

Torah Table Talk – *Sacred Words*

Chet: Temptation, Sin and the Choices We Make

Parshat Vayeshev, Genesis 37:1– 40:23

Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt

With love to their grandchildren

Elka, Joshua, Lindsay, Oren z"l, Jenny, David, Lauren, Kayla, Zenna, and Emily

Joseph's early life is filled with ups and downs. After being thrown into a pit and sold into slavery by his brothers, he is acquired by Potiphar, a wealthy Egyptian householder. Joseph quickly rises to a position of authority only to have his position threatened by the advances of his master's wife. Joseph lands up in prison when he is falsely accused of having tried to rape Potiphar's wife but his ability to interpret dreams brings him into the highest positions of power as Pharaoh's advisor and dream interpreter. Alone in the world, Joseph faces difficult choices and enticements. He could easily have taken the more expeditious path but is motivated by his strong sense of moral authority coming from God. In our contemporary world in which stories of infidelity and sexual immorality are far too common, Joseph is a hero for our time. No one would have faulted Joseph for going along with the advances of his master's wife. And yet Joseph is motivated by a higher sense of morality.

Genesis 39:8-9 But he refused. He said to his master's wife, "Look, with me here, my master gives no thought to anything in his house, and all that he owns he has placed in my hands. He wields no more authority in this house than I and he has withheld nothing from me except from yourself, since you are his wife. How could I do this wicked thing, and sin before God.

Sources

Nahum Sarna, The JTS Torah Commentary, Genesis

Joseph's spontaneous response is a categorical no. His moral excellence can be appreciated all the more if one remembers that he is a slave and that sexual promiscuity was a perennial feature of all slave societies. Moreover, an ambitious person might well have considered that the importuning woman had presented him with a rare opportunity to advance his personal and selfish interests.

Conscious of his subordinate position, Joseph dares not display anger. Nor does he preach. He only explains his personal reasons for refusing her advance and he presents these in an order that reflects his perception of her hierarchy of values. First he points to the abuse of trust that would be involved, then to the violation of the husband's proprietary rights over his wife, then to the religious and moral nature of the offence. The second of these reasons reflects pagan legal theory that adultery was largely a private injury, an affront to the dignity of the husband. The third line of argument conforms to the distinctive Israelite concept of morality as having its source and sanction in divine will, not social convention or utilitarian consideration.

Genesis Rabbah 86:5

"The Lord made all that he did to prosper in his hand" (Genesis 39:3). Whenever Joseph served his master spiced wine, the master would ask, "What have you poured me?" When Joseph replied, "Spiced wine," the master would say, "But I want bitter wine"--and it became bitter wine. When the master said, "I want mulled wine," it became mulled. The same happened with water--indeed, with each and every thing, as is said, "The Lord made all that he did to prosper in his hand." When his master became aware of it, he turned over all the keys to Joseph, so that Joseph was able to say, "My master has no concern about anything that is in the house" (Gen. 39:8). When Joseph found himself so comfortably situated, he began to eat and drink well, to frizz his hair, and to say, "Blessed be He who is everywhere, who helped me forget my father's house." Then the Holy One said to Joseph: Your father is mourning for you in sackcloth and ashes, and you eat and drink well, and frizz your hair--you pampered brat! As you live, I shall sic a she-bear on you. At once, "it came to pass that his master's wife cast her eyes upon Joseph" (Genesis 39:7). A parable of a strong man who stood in the marketplace, made eyes at the women, kept combing his hair, walked with a swagger, and said, "How fit I am, how well endowed I am--how strong! How handsome!" He was told, "If you are so strong and so fit, here is a bear--try to overpower it."

Otzar Chayim , a collection of Chasidic teachings

At first Joseph resisted even though he had no logical reason to do so. As the sages teach us: 'Do not say, "It is impossible for me to eat pork; rather say: I'd like to eat pork but my father in heaven has decreed that I should not.'" Through such fear of heaven a person will come to find the proper reasons to choose the right way and reject the wrong way. That is why the Torah says, "He refused" without giving a reason why. Logic might have led him to do the wrong thing. It is only when he expresses fear of God that he comes to realize why this would be wrong.

That is why we are taught in *Pirke Avot*, “Any person whose fear of sin is greater than his wisdom, his wisdom will become established.”

The Commentary of the Ramban, Nachmanides, Genesis 39:9

“And I shall sin before God” The sons of Noah are commanded regarding sexual violations. This is Rashi’s explanation. This is the correct reason (for avoiding such actions.) It is only because of the lack of maturity in the woman that he tells her first about the matter of betraying his master who had trusted him, and then does he refer to the sin against God. It is proper to explain further, “and I shall sin against God,” through this betrayal, for it is a great evil which involves sin before God, for His eyes are upon the faithful on earth (Psalms 101.6) and before Him the betrayer does not appear, and his word should be true, but Joseph does not mention the sin of adultery, for he spoke with her in the manner of women.

Commentary

Chet, sin, appears several times before the story of Joseph. God tells Cain that “sin (*chatat*) couches at the door” (Gen. 4:7) when he becomes sullen at God’s rejection of his offering. We are told that, “The outrage of Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin (*chatatam*) is grave.” (Genesis 18:20) While we are never told what their sin is later when the angels visit the city the people threaten to gang rape the visitors. And after Abraham passes his wife off as his sister, Abimelech says, “What have you done to us? What wrong have I done that you should bring so great a sin (*chatati*) upon me and my kingdom?” (Genesis 20:9) It is instructive that Abraham’s response is, “I thought, surely there is no fear of God in this place...” (Genesis 20:11) Sin is associated with adultery and a lack of fidelity in marriage. Even before the giving of the Torah, there appears to be a deep sense that ‘fear of God’ leads one to a strong moral foundation in ones life. Joseph is the first character in the Bible who to articulate this idea. He senses that he will not only let his master down by sleeping with his wife, but will disappoint God as well. Adultery is “the great sin” not only here but later when Israel worships the golden calf. Moses accuses Aaron, “What did this people do to you that you have brought such a great sin upon them?” (Exodus 32:20) Israel commits spiritual adultery by worshipping a calf rather than having faith in God.

The Jewish conception of sin is not a state of being but a statement of one’s actions. We do not speak of a person being sinful but rather a person is full of sins; character is measured by the acts one does or does not commit. The ultimate act of betrayal against a loved one and God is adultery. Joseph knows this even before he has the Torah. While Israel’s neighbors saw adultery as a matter of private injury, the Bible understood adultery as a sin which created a deep rift between us and God. Today, we are more titillated than shocked by adultery and infidelity. It occurs all the time. We talk about it incessantly on television talk shows. Sports heroes and politicians often use their position and power to seek forbidden desires. What have we become in a world where the only thing we tend to think of as sinful is fattening food? I wonder whether it is harder for us to justify speaking of marital infidelity as a “sin” in such a world?

Questions to Ponder

1. What is the difference between being ‘sinful’ and being guilty of sin? Does sin have a place in our contemporary world?
2. How does Joseph know that adultery is a ‘sin before God?’ Remember that this incident takes place before the giving of the Ten Commandments.
3. Trop are the musical annotations that are used for the chanting of the Torah. The trop note for the Hebrew word *Vayimaen*, “and he refused” is called *Shalsholet*; it is the longest and most tremulous of all the trop notes. It only appears four times in the Torah. In effect it allows the reader of the Torah to draw out the expression: *Annnnnnd Heeeeeee Refffffussssed...* How does this chanting of this word color our understanding of the text? Do you think Joseph was absolute in his refusal to be with the wife of his master?
4. Contrast the story of Joseph with the previous chapter which contains the story of Judah and Tamar. Tamar seduces her father in law when he refuses to fulfill his obligation of giving her a husband. What is the connection between these two stories? How do Joseph and Judah each deal with temptation?
5. Why is adultery wrong? Why can’t one say that adultery is simply an act between two consenting adults? What does the Torah imply about adultery?

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