

Parashat Vayeshev, 5779, 2018:

Yosef Hatzadik

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof and Pittsburgh, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yakir Ephraim ben Rachel Devorah, Mordechai ben Miriam Tovah, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Yosef is the sole figure in Tanach to whom *Chazal* (our Sages of blessed memory) attach the title, *hatzadik* (the righteous one). The second century work, *Seder Ha'olam Rabbah*, is one of the earliest Rabbinic sources wherein this appellation is found:

“...He grants wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who know understanding.” [This verse from *Sefer Daniel* 2:21] refers to *Yosef hatzadik*, for as the text states in his regard, “Then Pharaoh said to Yosef, ‘Since G-d has let you know all this, there is no one as understanding and wise as you.’” (*Sefer Bereishit* 41:39, these and all Tanach and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, *Seder Ha'olam Rabbah* chapter 30, translation, my own)

Our passage's view of Yosef as “*Yosef hatzadik*,” based upon his wisdom and understanding, seems very unusual, since it does not correspond to the standard action-based concept of *tzidkut* (righteousness). Normally, it is customary for individuals to receive the title of *tzadik* because of what they have done, and not because of their great intellectual acumen. Perhaps this is the reason why *Talmud Bavli*, *Yoma* 35a, teaches us that Yosef earned the title, *Yosef hatzadik*, as a result of his rejection of the amorous advances of Potiphar's wife:

It was told of Joseph the righteous that the wife of Potiphar every day endeavored to entice him with words. [Moreover,] the garments she put on for him in the morning, she did not wear in the evening, those she had put on in the evening, she did not wear in the morning. She said to him: “Yield to me!” He said: “No.” She said: “I shall have you imprisoned.” He said: “The L-rd releases the bound.” (*Sefer Tehillim* 146:7) She said: I shall bend thy proud stature. He replied: “The L-rd raises those who are bowed down.” (146:8) She said: “I shall blind your eyes.” He replied: “The L-rd opens the eyes of the blind.” (Ibid.) She

offered him a thousand talents of silver to make him yield to her, to lie with her, to be near her, but he would not listen to her; not “to lie with her” in this world, not “to be with her” in the world to come. (Translation, *The Soncino Talmud*, with my emendations)

Clearly, Yosef fulfilled the famous words of the Mishnah in *Pirkei Avot* IV:1: “Ben Zoma would say... ‘Who is strong? One who overpowers his inclinations. As is stated [*Sefer Mishle* 16:32], “Better one who is slow to anger than one with might, one who rules his spirit than the captor of a city.” (Translation, Rabbi Yosef Marcus) Moreover, the Talmud informs us that in addition to ceaselessly cajoling Yosef, Potiphar’s wife threatened him with imprisonment and physical disfiguration if he continued to reject her advances. Nonetheless, Yosef did not yield to her illicit requests – a mark, it must be noted, of an authentic *tzadik*, and hence the very fitting name, “*Yosef hatzadik*.”

In my estimation, there is another reason why *Chazal* call Yosef, “*Yosef hatzadik*.” I believe it may be derived from Rashi’s interpretation of a verse in our *parasha*: “And his master saw that the L-rd was with him, and whatever he [Yosef] did the L-rd made prosper in his hand.” (39:3) Rashi, based upon *Midrash Tanchuma, Vayeshev* VIII, adds the following interpretation: That the L-rd was with him [Yosef]: “The name of Heaven was frequently on his lips.” (“*Shame Shamayim shagur b’pive*”) Yosef explicitly mentioned Hashem’s name in all situations in which he found himself, both positive and negative, as we find in the following verses:

Rejection of Potiphar’s wife: “Now how can I commit this great evil, and sin against G-d?” (39:9)

In prison with the baker and cup-bearer: And they said to him, “We have dreamed a dream, and there is no interpreter for it.” Joseph said to them, “Don’t interpretations belong to G-d? Tell [them] to me now.” (40:8)

Upon being removed from prison and standing before Pharaoh to interpret his dreams: “And Joseph replied to Pharaoh, saying, “Not I; G-d will give an answer [that will bring] peace to Pharaoh.” (41:16)

As we have seen, even Pharaoh, one of the world's greatest practitioners of idol worship and the black arts, recognized Hashem subsequent to Yosef's interpretation of his dreams:

So Pharaoh said to his servants, "Will we find [anyone] like this, a man in whom there is the spirit of G-d? "Since G-d has let you know all this, there is no one as understanding and wise as you." (41:38-39)

Given these textual proofs, I believe that one of the most cogent reasons *Chazal* call Yosef, "*hatzadik*," is precisely because he was *mekadash shame Shamayim* (sanctified Hashem's Name), and led others to do so. This was the case, even when he could have directly benefited by stressing his own unique talents and abilities – instead of Hashem's glory and omnipotence. In this sense, Yosef is the rebbe of *klal Yisrael*, for he taught us to declare the greatness of the Almighty's Name at all times, so that we may be imbued and instill others with a sense of the greatness of the Creator. With Hashem's help, may we ever have the wisdom and desire to do so, and thereby fulfill the *mitzvah* of *kiddush Hashem* (hallowing G-d's name) in our daily lives. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.