

TORAH TABLE TALK – PIRKE AVOT

Understanding and Controlling the “Evil Impulse”

Parshat Vayeshev, Genesis 37:1 -40:23

Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt

With love to their grandchildren

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Joseph is often referred to in rabbinic literature as *hatzaddik*, the righteous one. This is surprising, since none of the patriarchs are given this title. Certainly, Joseph is the most worldly of our earliest ancestors; he has no direct encounters with God and lives in an alien world. So why is he considered to be ‘the righteous one?’ It is Joseph’s worldliness that makes him deserving of this title. First, Joseph is considered to be righteous because he overcomes his illicit sexual passion at a point when it would have been easy for him to succumb to his desires. And second, Joseph does so because he is committed to a higher moral standard that grows out of his faith in God.

When the wife of Potiphar tries to seduce him, Joseph refuses and explains that to do otherwise would be to be unfaithful both to his master and to God. In the Hebrew, the word *vayima’en*, ‘But he refused,’ is sung with a *shalsholet*, a rare musical note that is only used four times in the Torah. It’s hard not to take note of the *shalsholet* during the reading of the Torah: it is a long drawn out note that catches your attention. The wavering sound of the note suggests indecision and ambivalence on Joseph’s part. Joseph may be righteous but he is not a saint: he fights to overcome temptation and he resists the seduction by Potiphar’s wife.

Rabbinic literature devotes a great deal of attention to the question of human impulses, the *yetzer hatov* and *yetzer harah*. They speak of a battle within every human being between the good and the evil impulse. But the significance of these two impulses is more subtle and complex. To be mighty is to subdue the evil impulse but to be human is to redirect it in positive and life affirming ways.

Pirke Avot, 4:1 Who is mighty? He who subdues his ‘impulse,’ as it is written (Proverbs 16:32) "One who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and one who controls his spirit than one who captures a city."

Pirke Avot 2:16 Rabbi Joshua said: the evil eye, the evil impulse, and hatred of humankind drive a man out of the world.

Sources

Babylonian Talmud Sukkot 52b

Rabbi Assi said: At first the impulse to evil (*yetzer harah*) is as thin as a spider's web, but in the end it is as thick as a cart rope, as is said, "Woe unto them that begin to draw iniquity with gossamer strands, and in the end sin as it were with a cart rope" (Isaiah 5:18).

Avot D'Rebbe Natan Chapter 16

The *yetzer hara* is 13 years older than the *yetzer hatov*. While still in the mother's womb, the *yetzer hara* begins to develop in a person. If he begins to violate the Sabbath, nothing stops him. If he commits murder, nothing stops him. If he goes off to another sin, nothing stops him. But 13 years later, the *yetzer hatov* is born. When he violates the Sabbath, it rebukes him, "Empty one! Don't you know it says 'Everyone who violates it will surely be put to death' (Exodus 31:14)?" If he is about to commit murder, it rebukes him, "Airhead! Don't you know it says 'Whoever sheds a man's blood, by man will his blood be shed' (Genesis 9:6)?" If he is about to engage in a sexual sin, it rebukes him, "Empty One! Don't you know it says 'both the adulterer and the adulteress will surely be put to death' (Leviticus 20:10)?"

Genesis Rabbah 9:7

Were it not for the evil impulse no man would build a house, marry a wife or beget children.

Babylonian Talmud Sukkot 52b

Abaye, hearing a certain man say to a woman, "Let us get up early and go on our way," said to himself: I will follow them to keep them from doing what is prohibited. He followed them through meadows a distance of three miles. As they were about to separate, he heard them say, "The company is pleasant, but the way is long." Abaye

said: If I were in their place, I could not have restrained myself. And in deep anguish he leaned against the bolt in a doorway. An elder came and recited the tradition: "The greater the man, the greater his impulse to evil."

Babylonian Talmud Berachot 5a

R. Levi bar Hama said in the name of R. Simeon ben Lakish: A man should always make the impulse to good [within him] rage against the impulse to evil. If he prevails against it, well and good; if not, he should occupy himself with Torah. If he then prevails against it, well and good; if not, he should recite the Shema. If he now prevails against it, well and good; if not, he should remind himself of the day of death.

Commentary

The sages have a great deal to say about the *yetzer harah*, the evil impulse, and the *yetzer hatov*, the good impulse. Good and evil are not external forces which control the universe but the inner drives which motivate human behavior. Both are necessary for the maintenance of human life. There is more than a little irony in the statement of Rabbi Yehudah, "The world endures because of three things: rivalry, lust, and mercy." (*Avot d'Rebbe Natan 4*) While the evil inclination can be destructive, it is a necessary part of our human psyche: human beings are motivated by the desire for dominance, by lust and competition. We can use these inner drives to build or destroy a society. As human beings we have the ability to sublimate and direct these all too human characteristics or to allow them to go unchecked.

Joseph symbolizes the inner psychological battle between the desire to do good and the need for gratification that is a part of every human life. We see that not only in the story of his near seduction but also in his struggle between vengeance and reconciliation with his brothers. At crucial moments in his life, Joseph is deeply aware of a commanding God that motivates him to act with righteousness. The sages suggest other factors that motivated his behavior. At the moment when he is about to give into his desire, the sages tell us that Joseph saw his fathers face reminding him of his ancestral legacy. Whether motivated by theology or family, Joseph overcomes his all too human desires and does that which is right.

In the statements from rabbinic literature quoted above, we see some of the complexity in the way the sages thought about the impulse for good and evil. While we often presume that there is no 'original sin' in the Jewish tradition, it is interesting to note that, according to the sages, human beings are born with an evil impulse and only develop a good impulse later in life. Of course the idea of original sin has very different implications. But it is clear that the sages had a much more realistic and somber perception of the potential of human nature.

Questions to Ponder

1. In Genesis 39:8, first Joseph refuses Potiphar's wife and only afterwards does he explain the rationale for his refusal. Why does Joseph's refusal come before his rationale? When we find ourselves confronted by moral dilemmas and temptation which usually comes first?
2. Do you think Joseph deserves to be called *Hatzaddik*, 'the righteous one'? Why or why not? How would you define or describe a righteous person?
3. The sages attributed the creation of the good and evil impulses to God. They even suggest that along with the rest of creation, God saw both of these impulses as 'good.' In what ways is the evil impulse 'good? What is it about the evil impulse which motivates human beings to build houses, marry and beget children?
4. How do you understand the meaning of *yetzer harah*, the impulse for evil, in light of modern societal expectations? We live in a world which encourages and evil celebrates self fulfillment and gratification. Does this idea have meaning for us today?
5. What do the sages mean when they say, "The greater the man, the greater his impulse to evil? Why is it that great men have more powerful impulses for good and for evil?"

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