

In this week's Torah portion we read about the unsuccessful attempt of Potiphar's wife to entice Yosef into sin. It is Yosef's steadfast refusal to be lured into the world of debauchery that earns him the epithet Yosef HaTzaddik (the righteous). While the piety of Yosef is a well-established fact, is it that laudable that he did not succumb to the temptation for adultery? Even the simplest of Jews know that for the three cardinal sins; adultery, idolatry, and murder one must sacrifice his own life rather than capitulate. Why is this so remarkable that Yosef resisted the overtures of Potiphar's wife?

Potiphar's wife occupied a unique and powerful position in the Egyptian bureaucracy, certainly she had ample opportunities for sin, why was she insistent on tempting Yosef? The Midrash relates that Potiphar's wife had consulted with her astrologers and foresaw that through Yosef she was destined to be the progenitor of great offspring. Indeed, she was correct, she would have well-known progeny through Yosef, but her fallacy was that it was not to be through the union of her and Yosef, rather through her daughter, Asnot. Her daughter would eventually marry Yosef and give birth to Menashe and Efraim, the father of two of the twelve tribes. Although her actions were certainly devious and evil, her intentions were not. They were the product of misunderstood information.

The great Chassidic master, R. Baruch from Mezhibuzh, says that just as Potiphar's wife had access to astrological predictions, Yosef had them as well. Yet for Yosef this presented him with a theological conundrum. Certainly he sought to fulfill his destiny and father future great leaders of the Jewish people, yet, for this to happen it would involve a transgression of the most serious nature, adultery. His challenge in navigating his path of action lay in deciphering which of these temptations was actually the product of his good inclination or unfortunately his evil inclination masquerading as a positive force in his life.

The Gerrer Rebbe, (R. Yitzchak Meir Alter) gives us a unique insight into the natures of both our good and our evil inclinations. The Yetzer Tov, our inner desire to do good in this world is not nearly as dedicated or as persistent as our evil inclination. Our good inclination will try to influence us to engage in acts of kindness, compassion, and generosity, but if it finds itself unsuccessful, it will quickly give up. However, G-D endowed our Yetzer Hara, our evil inclination, with the gift of tenacity. When it works to lure us in to sin and crime, it even works overtime to achieve its goals. For our Yetzer Hara failure is simply not an option and it will work to entice us into sin at almost all cost.

Yosef was unsure if his desire to sin with Potiphar's wife was really his desire to do good in the world, to bring into this world future leaders, Menashe and Efraim or it was his desire for sin and immorality cloaking itself the trappings of piety. He was truly confused and almost acquiesced to Potiphar's wife out of uncertainty. However, clarity finally prevailed and he was able to discern the true nature of his temptations. The verse says "It was that she talked to him each and every day". Yosef finally found the truth he had searching for. He understood that if his temptation renewed their attacks on him daily and persistently without respite, it must be the temptation for sin and not for good. Our inner desires for good are simply not persistent or tenacious. They will gladly quit tempting us after one or two denials and will definitely not engage us on a daily basis.

Shabbat Shalom
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