

YOSEF'S SELF-INSTRUCTION

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

From the time he appointed him in his house...Hashem blessed the Egyptian's house on account of Yosef...Now Yosef was of handsome form and handsome appearance.

Be'er Yosef: Citing a midrash, Rashi explains that this last phrase sets the stage for Yosef's difficulties with Potiphar's wife. Finding himself in a position of power, Yosef began to eat and drink and carefully groom his hair. HKBH found fault with this behavior while Yosef's father was still mourning deeply for his missing son. Hashem pledged to unleash new danger upon Yosef, in the form of his master's wife setting desirous eyes upon him.

Can this be the same Yosef, about whom the Torah writes, "Hashem was with Yosef,"² and "His master perceived that Hashem was with him?"³ Rashi and others explain that Yosef kept the mention of Hashem constantly on his lips; his conduct was such that people could perceive that the Shechinah was with him. The Divine Presence can only attach itself to a person whose thoughts and actions are on a lofty plane. How is this consistent with the self-indulgent vanity our Rashi describes?

From the time Yosef was taken from his brothers, he stopped drinking wine.⁴ Now, the same gemara tells us that years later, when his brothers stood before him with Binyamin, he changed his practice and drank with them. But why would he change his policy simply because he was reunited with all his brothers? If he acted this way all these years as a self-imposed mourning practice, why change? Was he not still in mourning for his beloved father? Surely he would continue the mourning practices until reunited with him!

It seems that Yosef did not refrain from wine because of aveilus. To the contrary. We have every reason to believe that Yosef had so much bitachon in Hashem that he accepted his circumstances with happiness. Seeing himself blessed at every turn with extraordinary success, he realized that not only was Hashem watching over him, but that He was making Yosef part of some larger, important plan.

Yosef's conduct came from a completely different place. He plunged himself into the role of an active mourner despite his general sense of well-being. He did it to erase any anger and hatred he might have felt against his brothers. Rather than harbor any resentment towards them, he mourned as one pining away because of the loss of their presence. He believed that he could purge himself through this of any enmity he felt for his siblings.

In doing so, he followed the advice of the Rambam, who tells us that a person who leans towards some undesirable trait must move to the opposite extreme, not just a neutral point. Yosef would not content himself with simply trying to push the memory of his ordeal at the hands of his brothers from his mind. Instead, he threw himself into active mourning for his separation from them, emphasizing the closeness he felt to them.

This kind of reaction is well-sourced in the gemara⁵ that speaks of the dilemma of a person confronted with two animals in distress. Typically, the mitzvah of unloading an animal that has fallen under its load takes priority over one whose owner needs assistance in reloading a spilled load so that he can resume his travels. Yet, the gemara instructs that if the latter animal is owed by an enemy, while the former belongs to a friend, one should help the enemy. Acting against one's nature to hate the enemy is too important an opportunity to lose. By helping the enemy, some of the enmity will be eradicated - and that is a good thing.

Similarly, the Zohar⁶ recommends that one who had been hurt by his fellow should look for ways to help him, so that he can uproot the hatred that might reside in his heart.

Yosef kept up the practice for decades. Only when the brothers returned with Binyamin, did he sense within himself that for all the love he had for Binyamin - who was not involved in Yosef's sale - he felt not the slightest distance from the other brothers. His mourning had done its job; there was no point in refraining from wine any longer.

We can now address our opening question. Why would a Yosef who clung to the Shechinah indulge his appetite for food, and spend time grooming himself? This behavior may have been motivated by the same reasoning as his mourning. As he rose in prominence, he came to realize intellectually that his condition was not tragic, but part of some larger Divine plan. How could he make himself feel that emotionally as well? He forced himself into the conduct of a person living in a state of euphoria, as if to say, "Baruch Hashem for allowing me to let go of the house of my father, and find contentment here!" By acting this way, he wished to prop up the feeling that his life story was one of privilege, rather than deprivation.

Despite his lofty intention, Hashem was not pleased with such conduct, because it meant that Yosef had to dissociate himself as well from the memory of his father Yaakov. Thus, HKBH place him in the clutches of Potiphar's wife. Yosef nearly faltered. He saved his righteousness only, as Chazal teach, by summoning up the image of his father at the crucial moment, and concentrating upon it. What saved him was the very memory he was trying to suppress.

Sources:

1. Based on Be'er Yosef, Bereishis 39:6
2. Bereishis 39:2

3. Bereishis 39:4
 4. Shabbos 139A
 5. Bava Metzia 32B
 6. Zohar Vayeishev 201B
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