

# JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

## Parshat Vayeishev

The Midrash (Breishit Raba 84:6) lists several striking similarities between Jacob and Joseph, the main subject of our parsha. In addition to physically resembling his father, he also had many experiences similar to those of his father. Both Jacob and Joseph were hated by siblings who wanted to kill them, and they both left the land of Israel to keep a distance from those siblings. Both of them married women from outside Israel and had children outside the land, and they both brought material blessing to the business ventures of their father-in-laws. Of all the sons of Jacob, Joseph also seems to enjoy special status since we specifically single him out as one of the seven Ushpizin (special guests) we invite to the Sukka on Sukkot. Is Joseph simply a replica of his father who continues his legacy, or does Joseph teach us unique lessons that we did not learn from Jacob?

Despite all the similarities, Joseph confronted challenges which Jacob never faced. While the Torah tells us nothing about the physical appearance of Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob, it specifically tells us about Joseph's physical appeal and the challenge he confronts due to it. Before Potiphar's wife tries to seduce Joseph, the verse relates (39:6), "Joseph was handsome of form and handsome of appearance." Jacob also refers to Joseph's looks when he blesses him before his death. While Esau wanted to kill Jacob and Lavan wanted to cheat him, neither of them tried to cause him to sin. But the wife of Potiphar challenges Joseph, trying to seduce him to participate in the sinful act of adultery.

When Potiphar's wife tempts Joseph to commit this grievous sin, he resists based on his fear of Heaven. Joseph says to her (39:9), "How can I do this great evil and sin against G-d." Later, when he becomes viceroy of Egypt but his brothers do not yet recognize him, he tells them (42:18) he fears G-d. Joseph shows us how to demonstrate fear G-d: exercise self-control to refrain from sinning. Because of his strength of character stemming from his intense awareness of G-d, the rabbis refer to him as Yosef Hatzadik (the righteous one).

Daat Zekeinim (12th Century) quotes a midrash which asserts that sometimes a poor man fears G-d but then becomes wealthy and does not feel any need to submit to him. Joseph, however, feared G-d while working in the house of Potiphar and maintained his fear of G-d when he became the viceroy of Egypt. The Hebrew word for fear of G-d (yirah) is related to the word ro'eh, which means "sees." When a person "sees" G-d in his life, he can be moved to fear him. Joseph not only sees G-d when his brothers sell him to Egypt and he finds himself in Potiphar's house; he also sees him when he rules over Egypt.



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Since Joseph lives with an awareness of G-d, the Almighty helps him succeed in his endeavors. The Torah repeatedly tells us Hashem helped Joseph and made him successful in all of his undertakings. When working in Potiphar's house, the Torah tells us (39:2), "Hashem was with Joseph and he was a successful man." When Potiphar throws him into jail, the prison warden observes (39:23) that "whatever he did, Hashem made successful." The Torah clearly attributes Joseph's success not to his own talents but to the hand of G-d, which enabled him to succeed.

In the first chapter of Psalms, King David teaches us about fear of G-d in a way that applies to us on a daily basis, surprisingly saying that every G-d fearing person will succeed in all of his endeavors. He describes a person who seeks to fulfill the will of G-d as "fortunate" and says metaphorically that he will be like a tree producing fruits at the proper time and growing leaves that do not wither. Then, he adds (Psalms 1:3) "and everything he will do, he will be successful."

But if every person experiences hardships and challenges, how can a righteous man be assured of success in all of his ventures? R' Eliyahu Dessler (d. 1953) explains that when one constantly looks to fulfill the will of G-d, he automatically succeeds on a spiritual level, regardless of the particular outcome. If success is met when one achieves a desired result, then a spiritually growing person always succeeds. For when one lives his life according the will of Hashem, he earns great reward in the World to Come, which is ultimately a successful outcome. Hashem tests every person with his own particular set of trials and tribulations, through which he potentially can succeed in securing real long-term reward in the next world.

The Mishna (Sanhedrin 90a) quotes Isaiah's prophecy (60:21), "All of your people are righteous," as a source that every Jew has a share in the world to come. Every Jew can increase his merit, become a greater tzadik, and thereby enhance his share. Whenever one resists temptation of the moment in order to follow Hashem's commands, he succeeds in achieving one more bit of eternal reward.

Shabbat Shalom

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