

GARMENTS OF BETRAYAL

by Rabbi Dovid Green

In parshas VaYeshev we encounter several seemingly scandalous stories. The student of Torah does not view these stories with a superficial perspective, but attempts to understand them in context, in accordance with the words of our sages. Only with their explanations can we truly appreciate the motivations for the actions of our exceptional forebearers.

Yosef, the child of Yaakov and Rachel, becomes an object of hatred and jealousy in his brothers' eyes. This was because Yaakov showed him extra favor, above that which the other brothers received. Through a chain of events, Yosef's brothers end up selling him as a slave to Egypt. There, Yosef excels in his work, and soon finds himself in a position of major responsibility in the house of Potifar, a servant of Pharaoh. Potifar's wife takes a liking to Yosef, and attempts to lure him into an extra-marital relationship. He unconditionally refuses, but Potifar's wife is undaunted. She doubles her efforts, using tactics that would conquer the strongest of wills.

In her final attempt she makes use of an opportunity when no one else is around. "And she grabbed him by his garment saying 'lay with me' (Genesis 39:12)." Yosef runs out, leaving his garment in her hand. She uses the garment to frame Yosef and say that he made forceful advances toward her. Yosef ends up in jail for the next 12 years, until he is released and becomes the Prime Minister of Egypt as we will read in next week's parsha.

Rabbi Shalom Noach Brezovsky, the Slonimer Rebbe, explains these verses in the following way. "And she grabbed him by his garment." The words "his garment" are one word in Hebrew; "bigdo." The root of this word (Beis, Gimel, Dalet) means "to betray". Perhaps the Hebrew word for "betrayal" is related to the word for clothing because clothing projects an artificial impression just as one who betrays tries to do. With the above understanding the Slonimer Rebbe explains that sometimes people are inclined to reason that their actions don't matter. That is to say, they may feel that as a result of their past lifestyles or transgressions they should give up, that they have proven themselves unreliable to G-d, and at this point it no longer matters whether they transgress further. "She grabbed Yosef by his garment (betrayal) saying 'lay with me'. You're no longer a player on G-d's team anyway. You might as well..." That is just plain negative thinking, and it gets us nowhere fast.

Yosef's earlier response to her advances (Genesis 39:8-9) is the attitude that helps us through such tests. "And he refused, and he said...there is no one above me in this house..., and how could I commit this terrible evil, and sin to G-d?" That is to say, "I'm an important person. I'm not evil, or forsaken. I'm special. I'm dear to G-d with all my imperfections and mistakes. These actions are below me. How

could I possibly lower myself to that degree? The Slonimer Rebbe writes that the Torah states no explicit prohibition for sadness and despair, yet these feelings can bring a person to commit all of the transgressions enumerated in the Torah. Yosef provides us with the response to the "wife of Potifar" which we encounter numerous times throughout our lives.

In the "Code of Jewish Law" it states that we should say "Modeh Ani" in the morning upon awakening from sleep. In this one sentence we thank G-d for returning our souls and granting us another day. The last two words (Rabah Emunasecha) "great is Your faith (in us)", compliment our aforementioned words. G-d gives us another day because He has confidence in us that we will use the day in the proper way. By giving us another day G-d conveys to us that what we do makes a difference; that we have a unique job to do, and that G-d is confident that we are the one for the job. May we merit to live up to His expectations.

Good Shabbos.

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