

YOSEF'S PLAYING WITH HIS HAIR WAS NOT A JUVENILE FIXATION

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 396, Artificial Insemination Before Chemotherapy. Good Shabbos!

Yosef's Playing With His Hair Was Not A Juvenile Fixation

The pasuk [verse] says regarding Yosef, "v'hu naar" [and he was a young lad] [Bereishis 37:2]. At the beginning of the parsha, Rashi cites the Medrash on these words. The Medrash says that Yosef acted immaturely, like a young lad. He used to fix his hair and touch up his eyes so that he would look handsome.

Yosef was 17 years old at the time, and this is not unusual behavior for a 17 year old. But, on the other hand, it is highly unusual to be told that a person of Yosef's caliber would engage in this type of activity. Our Sages say that Yosef was almost like a replica of our patriarch, Yaakov. He is referred to as Yosef the righteous (haTzadik) by virtue of the restraint that he exhibited in this week's parsha. He did not lose himself to temptation, despite all the years that he was separated from his family. Yosef had a sterling character and every single action that he took was for the sake of Heaven. How could we attribute to him -- even at the age of 17 -- behavior like preening himself to look handsome?

Even if we were inclined to write off Yosef's practice of preening himself as the foolish behavior of a teenager, behavior that he would soon outgrow, we would still have a problem. The pasuk [verse] later in the Parsha [Bereishis 39:6] says, "And Yosef was beautiful of form and beautiful of appearance" (yefei toar v'yefei mar-eh). There too, the Medrash Tanchuma comments that once Yosef saw that he was in a position of command (in Potiphar's house) he began to eat and drink like a monarch and began to fix his hair. G-d commented, "Your father is in mourning over you, and you are playing with your hair!"

Yosef was already a grown adult. What is this fixation with his hair that the Medrash again accuses him of? This is the righteous Yosef. What is really happening here?

Rav Schwab (in his sefer) provides a very interesting insight. The Torah calls Yosef a 'naar' [young lad]. The Torah uses this term in last week's parsha (VaYishlach) in reference to Shechem, son of Chamor. "And the 'naar' did not delay to carry out the matter (of circumcision) because he desired Yaakov's daughter." At this point in time Shechem son of Chamor was not a young lad. He was in fact one of the most prestigious people in the city. So why does the pasuk refer to him as a 'naar'?

This teaches us that the definition of a 'naar' has nothing to do with one's age. Rather, 'naar' is symbolic of the impetuosity of youth. When people become older, they learn to take life slower and more deliberately. They do not rush into decisions. Often, a young person does not merely need to have something 'Now'. He must have it 'yesterday'. As we grow older, we learn that we need to think things over and wait things out. We cannot always grab and take things reflexively.

Shechem may have been an older person. He may have been a respected individual, but he still acted like a 'naar' because he rushed into the agreement proposed by Shimeon and Levi without thinking it through. That is the definition of a 'naar'.

Our Sages say that Yosef was the King of his brothers. Yosef foresaw this in his dreams. He envisioned that they would bow down to him and that he would be the King. One of the laws of monarchy is that the King has to be physically prominent. "A King in his glory your eyes shall behold..." [Isaiah 33:17]. The Talmud states [Sanhedrin 22b] that a King must groom his hair daily. He represents the people and he must have the type of handsome appearance that people can respect.

When our Sages say that Yosef acted as a 'naar,' they mean that his mistake was that he already saw himself as being the monarch at age 17. It was not an adolescent fixation with hair. The problem was that he saw himself as the ruler of his brothers before the proper time for that relationship to develop. This, too, is the meaning of the Medrash later in the parsha. When Yosef saw himself in a position of leadership in Potiphar's house, he again went back to fixing his hair. Why? Again, Yosef thought that this was the time to act like the King, which he knew he was destined to become. Again, he was premature. This premature behavior, rather than any juvenile concern with his hair, was the "maseh na-arus" ('immature' actions) that the Medrash attributes to Yosef.

One Who Rules Over Himself Can Then Rule Over Others

The pasuk teaches "Yehudah recognized and said 'She is more righteous than I...'" [Bereishis 38:26]. Yehudah originally thought that his disguised daughter-in-law was a prostitute, and engaged her as such. Later, when it was discovered that Tamar was pregnant, the people wanted to have her put to death. [Religious practice at that time considered Tamar to be bound in a "levirate relationship" (zekuka l'Yibum) to the family of Yehudah, such that relations outside the family were akin to adultery]. Tamar pulled out the signet and staff that Yehudah had given her in lieu of payment, and asked the owner of those items to identify himself as the father of her fetus. Yehudah publicly admitted that he had given those items to Tamar and as such she should not be put to death.

Rashi interprets Yehudah's words of "Tzadkah mi'meni" (which are simply translated as "she is more righteous than I") to mean "She is righteous. (The fetus is) from me." Rashi explains that according to our Sages, a Heavenly Voice issued forth at that time and said "And from Me did the matters emerge... I decreed that kings should come forth from her and it is from the Tribe of Yehudah that I decreed kings should be established in Israel".

The Medrash similarly says "Because you admitted that you were wrong and Tamar was right, your brothers will admit to you that you are worthy of being their king".

Granted, Yehudah -- who could have stonewalled and had Tamar put to death -- was being very noble by embarrassing himself and admitting to her virtuousness at his expense. However, in what way does that give him the credentials to be the Monarch of the Jewish people?

Rav Elya Meir Bloch writes that there is a vast difference between leadership as we see it today, and the classic Monarch of the Jewish nation. Leadership today is based on poll reading, not on what is right for the people. Today's "leaders" are really the followers, writes Rav Elya Meir. They see what the people want and they make their decisions based on the polls.

The first requirement for a Jewish King is that he must rule over himself. If a person has the capacity to rule himself then he can be a ruler for the people. However, if he has no control over himself, how can he expect to control and lead a people?

With Yehudah's act of admission, he demonstrated unbelievable self- control. He disregarded the fact that he was opening himself up to humiliation and disgrace and disregarded the fact that he had an "easy way out." He took the unpleasant path, but the right path. He swallowed the bitter pill of embarrassment and humiliation that would result from this admission. But he had the fortitude and the moral character to do what is right and to rule over himself. It was this demonstration of his self-effacing concern for what is right that his brothers would recognize, and admit that he is worthy to be the true Jewish leader.

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