**S.A.L.T. - PARASHAT VAYESHEV**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah in Parashat Vayeishev tells the famous story of the wife of Yosef’s master, Potifar, who desired an intimate relationship with Yosef and attempted to seduce him. Just seventeen years old, Yosef heroically resisted her advances, until she eventually accused him of attempting to rape her, which resulted in Yosef’s imprisonment. Many commentators over the ages have approached this story as an instructive model for resisting the various sinful lures and temptations that we face, and have suggested learning from Yosef’s refusal different strategies for confronting our own spiritual challenges.

One such concept has been found in Yosef’s explanation to Potifar’s wife why he refused her advances. He noted his prominence in Potifar’s home, how Potifar had entrusted him with all his assets and property. Yosef concluded, “There is no one greater in this home than me… How, then, can I commit this great evil, and I shall have sinned to God?!” (39:9).

Rav Moshe of Kobrin (*Imrot Moshe*) commented that this mindset is one which each and every one of us should try to develop and live by. We, too, need to proclaim, “There is no one greater in this home than me.” Every person must think to himself or herself, in the words of Rav Moshe Kobrin, that “there is nobody worthier of serving God than me.” If we live with this mindset, we will regard sin as beneath our stature and beneath our dignity, and thus avoid it.

Extending this notion one step further, we might add that despite Yosef’s lowly status as a slave, he was nevertheless able to proudly proclaim, “There is no one greater in this home than me.” Although he was a slave, he recognized the unique role he served in Potifar’s home – and this is precisely the recognition that Rav Moshe Kobrin teaches us to apply to our own lives. When we consider just how large the world is, and how many especially gifted and talented people there are, we can easily begin to feel very small and insignificant. We can begin to feel the way we might have expected Yosef to feel as a teenager who was kidnapped and brought to a foreign country where he was sold as a slave – unimportant and irrelevant. But Yosef did not feel this way. Instead, he said, “There is no one greater in this home than me,” proudly acknowledging the unique role he was given to fulfill – and this is precisely what empowered him to resist temptation. If we regard ourselves as insignificant, then we will regard our conduct and decisions as insignificant, so we will make no effort to avoid wrongdoing or to pursue ambitious goals. Rav Moshe of Kobrin urges us to follow Yosef’s example, and to take pride in our unique role and position in life. No matter how small we might feel, we each serve a special role that cannot be served by anybody else. If we live with this sense of pride and sense of mission, we will be far better equipped to meet the challenges that arise and to invest effort to achieve to the very best of our ability in everything we involve ourselves in.

Sunday

We read in Parashat Vayeishev of Yosef’s experiences as a slave in Egypt, of how faithfully served his master, Potifar, until Potifar’s wife tried to lure him into an intimate relationship. Yosef refused, whereupon Potifar’s wife falsely accused him of attempting to rape her, prompting Potifar to send Yosef to prison.

The Gemara in Masekhet Zevachim (118b) draws a curious association between Yosef’s resisting temptation and a unique *halakha* that applied during the period when the *Mishkan* stood in Shilo. The city of Shilo is situated in the territory assigned to the tribe of Efrayim, the tribe which descended from Yosef’s second son, and after *Benei Yisrael*’s conquest of the Land of Israel, the *Mishkan* was brought to Shilo which became the exclusive location for sacrificial offerings. During the years when the *Mishkan* was in Shilo, the Gemara teaches, the meat of *kodashim kalim* – the lower-level sacrifices – was allowed to be eaten anywhere within view of the *Mishkan*. Any spot from which one could see the *Mishkan*, no matter how distant that location was, was suitable for the consumption of this meat. (The meat of *kodashei kodashim*, the higher-level sacrifices, had to be eaten in the courtyard around the *Mishkan*.) This *halakha* was unique to that period. Once the *Beit Ha-mikdash* was built in Jerusalem, the meat of *kodashei kalim* was allowed to be eaten only within the walls of Jerusalem. It was not permitted for consumption anywhere beyond the city walls, even in places within view of Jerusalem.

The Gemara writes that this unique provision was made in the merit of Yosef, whose eye “did not want to feed from and enjoy something which did not belong to it.” Yosef’s eyes refused to succumb to the sight of the attractive temptress, and so he was rewarded with a unique provision involving eyesight that applied specifically to the *Mishkan* erected in his territory.

Rav Avraham Borenstein of Sochatchov (the *Avnei Neizer*) is cited as offering an insightful explanation for this connection. The standard law, requiring the consumption of sacrificial meat within the walls of Jerusalem, reflects the need to preserve sanctity, the notion that hallowed materials are susceptible to defilement if they veer too far from the source of their sanctity. The practical expression of this notion is that we human beings become vulnerable to “defilement” if we venture beyond certain boundaries. If we leave the basic framework of religious life, we can easily become spiritually tainted. Yosef, the Rebbe of Sochatchov explains, represents the striking exception to this rule. His refusal to succumb to sexual temptation as a seventeen-year-old in ancient Egypt, which *Chazal* depict as a society steeped in sexual immorality, demonstrates the possibility of retaining *kedusha* even well beyond ordinary boundaries. Yosef had been driven very far – both geographically and culturally – from his spiritual roots, from the *kedusha* of his home, from the values and greatness of his father, grandfather and great-grandfather, and yet he somehow managed to preserve his inner *kedusha* and remain unwaveringly faithful to his family’s faith and ideals. The Gemara thus associates Yosef’s heroic preservation of his sanctity to the special law that applied to the sacrifices in the *Mishkan* in Shilo, allowing them to be brought even well beyond the area of the *Mishkan*. Just as Yosef retained his sanctity even far from his spiritual source, likewise, the sacrifices in Shilo retained their status of sanctity even at a distance from the *Mishkan*.

We might add that the Gemara’s remark should perhaps be understood also in light of the Gemara’s famous comment elsewhere (Sota 36b) that Yosef nearly succumbed to Potifar’s wife, until he saw his father’s image appear to him. This likely means that Yosef succeeded in overcoming this challenge by keeping the image of his saintly father, his source of *kedusha*, before him at all times. As long as Yosef kept his eyes focused on his spiritual origin, on the lofty ideals and principles he was taught in his youth, he was able to divert his eyes, his attention and his interest from the temptations around him. The Gemara thus associated Yosef’s heroic resistance to temptation with the *halakha* allowing the consumption of sacrifices within view of the *Mishkan* in Shilo. The message being taught is that as long as we still “see” the “*Mishkan*,” as we continue focusing upon and aspiring to the ideals of *kedusha*, we can retain our commitment no matter what challenges we confront over the course of life.

(See also Rav Elchonon Ehrman’s in-depth discussion of the *Avnei Neizer*’s insight in [*Orot ha-giv’a*, Parashat Vayeishev, 5778](http://beinenu.com/sites/default/files/alonim/114_09_78.pdf))

Monday

Towards the end of Parashat Vayeishev, we read of the efforts made by the wife of Potifar, Yosef’s master, to lure him into an intimate relationship. Yosef consistently refused, and one day, Potifar’s wife grabbed Yosef’s garment in a desperate attempt to gain his consent. Yosef ran away, leaving the garment in the seductress’ hands.

The Ramban, explaining Yosef’s decision, writes, “Out of respect for his mistress, he did not want to take it [the garment] from her with his strength, which exceeded hers…” Yosef was certainly capable of forcibly taking his garment out of Potifar’s wife’s hands, but he nevertheless chose instead to leave the garment and run away. The reason, the Ramban writes, is because Yosef found it necessary to show respect to his master’s wife, and felt it would be inappropriate to engage in a physical struggle against her.

A number of *ba’alei mussar* point to the Ramban’s comments as a striking expression of the importance of basic manners and dignified behavior. Yosef would certainly have been justified in forcing the garment out of Potifar’s wife’s hands. After all, she initiated this confrontation by grabbing his garment in the first place, and, she did so in a nefarious attempt to lure him to commit a grievous offense. However, even under such conditions, Yosef simply could not allow himself to fight against his master’s wife, whom he felt obliged to treat with respect and dignity. The Ramban’s remarks underscore the extent to which we must maintain our dignity, composure and respectful demeanor even when dealing with people against whom we have valid grievances.

Additionally, it has been suggested (by the author of the anonymous work *Ahavat Hashem*, Parashat Vezot Haberakha) that the Ramban’s comments may perhaps help explain a curious association famously drawn by the Midrash between Yosef’s escape from Potifar’s wife, and the miracle of the splitting of the sea. The Midrash (*Yalkut Shimoni*, 873) notes that the word “*va-yanas*” used in reference to Yosef’s fleeing from Potifar’s wife (39:12-13) is also used in Tehillim (114:3) in reference to the waters of the Sea of Reeds “fleeing” from the sea so *Benei Yisrael* could cross. On the basis of this parallel, the Midrash asserts that the sea split only upon seeing Yosef’s coffin which *Benei Yisrael* were carrying with them from Egypt.

Numerous different approaches have been taken to explain the connection drawn by the Midrash between these two events. But one possibility that has been proposed relates to the aforementioned comments of the Ramban. Perhaps, the Midrash here seeks to answer the question raised by Ibn Ezra (Shemot 14:13) as to why *Benei Yisrael* did not take up arms against the Egyptian army at the shores of the *Yam Suf*. Why did God choose to save the people by miraculously splitting the sea, instead of assisting them in battle against their former oppressors? The answer might lie in the Ramban’s comments regarding Yosef response to Potifar’s wife’s aggressive seduction tactics. Yosef sensed a debt of gratitude to Potifar and his wife, in whose house he found a comfortable home after being cruelly driven from his homeland and sold as a slave. And so even after Potifar’s wife betrayed him, he chose to save himself by escaping, rather than fighting against her. By the same token, perhaps, it would have been inappropriate for *Benei Yisrael* to wage war against Egypt, the nation that had welcomed their ancestors who were threatened by a dire famine in Canaan. Just as the Torah (Devarim 23:8) forbids hostility against Egyptians, explaining, “for you were a stranger in his land,” likewise, *Benei Yisrael* were perhaps barred from waging battle against the Egyptians because of the debt of gratitude owed to them – notwithstanding the centuries of persecution they suffered at their hands.

This discussion reminds us that our debt of gratitude towards those from whom we have benefitted does not end when we feel legitimately hurt and betrayed by them. Even when Yosef was betrayed by Potifar’s wife, he continued showing her loyalty and gratitude for her past benevolence. We, too, must continue appreciating the goodness we’ve received from other people even when we feel they have mistreated us. A debt of gratitude always remains, and is never completely erased, even by subsequent hostility.

Tuesday

Parashat Vayeishev tells of the tensions that arose between Yosef and his brothers as a result of the preferential treatment Yosef received from their father, tensions which were exacerbated by Yosef’s dreams which foretell his future stature of authority over his brothers. The Torah emphasizes that although the brothers despised Yosef even before he told them of his dreams, their hatred was intensified after he described to them his visions of ruling over the family (“*va-yosifu od seno oto*” – 37:5,8).

The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 84:10) draws an intriguing parallel between Yosef’s reporting his dreams to his brothers, and the prophets’ communication of their prophetic messages to *Benei Yisrael* centuries later. Yosef, after beholding his first dream of leadership, approached his brothers and announced, “*Shim’u na ha-chalom ha-zeh asher chalamti*” – “Hear, if you please, this dream which I dreamt” (37:6). The Midrash notes that the phrase “*shim’u na*” was also used by the prophet Mikha (6:1) in introducing one of his scathing prophetic message criticizing *Benei Yisrael* for their conduct. Based on this parallel, the Midrash says that Yosef told his brothers, “So will the prophets admonish you” – foreshadowing the harsh condemnation that *Benei Yisrael* would hear from their prophets, using the same words Yosef used in telling about his dreams.

Similarly, the Midrash later (*Bereishit Rabba* 84:11) draws a connection between Yaakov’s reaction to Yosef’s dreams and a Jewish leader’s reaction to one of the prophets. The Torah tells that after Yosef reported his second dream to his father and brothers, he father reprimanded him – “***va-yig’ar*** *bo aviv*” (37:10). During the time of the prophet Yirmiyahu, one of his leading adversaries – Shemayahu Ha-nechelami – called upon the *kohen gadol* to publicly censure Yirmiyahu for prophesying the fall of the Judean Kingdom – “*lama lo* ***ga’arta*** *be-Yirmiyahu*” (Yirmiyahu 29:27). In light of this textual parallel, the Midrash comments that God said to Yaakov after his angry response to Yosef, “So will you reprimand your prophets.” Just as Yaakov reprimanded Yosef after his dreams, similarly, the Jews would reprimand the prophets for their harsh criticism of the people’s conduct.

How might we explain this connection between Yosef’s dreams of leadership, and the admonitions of the prophets, and between Yosef’s family’s angry response to his dreams, and the people’s angry response to the prophets?

Possibly, the Midrash here teaches that our instinctive resistance to criticism stems from the same source as the brothers’ instinctively hostile response to Yosef’s dreams. Often, when we hear criticism, it strikes us as an attempt to assert superiority. We rush to defend ourselves because we do not wish to subject ourselves to the “rule” of the criticizer, just like the brothers angrily and dismissed the prospect of their subservience to Yosef. And thus the Midrash compares Yosef’s reports of his dreams to the prophets’ harsh messages to the people, and it compares the brothers’ reaction to the people’s reaction. The point being made is that words of criticism often strike our ears the way the news of Yosef’s dreams of kingship struck his brothers’ ears, and this is precisely why we tend to angrily and impulsively dismiss and resent criticism. If so, then the Midrash here perhaps teaches us that we must learn to distinguish between the content of another person’s critical remark, and what this remark might say about our status vis-à-vis that person. The discomfort we intuitively feel when we hear criticism should not affect our reaction, which should be determined solely by the content of the criticism, by whether or not it has merit. We should keep our ears and minds open to the words of even the self-proclaimed “prophets” who criticize what we say or do, and we should try to honestly and objectively assess whether there is truth to their criticism, uncomfortable as it may be for us to hear it.

Wednesday

The Torah in Parashat Vayeishev tells the disturbing story of *mekhirat Yosef*, of how Yosef’s brothers decided to kill him by throwing him into a pit, from where he was later lifted and sold as a slave. In order to conceal their crime, the brothers slaughtered a goat and dipped Yosef’s special cloak in its blood, to make it appear as though he was attacked by an animal (37:31). Rashi, citing the Midrash, comments that the brothers slaughtered specifically a goat for this purpose because goats’ blood resembles human blood.

Numerous later writers raised the question of how to reconcile Rashi’s comments with the tragic story told by the Gemara in Masekhet Gittin (57b) of the time when Nevuzaradan, the Babylonian general who led the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem, entered the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. The Gemara relates that Nevuzaradan saw a mysterious puddle of blood that was “bubbling,” which was the blood of the prophet Zekharya ben Yehoyada, who, many years earlier, was stoned to death in the *Beit Ha-mikdash* by the order of the Judean king, Yoash, for condemning the people’s worship of foreign deities (Divrei Ha-yamim II 24:21). The blood miraculously never dried, remaining as a sign of God’s anger at the people for murdering His prophet, in His Temple. When Nevuzaradan asked about the blood, the *kohanim* in the *Beit Ha-mikdash* decided to lie, and told him that the blood was sacrificial blood that spilled on the floor, rather than confess to the murder of an innocent prophet. Nevuzaradan, mistrusting the *kohanim*, brought human blood to compare it with the blood on the floor, and found that it looked different. The *kohanim* thus had no choice but to tell the general about the murder of Zekharya, and Nevuzaradan proceeded to brutally murder scores of innocent Jews until Zekharya’s murder was atoned for, and the blood stopped “bubbling.”

This tragic account appears to indicate that human blood does not resemble the blood of any animals used as sacrifices in the *Beit Ha-mikdash* – which include goats. This seemingly calls into question the Midrash’s claim, cited by Rashi, that Yosef’s brothers dipped his cloak in goats’ blood because of its resemblance to human blood.

Several answers have been offered to this question. One answer, suggested by the *Panei’ach Raza*, is that goat’s blood indeed resembles human blood, but when they are examined in proximity to one another, different colors can be discerned.

We might also suggest that the Midrash’s comment concerning Yosef’s brothers should be understood as telling us something more than the reason for the brothers’ tactical decision to dip Yosef’s cloak in goats’ blood. Perhaps, the Midrash here intends to make a subtle but scathing observation about the brothers’ conduct in this incident – namely, that they perceived Yosef’s blood as no different than an animal’s blood. Their feelings of jealousy and resentment towards Yosef brought them to reduce his blood to the level of the blood of the goats which they shepherded. This is what enabled them to reach the unconscionable decision to murder him. The Midrash here warns us of the devastating effects of passionate hatred and disdain for other people, alerting us to the danger of perceiving fellow human beings as animals, such that their wellbeing is no longer of any concern and do not need to be taken into account in any way.

Extending this point one step further, we might suggest that this is also the deeper significance of the exchange between the *kohanim* and Nevuzaradan at the time of the First Temple’s destruction. The people, influenced by the king, resented Zekharya for criticizing the kingdom, and so they reduced him to the level of an animal, spilling his blood as though it was the blood of an animal sacrifice. Like Yosef’s brothers did to Yosef, the people allowed their feelings of resentment to lower the prophet’s stature in their eyes to the point where they no longer regarded him as human. Ironically, it was Nevuzaradan, the cruel, heartless Babylonian general, who showed the people that human blood does not resemble animal blood, that no matter how angry and resentful we feel towards another person, he or she deserves the basic level of care, dignity and respect owed to all human beings.

Thursday

The Torah in Parashat Vayeishev tells of the tragedies that befell the family of Yehuda, the fourth son of Yaakov. Yehuda’s son, Er, died after his marriage to Tamar, before begetting children. Following the practice of *yibum* – the levirate marriage – which, apparently, was customary even before the Torah was given, Yehuda had his second son, Onan, marry Tamar. Onan also died without begetting children (as he would purposely ejaculate outside Tamar’s body during intercourse to prevent conception), and thus Tamar was again left widowed. After Onan’s passing, Yehuda told Tamar to return to her father’s home until his third son, Sheila, grew up, because, as the Torah tells, Yehuda feared that Sheila would also die. However, even when Sheila grew older, Yehuda did not bring Tamar to marry him, prompting Tamar to take the bold action of posing as a prostitute and luring Yehuda into an intimate relationship in order to conceive from a member of the family.

Rashi (38:11) explains that Yehuda in truth had no intention of ever allowing Sheila marry Tamar, as he feared that she was somehow the cause of his two older sons’ deaths. The claim that Sheila was too young was, according to Rashi, just an excuse for sending Tamar back home, as in reality Yehuda did not plan on ever allowing her to marry Sheila.

The Ramban disagrees, noting that if Yehuda feared that marrying Tamar is what caused his sons to die, and for this reason did not want her to marry Sheila, he would have told this to Tamar, without misleading her into thinking that she could eventually marry Sheila. Tamar clearly expected to marry Sheila, and thus necessarily, the Ramban argues, this must have been Yehuda’s plan. The Ramban therefore explains that Yehuda realized that his two older sons died young because of their sinful behavior (as the Torah explicitly states – 38:7,10), and so he decided to delay Sheila’s marriage until he was older. He figured that Er and Onan married at too young an age, and this is what led to their sinful conduct for which they were killed. In order not to repeat this mistake, Yehuda wanted Sheila to grow older before marrying. However, Tamar was dismayed when Sheila became old enough – in her estimation – to get married, and Yehuda still refused to have her marry him. This interpretation is offered by Chizkuni and Seforno, as well.

Netziv, in his *Ha’ameik Davar* commentary, questions this approach, challenging the assumption that Yehuda was able to point to Er and Onan’s sinful conduct as the reason for their early deaths.

Chizkuni adds a different explanation, suggesting that perhaps Yehuda wanted Sheila to marry a different woman before then taking Tamar as a second wife. Yehuda wanted Sheila to fulfill his levirate obligation and marry Tamar, but he did not want Sheila to die without children, as his brothers did after marrying Tamar. He therefore planned for Sheila to marry and produce children with a different woman, and then marry Tamar. We might wonder, however, why, according to this theory, Yehuda would have thought to allow Sheila to marry Tamar at all, even after producing children with another woman, if he feared this marriage would cause Sheila to die.

Netziv takes a much different approach. In his view, Yehuda did not know the reason for his sons’ premature death, and so he feared that his family was plagued by a genetic defect of sorts which made his sons die young. He therefore told Tamar to return home and not to wait for Sheila to become old enough to marry, as he wanted to see if Sheila would die at a young age like his older brothers. In the end, however, even when Sheila grew older than the age at which Er and Onan died, Yehuda still did not have him marry Tamar, for some unknown reason (see Netziv’s comments to 38:26), and thus Tamar decided to boldly initiate an intimate encounter with Yehuda so she could bear a child.

Friday

We read in Parashat Vayeishev of how Yosef’s brothers schemed to deceive their father, Yaakov, into thinking that Yosef had been killed by a beast. After violently throwing Yosef into a pit, from where he was later sold as a slave, the brothers took his garment and dipped it in the blood of a goat, to make it appear as though an animal devoured him.

A number of commentators noted the difficulty in the Torah’s account of the brothers’ presentation of the bloodstained garment to Yaakov. The Torah writes, “They sent the striped tunic, and they brought it to their father, and they said, ‘We found this’” (37:32). Oddly, the Torah first tells that they “sent” (“*va-yeshalechu*”) the garment, implying that they had it brought to Yaakov by somebody else, and it then immediately tells, “they brought it to their father” (“*va-yavi’u el avihem*”), indicating that they brought the garment themselves.

Several commentators, including the Rashbam, the Ramban and Chizkuni, explain that the brothers sent the garment to Yaakov, and did not bring it to him. When the Torah says, “*va-yavi’u*” (“they brought”), these commentators write, it means that the messengers brought the garment. The Ramban also suggests that this word might refer to the instruction given by the brothers to the messengers. This was done, as Chizkuni explains, to avoid the possibility of Yaakov suspecting the brothers of killing Yosef. If they had brought the garment to him, he might have perhaps entertained the possibility that they, who despised Yosef, had killed him and now tried to cover up their crime.

The Ramban also suggests interpreting the verse to mean that the brothers sent the garment to one of their homes in Chevron, and then, when they arrived, they came together to Yaakov to show him the garment.

A much different approach is taken by Seforno (and by anonymous commentators cited by the Ramban), who interprets the word “*va-yeshalechu*” not as “they sent,” but as “they tore.” According to Seforno, the brothers made holes in Yosef’s garment to make it appear as though he was attacked by an animal.

More recently, a creative explanation was offered based on another difficulty in the text of this story. (This approach is presented by Rav Yisrael Meir Astrik in [*Aspaklaria*, Parashat Vayeishev, 5778](http://beinenu.com/sites/default/files/alonim/211_09_78.pdf), pp. 60-61.) In the previous verse (37:31), the Torah writes that the brothers took “*ketonet Yosef*” – “Yosef’s tunic” – and dipped it in a goat’s blood. It then tells that they sent the “*ketonet passim*” – the striped tunic, referring to the special garment which Yaakov made for Yosef (37:3). Quite possibly, this refers to two different garments. Indeed, Rashi, commenting on an earlier verse (37:23), writes (based on the Midrash) that Yosef was wearing two garments when he came to his brothers – an ordinary tunic, and the special striped garment made by his father. And so the Torah writes that before throwing Yosef into the pit, the brothers removed from him both “*kutanto*” (“his tunic”) and the “*ketonet passim*.” If so, then it could be suggested that the brothers’ actions after Yosef was sold involved both these garments. First, they dipped Yosef’s regular garment in blood, and brought it with them to show Yaakov. But before that, they sent ahead Yosef’s special *ketonet passim*, which was not dipped in blood. Their intent, apparently, was to first arouse Yaakov’s concern by having somebody bring him Yosef’s garment which he claimed to have found, which would appear to indicate that something happened to Yosef. Once Yaakov was already worried about Yosef’s whereabouts, the brothers brought him Yosef’s bloodstained garment, which confirmed his greatest fears.

According to this interpretation, the Torah in this verse speaks of two different garments worn by Yosef – one which the brothers sent ahead to Yaakov, and another which they personally brought to their father.

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