

Torah Table Talk

What Would Joseph Do?

Anatomy of a Righteous Man

Parshat Vayeshev
Chapter 37:1 – 40:23



The final Parshiot in Genesis deal with the sons of Jacob in general and the life of Joseph in particular. Young Joseph fails to win the favor of his older brothers when he antagonizes them and shares his dreams of grandeur with them. Worst of all, the brothers resent the fact that their father favors their younger brother. Jacob's sons decide to sell Joseph into slavery and to bring his coat of many colors to their father as a sign that he was killed by a wild animal. In Egypt, Joseph's life is filled with ups and downs. As the Parshah ends we find him imprisoned for a crime he did not commit. In the midst of this story we learn about the gutsy and courageous actions of Tamar, a Canaanite woman who gives birth to twins. Her offspring will become the founders of the house of King David

Genesis 39: 7-9

After a time, his master's wife cast her eyes upon Joseph and said, "Lie with me." 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 yourself since you are his wife. How then could I do this most wicked thing and sin before God?"

1. How does Joseph know that adultery is a 'sin before God?' Remember that this takes place before the giving of the Ten Commandments. Indeed why is adultery wrong?
2. Trop are the musical annotations that we use for chanting the Torah. Note the trop note for the Hebrew word *Vayimaen*, "and he refused." It is called a *Shalsholet* and 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: Annnnd Heeeeeee Refffffusssssed... How does this chanting of this word color our understanding of the text?
3. 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?

Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 36b

"And it came to pass about this time that he went into the house to do his work," Rab and Samuel differ in their interpretation: One said that it really means to do his work; but the other said that he went to satisfy his desires. "And there was none of the men in the house," Is it possible that there was no man in a huge house like that of this wicked Potiphar? It was taught in the school of Ishmael: that day was their feast day and they had all gone to their temples. But she had pretended that she was ill because she thought, "I shall not have an opportunity like today for Joseph to associate with me!" "And she caught him by the garment," at that moment his father's image came and appeared to him through the window and said, "Joseph thy brothers will have their names inscribed on the stones of the ephod and yours among theirs...is it your desire to have your name removed from theirs...."...then his passion subsided.

1. How did Joseph manage to resist the temptation of Potiphar's wife? How is this Midrash different from the statement in the Torah above? Why do you think the rabbis felt the need to provide another explanation for his will power?
2. Only Joseph is referred to as a *Tzaddik*, a righteous person? This term is not used for any of the Patriarchs. Why? What was about Joseph that made him a righteous man in the eyes of the sages?
3. How is saintliness different from righteousness? How would you define righteousness today?
4. All of us find ourselves in situations in which we must resist temptations? When you find yourself tempted to do something that you should not do how do you resist temptation?
5. Do you believe that there unconditional rights and wrongs? What makes certain things right and others wrong?

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 let him 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" with 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.

1. What is fear of God? How does our fear of God help us to find the right path in life?
2. What is the connection between fear of God and conscience? Is what our conscience tells us to do always the right thing? How can logic lead a person astray?
3. What do all of these passages say about Joseph's righteousness? What makes a person righteous?

How to use Torah Table Talk

1. *Read the sheet out loud to one another. Discuss what it has to say.*
2. *Focus on the text in the box. It is taken from Biblical, post-biblical and modern Jewish sources. What does it mean? How does it make you feel?*
3. *Try to answer the questions following the text.*
4. *This is not a test and there are many correct answers and interpretations to each question. Share your ideas with one another. Be open and honest in sharing your ideas.*

***"All it takes to study Torah is an open heart, a curious mind
and a desire to grow a Jewish soul."***

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