



Vayeshev – The Strength to Resist

Rabbi Shmuel Silber

“Now it came to pass that since he had appointed him over his house and over all that he had, the Lord blessed the house of the Egyptian for Joseph's sake, and the blessing of the Lord was in all that he had, in the house and in the field. So, he left all that he had in Joseph's hand, and he knew nothing about what was with him except the bread that he ate; and Joseph had handsome features and a beautiful complexion. Now it came to pass after these events that his master's wife lifted her eyes to Joseph, and she said, ‘Lie with me.’ But he refused, and he said to his master's wife, ‘Behold, with me my master knows nothing about anything in the house, and all he has he has given into my hand.’” (Bereishis 7-9)

After all the trauma, Yosef found success in Egypt. He had risen through the ranks of servitude and had become the most trusted attendant in the house of Potiphar, one of the closest advisors to the Pharaoh. But Yosef was alone, no family, no nation; he was truly a stranger in a strange land. In the midst of this loneliness, a powerful woman took an interest in Yosef. The wife of Potiphar tried to seduce young Yosef, but Yosef was steadfast and resolute, refusing her advances. Yosef was then vilified and thrown into prison and his tragic saga continued.

The great Chassidic master, Rebbe Nachman of Breslov (1772-1810) writes:

“Presently, it is much easier for us to withstand our tests and temptations, for those who came before us shattered the shells (klipos) of desire. Even the simplest amongst us has the ability to withstand temptation. This is due to the spiritual heroism of earlier generations.”

Life is filled with temptation. At every turn there are opportunities for mistakes and missteps. To be successful in the journey of life we must summon the courage to overcome our illicit wants and desires, and utilize our passionate strength and ability for the accomplishment and actualization of good. Yet, at times we are faced with a burning desire to do something we know we should not. Reckless passion can cause us to go in harmful and hurtful directions. We must remember that the power to confront temptation is embedded in our spiritual DNA. When Yosef refused the advances of a married woman, he created a spiritual strength and resiliency which exists inside of each of us to this very day. It surely took all of Yosef's courage and will to refuse this relationship. Yosef was all alone in this world and a powerful woman offered him an opportunity for connection and belonging. But he knew it was wrong and refused. This moral courage has been passed down to us. We too have the ability to stand up and say no. We have this power of Yosef and so many others throughout the generations who have exercised self-control and moral clarity. This strength is part of who we are. Rebbe Nachman explains that every time one of our ancestors “passed a test” and overcame a challenge, they bequeathed us this strength as well. We have inherited the moral strength of our ancestors and when we find the strength to overcome our negative desires and inclinations, we create new reservoirs of strength for our children and grandchildren. Every time we exercise the moral fortitude to make the right decision and avoid the negative one, we create new moral energy. When I pass a test in life, I make it a bit easier for my son and my daughter to face their demons and wage their battles.

It is our sacred duty to enjoy life, enjoy the world and partake of permitted pleasures. But when temptation appears, we must draw on the courage and moral clarity of our ancestors and exhibit the necessary strength and restraint for ourselves and our future generations.