

Transcending our Nature (Vayeshev)

To become fully alive a person must have goals and aims that transcend himself. -Herbert A. Otto

Joseph's dreams of grandeur plus being his father's favorite caused his brothers to hate him. When the opportunity arose, they conspired to kill him. However, at the last moment, they change their mind and decide to sell him to slavery instead. Joseph is taken by Midianite traders and sold to Potiphar, a powerful minister in Egypt.

Joseph becomes wildly successful in his tasks as a slave, and his master Potiphar, seeing that God has blessed Joseph in all his endeavors, puts his entire estate in Joseph's fortune-bearing hands. The Torah also adds that Joseph was extremely handsome.

Joseph, the young, successful, handsome head slave draws the attention of Potiphar's wife. Potiphar's wife attempts to seduce Joseph. Joseph resists her advances. However, during her last attempt, she accosts Joseph when nobody else is in the house. Joseph flees, but in his effort to extricate himself he leaves his garment behind. She then uses the garment as evidence to claim that Joseph had accosted her which gets Joseph sent to prison.

Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim of Prague, the Kli Yakar (1550-1619) on Genesis 39:12 draws our attention to the word used to describe Joseph escaping Potiphar's wife. The Hebrew word is "vayanas," meaning "and he fled". What is interesting is that the same exact verb is used to describe how generations later, during the Exodus from Egypt, at the Splitting of the Sea, the water "fled" from the Children of Israel. The supernatural event of the Splitting of the Sea is credited to the merit of Joseph. Moses himself is attributed as personally carrying the remains of Joseph out of Egypt.

The Kli Yakar explains that Joseph fled from his nature when he rejected the advances of Potiphar's wife, that he transcended and rose above nature and the behavior of the world. As a result, he was then rewarded when years later Pharaoh released him from prison. Joseph was appointed as Viceroy and the real power of the entire Egyptian Empire, with control and dominion over nature and basically the civilized world at the time. So too, his descendants were given the chance to rise above nature at the Splitting of the Sea and thereafter retain that potential for transcendence. In essence, he is saying that we can overcome our initial human limitations, we can change nature itself and reach supernatural heights.

May we realize our potential and transcend it.

Shabbat Shalom and Chanuka Sameach,

Ben-Tzion

Dedication

To the memory of Elchanan Kalmanson hy”d. You can read about his selfless heroism here: <https://mizrachi.org/hamizrachi/gibor-yisrael-the-heroic-story-of-elchanan-kalmanson/>