



## MIDEI CHODESH B'CHODSHO

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# Yosef HaTzadik?

As a rule, the Torah does not offer biographies. We are given sparse information concerning our Biblical heroes. Hashem only reveals what He feels we need to know.

Yosef, however, is an exception. As his story unfolds, we are granted an unusually clear glimpse into the character of this hero. The picture that emerges, however, is complex and seemingly contradictory.

On the one hand, “handsome of form and handsome of appearance,” Yosef is apparently a personally engaging and naturally successful individual. He clearly knows how “to win friends and influence people”.

As his father’s favorite; as a slave who earns the complete trust of his master; as a prisoner who becomes assistant to the jailkeeper; as an inmate who is summarily snatched from the dungeon for an appearance before Pharaoh, and then is, just as suddenly, appointed the king’s second in command...nothing, not even the most powerful of setbacks, can stop Yosef’s repeated rise to prominence.

*Wherever Yosef is placed and whatever situation he finds himself in, he rises to the top.*

On the other hand, this highly successful, engaging man is guilty of questionable behavior, specifically towards his own family.

Seemingly oblivious to his brothers’ antagonism, he exacerbates matters by delivering

negative reports concerning their behavior to Yaakov. He then further enrages his siblings by sharing with them, on two separate occasions, the content of dreams that reflect his superiority over them.

When Yosef’s brothers descend into Egypt to procure supplies in the face of famine, Yosef deliberately hides his true identity. He then proceeds to put his brothers through a carefully planned series of painful and frightening experiences. Only when Yehuda rises in defense of his youngest brother, Binyamin, does Yosef finally disclose the truth<sup>1</sup>.

Further complicating an already complicated picture, Rabbinic tradition portrays Yosef, both in his early years and later in the house of Potiphar as vain and overly concerned about his appearance. The Midrash also finds Yosef guilty of relying too much upon the actions of man rather than trusting in God.

How then does history judge Yosef? What is the final verdict concerning this most complex and self-contradictory Biblical figure?

From a Rabbinic perspective, the answer is resoundingly clear. In the Talmud, Midrash, and throughout Rabbinic literature, Yosef is afforded a title awarded only to a very select few.

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1. The many explanations for Yosef’s behavior at this point in the story do not negate the pain that he clearly causes his brothers.

Yosef is simply "Yosef Hatzadik- Yosef the Righteous."

And we are forced to ask: By what merit does Yosef earn this singular title? Yosef's rejection of Potiphar's wife certainly displayed both courage and moral fiber. Was this one event, however, enough to earn him the title of *Yosef Hatzadik*?

I would suggest that only by viewing Yosef's story as a whole- against the backdrop of one critical phenomenon- can we begin to appreciate the true nature and full extent of his "righteousness."

A momentous yet subtle change takes place in God's relationship with man when Yosef appears on the scene.

*Suddenly, God stops talking.*

*For the first time since His commandment to Avraham launched the opening chapters of Jewish history, God is silent.*

God commanded, taught, instructed and reassured Yosef's predecessors- Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov- at critical junctures of their lives. The Patriarchs not only knew of God's existence through firsthand experience; they were also keenly aware of His personal relationship with them.

In stark contrast, when Yosef is violently thrust into the pit by his brothers, the God who reassured his father at Beit El doesn't say a word; When Yosef faces overwhelming challenge in the house of Potiphar, God seems nowhere to be found; When Yosef is thrown into prison, alone and in an alien country, God does not comfort him; And when Yosef has his audience with Pharaoh, God does not tell him what to do or say.

Even Yosef's dreams, and the dreams of others that he interprets, are substantially different from those of his predecessors. At



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no point, in the dreams of the Yosef story, does God appear or even speak. Yosef finds the future hidden within symbolism and riddle, accessible only through analysis and interpretation. Yosef, under the most trying of circumstances, must find his way on his own.

How, then, does Yosef react to God's apparent absence and resounding silence?

*The evidence of the text is clear: Astoundingly, Yosef responds to God's silence by deliberately bringing God into the picture over and over again.*

When confronted with the attempted seduction by Potiphar's wife, Yosef openly refuses to submit lest he "*sin against God.*"

When approached in jail by the butler and the baker for interpretation of their dreams, Yosef states, "*Do not interpretations belong to God? Please tell them [the dreams] to me.*"

When he stands face to face with the terrifying might of Pharaoh, Yosef responds to the king's request for dream interpretation by declaring, "*That is beyond my reach, God will respond, to grant Pharaoh peace.*" He then repeatedly proceeds to *reference "God"* in his actual interpretation of the king's dreams.

And when his brothers stand trembling before him, he reassures them by insisting, "*And now do not be aggrieved, and do not remonstrate yourselves for having sold me here, for it was to sustain life that God has sent me before you.*" He then, once again, *repeatedly refers to God and God's plan* in subsequent conversations with his father and brothers.

Yosef's words reflect an astounding ability to look back upon the trajectory of his life and to see in it God's guiding hand. From the perspective of *Yosef Hatzadik*, nothing has happened by coincidence. His wrenching

sale into bondage, his lonely years in prison, his rise to power, have all been for a higher purpose. As far as Yosef is concerned, *God has been present, albeit silent, throughout his life.*

We arrive, then, not only at an understanding of Yosef's greatness, but also at an understanding of how that greatness clearly speaks to us. Yosef is a Tzadik because he is the first of our ancestors to maintain his faith while living in a "*non-prophetic era*"- *an era when God is silent.* Yosef is the Biblical figure whose life experience most closely mirrors our own.

Like Yosef, we live in non-prophetic times. Our challenge? To perceive Hashem's presence in our lives and to act upon His will without clear Divine direction. As the upcoming Festival of Chanukah testifies, this challenge is centuries old. We have survived as a people only because heroes like Matityahu saw a path forward and acted on their own, to fulfill God's will. We are here today because they felt Hashem's presence in their lives, even in a time of silence.

From Yosef, to the Chashmonaim, to the soldiers of the IDF, our challenge has been constant. May we, in our own turbulent times, continue to see the Hand of Heaven in our lives. And may we find the wisdom to hear Hashem's voice, even when He is silent. ■

Rabbi Goldin is the author of the  
OU Press volumes "Unlocking the Torah Text,"  
and "Unlocking the Haggada."

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