בס"ד

***פרשת וישב***

**Parshas Vayeishev**

In His Father’s Image: Know Thyself

*וַתִּתְפְּשֵׂ֧הוּ בְּבִגְד֛וֹ לֵאמֹ֖ר שִׁכְבָ֣ה עִמִּ֑י וַיַּעֲזֹ֤ב בִּגְדוֹ֙ בְּיָדָ֔הּ וַיָּ֖נָס וַיֵּצֵ֥א הַחֽוּצָה׃ (בראשית לט, יב)*

*And she grabbed him by his clothing saying, “Lie with me!” And he abandoned his clothing in her hand, and he ran and went outside. (Genesis 39:12)*

I - What did the Sea See?

For almost fifty years, the ABC television network has aired Cecil DeMilles epoch *The Ten Commandments* during Pesach. Released in 1956, the film was praised for its scale, special effects, and acting, and it has been ranked as one of the greatest films of all time. However, people have noted that the film took many creative liberties, deviating from rabbinic literature.[[1]](#footnote-1) One such example occurred by *krias* Yam Suf.

In the movie and, more importantly, in the Torah itself, Hashem just appears to split the sea without any reservations, just unbridled kindness and miracles. The midrash,[[2]](#footnote-2) however, elaborates that the Jewish people’s ultimate salvation was not a foregone conclusion.

“*Halalu ovdei avodah zara, v’ahalalu ovdei avodah zara*.” The angels and the sea argued that the Jews were no different than the Egyptians. Both had worshiped idols. In what merit did the Jews deserve to have the laws of nature torn asunder in open display G-d’s omnipotence and love?

The answer is alluded to in Hallel: “*Ra’ah vaynos*.”[[3]](#footnote-3) The sea saw and ran. What did the Yam Suf see that caused it split? The midrash says that it saw the coffin of Yosef that Moshe was carrying. In the merit of Yosef Hatzadik running away and refusal to be seduced by Potifar’s wife when he was sold into slavery, the sea “ran away” and split, and the Jews were saved.

A truly poetic midrash no doubt, but there’s something very puzzling. What does one thing have to do with the other? Yosef’s refusal to commit adultery doesn’t seem to address the argument that the Jews were just like the Egyptians with respect to idol worship! So why did Yosef’s actions turn the tide?!

II – The Image of his Father?

Let’s go back to the story of Yosef and Potifar’s wife. Because of his refusal to succumb to temptation, he is given the title of “*tzaddik*.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Yosef Hatzaddik. Yosef the Righteous. But what’s interesting is that the gemara relates how just like the Jews by the Yam Suf, Yosef’s success was not an assured thing. Yosef, the *gemara*[[5]](#footnote-5) says, was sorely tempted to sin, and the only thing that could hold him back was seeing a vision of father exhorting him that he would lose his place amongst the *shevatim* if he succumbed to temptation.

The parallel is certainly quite striking, but there’s something else in this gemara that often gets overlooked. In effect, Yosef needed Yaakov! He needed to see his father’s face to succeed!

And that’s very problematic.

When I was a kid, my friends and I used to collect trading cards and then compare which cards were better than others. Baseball cards, basketball cards, Pokémon cards, and even Torah/Rebbe cards. It’s a strange thing to debate with your friends that a “Yaakov” card is better than a “Yosef” card, but we did it. (And some people don’t grow out of it; they still argue which rabbi is greater than other when they’re adults!)

Now even though we obviously aren’t in a position to actually rank such great people, let’s compare one episode in Yaakov and Yosef’s lives.[[6]](#footnote-6) What would you say were the most defining moments in their journeys? For Yaakov, it would probably be wrestling with the *Sar shel Eisav*, and for Yosef it would be resisting the temptations of Eishes Potiphar.

They both emerged victorious. So far pretty similar, but now let’s compare what happened during their struggles. Yaakov Avinu was victorious on his own. The Torah[[7]](#footnote-7) tells us “*vayivaser Yaakov levado*.” He didn’t need any help.[[8]](#footnote-8) Yosef, however, was sorely tempted to sin, and the only thing that could shake him out of it was seeing a vision of father.

Moreover, the gemara[[9]](#footnote-9) teaches that even with regards to kedusha and purity, the nature of Yosef’s test, Yaakov was greater Yosef![[10]](#footnote-10)

It would seem then that Yaakov was on a higher level than Yosef, yet the strange thing is that Yosef is the one that’s called Yosef Hatzadik! Yosef the Righteous! Why?!

To answer this question, let’s think about what helped Yosef succeed, the vision of his father Yaakov in the window. Why specifically that? What is the significance of seeing his father in the window?

On a simple level, Yosef was physically and psychologically trapped in the room with Potifar’s wife. So at the very last second, he was able to grab hold of the last vestige of his life outside that room – the most fundamental aspect of his identity – the image of his father. Seeing the role model he loved and looked up to jolted him awake. It gave him the necessary “oxygen” from outside to allow him to escape.

That’s the simple explanation. But I think that there’s something much more subtle going on as well.[[11]](#footnote-11)

The midrash[[12]](#footnote-12) says that Yosef looked almost exactly like his father Yaakov. So when Yosef was looking at his father in the window, he was also looking at himself in the mirror!

Or, to be more precise, an older version of himself. The Yosef that he wanted to be. The next Yaakov. It was that Yosef who told him, “Don’t do this! It’s not you!”

III – The Mirror Stage[[13]](#footnote-13)

At that point, Yosef was faced with one of the most terrifying realizations that a person can have. When a person realizes that their ideal self, the one they see in the mirror, isn’t who they are right now. It’s just a projection; it might look pretty, but it’s not real. It’s just a dream.

Rav Kook[[14]](#footnote-14) says that the only way to begin to grow and connect to Hashem is to first know one’s self.[[15]](#footnote-15) To take an honest look at ourselves and internalize[[16]](#footnote-16) where we are and who we are.

But what happens next? A person can get disillusioned by the realization that they’re yet not who they want to be. They will smash the mirror and embrace who they are right now. Embrace their status quo.

But that’s not what Yosef did. He accepted who he was right now, but he didn’t embrace it. He knew that the Yosef he saw in the mirror, the Yosef he wanted be, wasn’t who he was. And he accepted that. But he kept that image, that dream Yosef[[17]](#footnote-17) alive and used it to propel him forward. To propel him out of the room.

*That’s* why he was called Yosef Hatzadik. Not just because he didn’t actually sin with Potifar’s wife.[[18]](#footnote-18) Yaakov was also pretty righteous. What made Yosef unique was that he needed to pick himself up. Shlomo Hamelech says in Mishlei “*sheva yipol tzaddik vekam*,”[[19]](#footnote-19) to become a tzaddik you need to pick yourself up when you fall down. [[20]](#footnote-20)

He was righteous because he had the courage[[21]](#footnote-21) to accept that he wasn’t who he wanted to be and had the even greater courage to nevertheless keep that idealized dream alive and harness it as the impetus to grow into something greater. That’s how he became a tzaddik.

IV – The Young Nation and the Sea

The Jews at the Yam Suf faced a similar predicament. They were the children of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. But they didn’t look the part. They had worshiped idols just like the Egyptians. At that moment, B’nei Yisrael took a long look in the mirror and realized that the Jews they saw in the mirror were just dreams. Dreams of carrying on the legacy of the Avos. But they weren’t there yet.

And the angel of the Yam Suf knew that as well. “*Hallalu ovdei avodah zarahah vahallalu ovdei avodah zarah*!” it cried. The Jews standing before you Hashem don’t match up to what they should look like!

So what changed everything? How did the Jews respond?

They marched into the Yam Suf with Yosef. Just like Yosef before them, the Jews accepted that the ideal Jew the saw in the mirror wasn’t real. But they didn’t smash it. They held onto their dreams and with the same self-sacrifice and strength as Yosef, they used that mental image of who they aspired to become to propel them forward into the raging waters.

They didn’t know if they would survive. The water continued to rise above them as they marched further into the sea. The midrash describes how the Jews were literally about drown with the water above their nostrils before the sea split.

But they held onto that dream to be descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov and follow Hashem through fire and water. And acting on that dream is what the sea saw. The determination of Yosef and the Jews split the sea. That’s what split the sea.

V – Dreaming in Galus[[22]](#footnote-22)

Much like Yosef in Mitzrayim and the Jews crossing the Yam Suf, each one of us s also has dreams of who we wish to be. And perhaps, those idealized images which we see in the mirror don’t yet represent where we are right now. It takes a great deal of strength to accept that at present they’re just images in the mirror. Just dreams. But it takes an even greater deal of strength to hang onto those dreams. To climb on them to reach greater heights.

*Im yirtzeh* Hashem, we should be *zoche* to live with our dreams, to live up to our dreams, and ultimately see the days of Moshiach when we will look back at *galus* and say “*beshuv Hashem es Tzion hayinu kecholmim*.”[[23]](#footnote-23)

1. For some examples, see <https://jewinthecity.com/2017/04/11-things-the-10-commandments-movie-got-wrong/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. There are many versions of this midrash. See Shemos Rabbah 21:7; Shir Hashirim Rabbah 8:9; Zohar 2:170b [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Psalms 114:3; Sochar Tov ad loc; Tanchuma Vayeishev 9; Breishis Rabbah 87:8; Mechilta D’Rebbi Yishmael 14:3. See Mechilta DeRashbi 14:14 that the sea split in the merit of circumcision. Its source is from Jeremiah 33:25 that Hashem shows His dominion over the laws of nature in the merit of a covenant that lasts in both day and night – circumcision (as opposed to *tzitzis* which are external and need to be seen, something Yosef could not do until saw father and took off the bad clothing). This is also a reference to Yosef who was *shomer bris*. The reference to both day and night refers to times when Hashem is revealed and when He is hidden. The “night” component came from Yaakov, and Yosef succeeded on his own by the day when he was *alei ayin* after being crowned viceroy (See Genesis 49:22; B’reishis Rabbah 98:18). That was why he received a blessing for that action – it was him living up to his full potential – while the Yam Suf split because of his actions with Potifar’s wife – since the Jews sacrificed their perceived images of righteousness and not davening, instead relying on *zechus avos* (See Pacahad Yitzchak: Purim, 19:3; Pachad Yitzchak: Igros U’Ksavim 20). See also B’reishis 84:8 that Yosef split the sea and this caused hatred. Through sacrificing his image, his bones (which come from the father – see Niddah 30b) were able to split it. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ohr Hachaim Leviticus 19:3. See also Avos D’Rebbe Nosson 16; Tanchuma Vayeishev 5; Yalkut Shimoni Tehillim 831; Rambam Yesodei Hatorah 5:10 which connect Yosef to the concept of *kedushah*, associated with the concept of *tzaddik*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Sotah 36b [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See B’reishis Rabbah 84:6. There are other parallels as well: Both had their names changed (Genesis 32:25; 41:43, 45), both emerged with temporary physical consequences (Genesis 32:27; 39:13, 20; Sotah 36b) and permanent spiritual ones (Genesis 32:29; Ramban ad loc.; Zohar 1:110b; Sotah 36b), and both passed on *zechusim* to the entire Jewish people (Ramban ibid; Zohar 1:196b.). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Genesis 32:25 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See previous *derasha*. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Sotah 36a and compare to B’reishis Rabbah 98:4 that Reuven was “*reishis ono”* (Genesis 49:3). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Zohar 1:110b [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. While on the surface the above interpretation is quite understandable, there are several points to consider: For one thing, what did Yosef think of his father who ostensible kicked him out of the family dynamic? But more fundamentally, Yaakov told him that he would lose his place amongst the brothers. Why would you say that? His brothers hated him! Moreover, he didn’t think he was like his brothers. He thought he was their king?! [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. B’reishis Rabbah 84:8 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For an explanation of the “Mirror Stage,” see Lacan’s *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique* (ed. J-A Miller), N.Y.: Norton, 1988 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Orot 24 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. This originates from a Greek proverb as one of the Delphic maxims (*Pausanias* 10:24). It was later accepted as a basic tenant of *mussar* movement. See *Hamaor Shebatorah* by Rabbi Shalom Shapira. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Such self-awareness is the embodiment of *da’as*, the *klipa* and corruption of which is *arayos,* illicit relations. Indeed, the word *da’as* is associated with marital relations. See Genesis 4:1 – “*Vayeida Adam es ishto”* - “And Adam knew his wife.” In effect, in order to truly know others, the correct form of *tashmish* (intimacy), we first need to accept who we are. Refusal to know one’s self impedes true *da’as* and creates a vacuum of *shtus* (the antithesis of *da’as*) which is the source of sin, and illicit relations in particular (See Sotah 3a. See also Rambam Hilchos Issurei Biah 22:21; Seder Olam Rabbah 30). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. This was the power of Yosef’s dreams. Yosef’s personality as a *ba’al hachalomos* (Genesis 37:19) was to believe in dreams. The challenge for such a person is to retain belief in those dreams even when they don’t reflect the current reality or need to be reinterpreted and use them to propel you forward. (See Rav Lopiansky’s “Vayeishev 5775: Yosef and the Power of Dreams” <https://torahdownloads.com/shiur-1006953.html>.) Initially, Yosef dreamt of being king, a step above the other *shevatim*. His vision of Yaakov made him realize that such a vision did not reflect the present reality. Yosef embrace his role as one of the *shevatim* by hearkening to the portent of losing his tribal stone on the *choshen.* Thus, he shed his coat (Genesis 39:12) that signified his exalted role. By doing so, however, he was able to ultimately become king over Egypt and his brothers. (Only in reality he was a king as one of the *shevatim* and not as an *Av.* See note 21.) Indeed, Yosef’s ascendancy was catalyzed by his ability to *interpret* dreams (not to have dreams *per say*). However, this only happened after Yosef learnt how to properly interpret his *own* dreams. Indeed, Yosef’s quality as a *ba’al hachalomos* only began to yield positive results after his confrontation with Potiphar’s wife. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Yaakov was greater in this regard. Yaakov would never have put himself into that situation. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Proverbs 24:16 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Pachad Yitzchak: Igros U’Ksavim 128 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Such *gevurah* made him sacrifice. (See Midrash Hagadol, Mossad Harav Kook ed. 39:9 note 10) He shed his identity as a perspective *Av* and embraced his identity as one of the *shevatim*. But through that he became the *bechor* of the *shevatim*, because only he fessed up before he actually did anything (unlike Yehuda or Reuven). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See Torah Ohr sv Shir Hama’alos [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Psalms 126:1 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)