

Rabbi's Column

I spent a lot of time with Joseph as I prepared for my Bar Mitzvah. I had a December Bar Mitzvah, and by the May before the Bar Mitzvah I knew all the Torah Readings. Then I forgot them over the summer, so I had to quickly relearn them all so I could read them. The Rabbi of that congregation at the time believed in the "do not read the boring or x-rated parts publicly" theory of Torah Reading, so parts of my Bar Mitzvah portion I had to learn much later.

What follows is like an iceberg of things that could be said about Joseph, about whom much has been written, deservedly so. After all, Joseph is the only one called consistently "the Righteous" in the later tradition.

It is quite clear that Joseph's essence during his young adulthood seemed to have nothing of righteousness about it. A bit of spoiled brat, with a hint of "how can these people not see what is obvious to me?" thrown in. After being sold into slavery, there is only one moment that sort of stands out - but not really, upon closer examination. If Joseph had slept with his owner's wife, then there is a good chance he would have been castrated or dead as a result. Self-preservation may be laudable, yet I do not think it should be equated with righteousness. Possibly he is correct and competent in almost everything, but that is not the same as being righteous either.

So we have to dig a bit deeper and return to basics

What defines a person as being righteous? It cannot be giving tzedakah, as many of us do give appropriate amounts of tzedakah without being called the Tzaddik, the righteous one. Basically, it seems to be that a person who overcomes temptation is probably a righteous person. Which means a righteous person must be tempted, and often almost gives in to the temptation. Overcoming temptation implies remaining in contact with it, not running away. So a hermit would not really qualify as righteous. You need to continue interacting with other people.

Joseph did not, (indeed, could not) set up his life to avoid temptation. He did not recuse himself from dealing with Canaanite requests for food. He did not avoid the presence of all single women with power. He also did not forget God, or the chance of people doing Teshuvah. God willing, none of us will have to endure what Joseph lived through. However, each of us can strive for moments of righteousness, moments when we do not hide from our temptations but overcome them, without expecting reward or notice for doing so.