

Sedra Highlight

- Dr Jacob Solomon

Vayeishev

It was that day: Yosef came to the house to do his work... (39:11)

The passage relates the captive Yosef's rise out of slavery to a position of trust and responsibility. Potifar, the grand vizier of Par'o, had promoted him to general manager of his estate. His wife, however, had plans of a more personal nature; namely in scheming seduction. But Yosef refused, declaring that it would be an abuse of Potifar's trust, and, further, 'How can I do such a great evil and sin against G-d'? (33:9). That Egyptian lady did not take 'no for an answer'; she seized her opportunity when 'it was that day: Yosef came to the house to do his work, and nobody else was at home' (39:11).

Rashi brings the opinion cited in the Talmud that 'his work' did not mean his routine work, but that Yosef wished to indeed sleep with the temptress. That was 'his work'. But at the last moment, 'he saw the image of his father Ya'akov', and he said no.

What was it about specifically his father's image that made him change his mind at the last minute? Didn't he fear that G-d was actually watching

at the time? Indeed, earlier on he rejected her by proudly proclaiming the Name of G-d: 'How can I do such a great evil and sin against G-d'? Why was the turning point his father, and not the Almighty?

Rashi (to 39:1), quoting B'reishit Rabba, brings a tradition that Potifar's wife's attempt to seduce Yosef came from higher rather than entirely base motives. For her astrological perceptions (which she could well have shared with Yosef) indicated that in the future, Yosef's descendants be would connected with her, though it was unclear whether they would issue from her or from her daughter. (Yosef in due course would marry her daughter, 41:45, see Rashi).

And yet, when the time came round, Yosef said "No!" That was both despite and because of the image of his father. Despite - for indeed, his father had also followed a practice explicitly forbidden from Matan Torah onwards: he had married two sisters. And because - Yosef also knew his father, he had not made that decision lightly. He perceived that it was his father's deeper spiritual awareness of his position in the Creation that prompted him to take that step. As Ya'akov's disciple (37:3), he knew something of his deep

spiritual perception: it was not a self-serving device, but for the spiritual advancement of Creation. And it was that deep spiritual awareness that his father's image represented that told Yosef that in this instance, it was "No!" "No" was "No". And he listened, and he obeyed.

This conveys a very important message when deciding whether or not to proceed. Sometimes, even when we can intellectualize and justify an action or a decision, we hear a voice screaming "No. Don't do it!" It is our work to pay attention to that voice, judge from where it is coming, and what precisely is prompting it...  