

Good Intentions

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Pharaoh then gave Yosef the name Zaphenath-paneah; and he gave him for a wife Asenath daughter of Poti-phaera, priest of On. Thus Joseph emerged in charge of the land of Egypt.

(Bereshit 41:45)

Yosef is free!

In this week's Parsha, Yosef is finally set free. He was sold into slavery by his brothers, and then falsely imprisoned based on a baseless accusation of his owner's wife. In the above passuk, not only is Yosef set free, he is also promoted to the second most exalted position in all of Egypt!

In this process of ascension, Pharaoh provides him with a wife, Asenath, daughter of Poti-phaera. Who is this Poti-phaera that the Torah details? Rashi explains that it is really Yosef's former master, Potiphar. From where does he get his new name? Rashi explains, "(phaera meaning, disturbed or cut) as he became naturally castrated, since he desired Yosef for male intercourse."¹

So Rashi tells us that Yosef's wife is the daughter of his former master, and for some reason his name was changed. But why would Pharaoh join Yosef and the daughter of Potifar in union? Yosef was in jail because of Potifar! Potifar's wife had accused Yosef of trying to take advantage of her, so Potifar used his power to jail Yosef. Why would Pharaoh want to reunite them?

Some kind of character

The Sphorno explains that Potiphar actually believed Yosef; he did not believe his wife's claim. However, Potiphar was forced to protect his wife's reputation, so he instead imprisoned Yosef.² Since Potiphar never believed his wife, Pharaoh would not be met in opposition in trying to quell the rumor that his new second in command performed a misdeed.³

It seems that Potiphar's wife did not have pristine character, seeing that her own husband didn't even believe her! If we look to the text, we can see that she was not such a stand up

¹ Commentary of Rashi on Sefer Bereshit 41:45

² Commentary of Sphorno on Sefer Bereshit 41:45

³ Commentary of Chizkuni on Sefer Bereshit 41:45

individual. She attempted to seduce Yosef; not once, but day after day.⁴ She then eventually turned to falsely accusing Yosef.⁵ Aside from the text itself, Rashi makes it clear that she is less than perfect. Rashi explains that she crassly reported this claim during intercourse with her husband.⁶ He also refers to her as the cursed one.⁷

Pure Motives

It is with her reputation from the Torah and Rashi in mind that we turn to a quite perplexing midrash, quoted by Rashi:

...A further reason why this narrative of Judah and Tamar is interpolated here is to place in juxtaposition the story of Potiphar's wife and the story of Tamar, suggesting that just as this woman (Tamar) acted out of pure motives so also the other (Potiphar's wife) acted out of pure motives, for she foresaw by her astrological speculations that she was destined to be the ancestress of children by him (Joseph) — but she did not know whether these children were to be hers or her daughter's (Genesis Rabbah 85:2). (Commentary of Rashi on Sefer Bereshit 39:1)

In the Torah incident of Tamar and Yehudah, Tamar disguised herself to join with Yehudah, son of Yaakov. She had previously married Yehudah's firstborn. He passed away, she married the second son, and he then likewise passed away. Yehudah had a third son, whom he promised to Tamar. After seeing that Yehudah was stalling and did not plan to actually have her marry his third son, she disguised herself and was able to have a child from Yehudah.⁸ The midrash is telling us that she did this for pure motives.

We can readily accept that Tamar was upright, as Yehudah himself points out that she was correct.⁹ However, the wife of Potiphar cannot lay claim to such an approbation. If anything, based on the understanding of the Sphorno, the opposite is true. By jailing Yosef and not killing him, Potiphar was essentially saying that she was incorrect in her actions. Even if you were to say that this midrash is not beholden to the powerful point of the Sphorno, Rashi himself,

⁴ Bereshit 39:7-10

⁵ Bereshit 39:13-18

⁶ Commentary of Rashi on Sefer Bereshit 39:19

⁷ Commentary of Rashi on Sefer Bereshit 40:1

⁸ Sefer Bereshit Chapter 38

⁹ Sefer Bereshit 38:26

who quotes the midrash, describes her in such a negative light. So how can we understand this midrash in light of everything else we know about the wife of Potiphar?

Deliberation

Perhaps the first point may be to better understand the assertion of Sphorno. He claims that Potiphar jailed Yosef in order to protect his wife's reputation. However, if we look to the very next incident in the Torah, we can see good reasoning to reject this Sphorno. Pharaoh jailed his baker and wine pourer after feeling that there was a disrespect to his throne. He decided to take some time to contemplate whether they should be put to death. In the end, he spared one and put the other to death. So perhaps the chief of Pharaoh utilized the same method. Maybe it was his intention to eventually execute Yosef, however, Yosef was freed before he could do so.

How do we explain the behavior of Pharaoh, and perhaps Potiphar? Pharaoh was a leader, a man who perhaps wanted to deliberate over the issue and not make an impetuous decision. He was the center of attention, and therefore open to scrutiny. Perhaps Potiphar shared this thought process. So this act may not be a proof that Potiphar believed Yosef. However, it does not negate the entire narrative that the Torah and Rashi detail concerning the wife of Potiphar's misdeeds.

If we look to the Torah, we see that not only did the wife of Potiphar feel a yearning desire to connect with Yosef, but Rashi explains that so did Potiphar! The midrash first quoted explains that Potiphar had an uncommon draw to Yosef. What was it about Yosef that drew so many people to him? Potiphar's wife, Pharaoh, the jailer, and even Potiphar?¹⁰

Pharaoh, upon first meeting Yosef, appoints him as leader of Egypt, second only to himself! The jailer appoints him in charge of the entire jail population. Potiphar appoints Yosef as the leader of his household. What did these people see?

The Lord is with Yosef

Potiphar saw that, "the LORD was with him and that the LORD lent success to everything he undertook, he took a liking to Joseph."¹¹ The chief jailer, "did not supervise anything that was in Joseph's charge, because the LORD was with him, and whatever he did the LORD made successful."¹² Pharaoh saw that he was, "...a man in whom is the spirit of God?" So

¹⁰ Although it is Rashi who adds how extreme of a drawing Potiphar had to Yosef, it is apparent from the text of the Torah how enamored he was with Yosef.

¹¹ Sefer Beresheit 39:3

¹² Sefer Beresheit 23

Pharaoh said to Yosef, “Since God has made all this known to you, there is none so discerning and wise as you. You shall be in charge of my court...”¹³

Potiphar acquired Yosef and saw that Hashem was with him. The jailkeeper¹⁴ and Pharaoh made the same determination. All of them were enamored with Yosef. Therefore, at the very least, Potiphar was confronted with a difficult decision to be made. Either believe his wife, or believe this great personality who he was enamored with. Perhaps he jailed Yosef to not face having to kill someone he was so fond of, or perhaps he was taking time to deliberate. Regardless, the Sphorno’s point that Potiphar was enamored with Yosef still remains. Rashi is telling us that the wife of Potiphar shared the same obsession with Yosef.

Obsession

One could easily have been misled by the Torah and think that she merely was attracted to Yosef due to his looks, as the Torah states:

He left all that he had in Joseph’s hands and, with him there, he paid attention to nothing save the food that he ate. Now Joseph was well built and handsome. After a time, his master’s wife cast her eyes upon Joseph and said, “Lie with me.” (Sefer Beresheit 39 6-7)

The Torah explains that Yosef was appointed as the leader of Potiphar’s household, he was handsome, and the wife of Potiphar set her eyes on Yosef. One might be led to think that she was obsessed with Yosef because he was handsome, and therefore sought his companionship. However, Rashi does not say that. He explains:

AND JOSEPH WAS OF BEAUTIFUL FORM — As soon as he saw that he was ruler (in the house) he began to eat and drink and curl his hair. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him, “Your father is mourning and you curl your hair! I will let a bear loose against you” (Midrash Tanchuma, Vayeshev 8). Immediately afterwards “his master’s wife lifted up her eyes.” [from Tanchuma Vayeshev 8].

The midrash quoted by Rashi explains that the wife of Potiphar initially noticed Yosef when he ascended to power in the household. Hashem intervened and allowed her to take notice of Yosef. However, this was not the cause for her obsession with him. Rashi is telling us that it can’t merely be a physical attraction that led her to Yosef. Hashem placed Yosef in a position of

¹³ Sefer Beresheit 41:38-40

¹⁴ While some commentators, including the sphorno, explain that the jailer was in fact Potiphar, at the very least the Torah brings a focus to a constant awe of Yosef.

authority, allowing her to initially notice his beauty. However, Rashi is telling us that her obsession stemmed from something else.

Torah Personality

Like the others in Egypt who came in contact with Yosef, she too saw that Hashem was with him. She desired to connect to him. So much so that Rashi tells us, she even sought to merely lie together, “Even without sinning.”¹⁵

She was so enamored by Yosef, she wanted to connect with him in any way possible. She was so impressed by Yosef, she dreamed of connecting to him and having descendants from him. She ended up turning this dream into a reality and completed a self-fulfilling prophecy. She was adamant, obsessed with fulfilling this prophecy. In fact, who does the midrash compare her to? To Tamar! Tamar too wanted to connect with Yehuda because she wanted to produce descendants that were great servants of Hashem. That is why they are compared and linked together in the order of the Torah. We see that she, as Rashi says it, “Had pure intentions.”

How is it that everybody naturally gravitated to Yosef? Why would seeing that Hashem was with him cause such an obsessive following? The midrash explains that:

The departure of a righteous man from a place makes an impression, for while the righteous man is in the city, he is its beauty, he is its splendor, he is its majesty. When he departs from there, its beauty has departed, its splendor has departed, its majesty has departed.”¹⁶

Whoever came into contact with Yosef was enamored. We can see that when a person sees a great person, there is a natural feeling of a desire to connect. People experience that with celebrities, and we see here that such a feeling is exuded by great Torah personalities. When Rav Moshe Feinstein walked into a room, people noticed. The Vilna Gaon would frequently exile himself from town to town. Why were so many trips necessary? It soon became apparent to each community that they were in the presence of greatness.

Approaching Hashem

The wife of Potiphar was not entirely wrong, and for that Hashem rewarded her. She sought to connect to the Almighty through Yosef, albeit through erroneous means; Aveirah Leshmah. However, we can see from her, and from those around Yosef, that there is an aura

¹⁵ Commentary of Rashi on Sefer Beresheit 39:10

¹⁶ Commentary of Rashi on Sefer Beresheit 28:10 quoting Bereshit Rabbah 68:6

surrounding a great person. One merely wants to connect to greatness. One can either utilize that to get closer to Hashem, or one can use that to get closer to others. May we utilize these powerful emotions for the right reasons, and through proper methods.