Yosef,” the text creates ambiguity as to whom the master was angry at.

Moreover, in describing him as he listened to his wife’s tale, the text stated *כְּשִׁמַע אֲדֹנָיו אֶת דְּבָרֵי אִשְׁתּוֹ* (“as his master listened to his wife’s words” v. 19). Why was it necessary to state more than “as he listened to his wife’s words”? Evidently, he listened to her as Yosef’s master, knowing him well, making it difficult to straightaway believe the accusation. Such an act was incongruous with Yosef’s character. The claim that upon being rebuffed he abandoned his garment by the woman he accosted and left the room in immodest attire ran counter to Yosef’s well-established standards of competence.

This passage highlights Yosef’s character and loyalty to the Covenant and affords insight into his thinking. His withstanding the challenge of a woman of stature provides an ever-inspiring example of maintaining one’s virtue and commitment to the Covenant – the physical sign of which betokens responsibility for sexual discipline – even under intense pressure to disregard it. But the passage also describes the apparent unfairness and hopelessness of the situation he now had to cope with. Valor and integrity resulted in his being in prison. He is now a lonely foreigner, a slave and a prisoner with no apparent solution to his plight. But he held firm to his values.

In prison, because of his administrative talent the warden placed him in charge of all that went on there. When Pharaoh became angry with his chief cupbearer and chief baker and placed them in detention, the warden assigned Yosef to attend to them. At some point Yosef interpreted a dream for each of them, both of which turned out to be accurate – the baker was hung and the cupbearer returned to his position. When Pharaoh needed a dream interpreter, the cupbearer

suggested Yosef, which brought about his freedom and rise to power.

One of the motifs of this chapter is that through a false accusation and imprisonment, an important person recognized Yosef's ability and when it was required brought it to the attention of the king, which led to Yosef's amazing ascendance to become viceroy of Egypt. This reflects the theme of the larger story that in His unique and unpredictable manner G-d is involved in fulfilling His promises to the patriarchs to provide them potential successors to advance the goal of bringing forth a covenanted nation from their progeny. Human beings, in the exercise of their free will, may create obstacles to G-d's plan, but if the appropriate individual is worthy, G-d will intervene to enable him to succeed. Obstacles are transformed into opportunities.

But at the time that the individual is living through his difficulties, he will generally be unaware of Divine intervention at work on his behalf. Yosef, although vouchsafed insight into a number of future matters, does not have a clue as to what is happening in his own case. While in prison, after interpreting the cupbearer's dream favorably, he entreated of him: "If you could remember me...and please do me the kindness and mention me to Pharaoh and have me released from this place, for I was kidnapped from the

land of the Hebrews and here also I did not do anything..." (40:14-15), but for a long time nothing materialized. He didn't understand why such things were happening to him, but he remained steadfast in his faith, doing his best, until the time of redemption arrived. It was a thirteen-year span from the time he was sold until he was released from prison.

It is worthy of note that the Torah provides only three age markers for Yosef's life: He is seventeen years of age at the time his brothers sold him (37:2); when standing in front of Pharaoh at the time of his redemption from prison he is thirty years of age (41:46), and he passes away at 110 years of age (50:22, 26). These three dates designate two segments of his adult life, one of thirteen years and the second of eighty years. As we have pointed out many times, both these numbers are prominent symbols in the Torah and often function in tandem as they do here, the thirteen representing an appreciation of the one G-d and the eighty signifying the Covenant*.

Endnote

* See our study *On Number Symbolism in the Torah From the Work of Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon*.

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