

REAL PEOPLE

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

The Talmud says, "there is no guard against sexual immorality." Our Sages, as always, were being brutally honest and open with us about the human condition and experience. We are physical creatures! G-d created us with both body and soul. Through the gift of free will and the Mitzvos, the soul is intended to impose structure, limits, direction and purpose on the body. However, without imposing our free will in accordance with the Mitzvos, we are nothing more than animals governed by needs and instincts. We lose the distinction of having been created in the image of G-d. Sexuality is among the most powerful, if not the most powerful, urges with which all animals are created. It is imperative that we use our free will to frame our sexual selves in accordance with the dictates of Torah law so that the distinction between ourselves and the rest of the animal kingdom is maintained.

As a religious community we are far more protected from the influences of our immoral and promiscuous society than the general public. Our homes are filled with Torah study, acts of kindness, the overt belief in G-d, and the respect and sensitivity generated by our adherence to Tznius - modesty, and Taharas Hamishpacha - the laws of Family Purity. Yet, the Talmud, which is primarily studied by the observant community, still states that there is no protection against sexual immorality! Were the Sages suggesting that regardless of what we do to impose structure and purpose on ourselves and our children in the realm of sexuality we are doomed to failure?

In this week's Parsha we are introduced to Yoseph Hatzadik - the Righteous. Why is it that Yoseph is the only one to have "Tzadik" attached to his name. Not even Noach, whom the Torah called a "righteous man," do we add the title Tzadik? What was so special about Yoseph that he should earn such an accolade?

With each of the personalities in the Torah there is a defining moment that captures the essence of his person. Yoseph is the ultimate spiritual survivor. Having been cast away from the protection of his family, Yoseph must physically and spiritually survive the amorality of Egyptian culture. We were first exposed to their lack of morality when Avraham and Sarah visited Egypt 93 years earlier. Already at that time the 75 year old Avraham, the great moralist and individualist, had to resort to extreme measures in order to protect the 65 year old Sarah from Egyptian carnal interests. How much more difficult must it have been for a 17-year old described by the Torah as "beautiful in appearance and form!" Yet, alone and without any other external moral support, Yoseph survived his 22 year long exile and remained a true son to the moral teachings of his father Yisroel.

The defining moment of Yoseph's character, for which he earned the title of Tzadik, was his moral victory in not succumbing to the seduction of his mistress, the wife of Potiphar. Let us analyze the incident of the seduction and see what lessons can be gleaned.

Starting with Pasuk 39:2, we are told that Yoseph was uniquely successful in everything he did. At the young age of 18 he was placed in charge of Potiphar's entire household. Pasuk 39:6 informs us that Yoseph was, "well built and handsome." The next Pasuk relates that "his master's wife cast her eyes on Yoseph saying, "sleep with me." Yoseph adamantly refused telling his mistress that he would neither sin against his master or against G-d. (39:9) She relentlessly pursued him and Yoseph steadfastly refused her attentions. (39:10) However, one day Yoseph found himself alone in the house with his mistress and she aggressively pursued her seduction forcing Yoseph to leave his cloak behind and flee from the house. (39:12)

Yoseph was introduced to us as a visionary. He dreamt of future times when he would ascend to the position of chief administrator and king. His brothers took issue with his dreams and sold him into slavery. However, regardless of Yoseph's dreams, Yoseph proved to be a uniquely gifted administrator. He was not only able to organize and delegate but he was prophetic in his ability to plan for the future and insure success. As we see at the end of this week's Parsha, Yoseph the dreamer also earned his reputation as the great interpreter of dreams.

I have always imagined Yoseph as a master chess player, able to predict his opponent's moves and maneuver himself to take advantage of every opportunity with unfailing success. I've also assumed that Yakov who was himself the ultimate master at foreseeing deception and planning for all possible contingencies nurtured this skill in Yoseph.

Considering Yoseph's gift at organizing and planning for the future, why did he allow himself to be alone with his mistress? Why, when he felt the need to flee her advances, did he foolishly leave behind his cloak as evidence?

The Torah Temimah (Rav Baruch Halevi Epstein) in answering these questions references the Talmud in Sotah 37b which suggests that Yoseph allowed himself to be alone with his mistress because he could no longer withstand her advances. Knowing that she was alone, he entered the house intending to give in to her seduction! However, at the moment of his greatest weakness, Yoseph, "saw the likeness of his father" and fled the scene of the almost-crime. (As an aside, we are told that Yoseph looked like his father. Is it possible that somewhere in the room there was a mirror and Yoseph caught sight of his own image staring back at himself and recognized the face of his father?) The memory of his father and the truths that he represented jarred him out of the fantasy that Potiphar's wife had woven. Without thinking, Yoseph fled her presence leaving behind his cloak. As the Talmud suggests, Yoseph's reaction was not the calculated decision of the master chess player; rather, it was the gut reaction of a Tzadik desperately attempting to save his soul.

Every day in our morning Davening we pray to G-d to, "please not bring us into the power of Nisayon

- challenge." Our Rabbis understood that regardless of our spiritual resolve and successes we are fundamentally physical beings with urges and desires. We have enormous potential for true nobility and sanctity. We are capable of framing our needs in purpose and sanctity. However, we can never be certain how we will respond in a given challenge. Therefore, we pray to G-d for the strength and foresight to avoid the challenges.

Yoseph is called "the Tzadik" because in the end he withstood the temptation to sin. However, we also learn, as the Talmud indicates, that it is far better to avoid a confrontation with sin, rather than be faced with the possibility of failure.

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