

Afterthoughts

- Yocheved Bienenfeld

YOSEF - V'HU NA'AR

I've always been confused about Yosef. Until this point in the Torah, the major figures, the Avot have been clearly outstanding and, what I would consider, above average. Now we are introduced to a person who doesn't quite fit that mold. Although by the time we reach the end of the story, the true importance and qualities of Yosef do come through, we have little hint of this at the beginning. I wondered how someone who would eventually be referred to as 'Yosef haTzadik' could behave in the way he is depicted at the beginning of the Parsha. What most of us recognize as signs of ego on his part and insensitivity to his brothers' feelings seems to elude him completely. As a matter of fact, it is easy for me to understand the feelings of the brothers towards him, given what we are told.

The answer, I believe, is presented in the second verse of the Parsha: V'HU NA'AR. Rashi defines NA'AR as one who behaves in the way of a NA'AR - to be preoccupied with his looks, his hair, his face, so that he looks good. It seems that this would put the emphasis on that which is on the outside. But the word NA'AR conveys more than that. L'NA-EIR means to

shake out, to empty, as in the verse in T'hilim (136:15) - V'NI'EIR PAR'O V'CHEILO B'YAM SUF... "He poured out (emptied) Par'o and his army into Yam Suf..." As I wrote earlier (in the entry of NA'AR), NA'AR properly describes the young, those empty of mature thinking, oblivious. It seems to me that is an apt description of Yosef at this time.

As we know, this is the same Yosef we refer to as Yosef HaTzadik. I don't believe this title refers only to his successful self-control and behavior regarding the wife of Potifar. He must have had some of this in him beforehand. The Malbim is quite profuse in describing the goodness and positive midot of Yosef in his behavior towards his brothers. And I imagine he is not the only one to see Yosef this way.

But given the fact that Yosef had to be more than what we read about in his growth, how do we explain the behavior? Simply, because he was, indeed, a NA'AR. The picture we have is of someone who is totally clueless about his surroundings. He had no idea that his brothers weren't thrilled with him? Why doesn't he understand the message behind the brothers' statement: HAMALOCH TIMLOCH ALEINU... "Would you reign over us? Would you dominate us?" Clueless. So clueless, in fact, that he proceeds to tell another dream with a similar

message which can't make things better. And maybe that's one of the reasons he agrees to seek out his brothers when Yaakov asks him to find out how they were. Chazal find the tzadik in Yosef when they explain that he did this even though he knew it could be dangerous, because he wanted to do what his father asked. But if he knew it could be dangerous, how do we explain this previous behavior with them? He couldn't read their emotions and understand. How sad. Yes, it was all necessary to bring the Jewish people to Egypt as told to Avraham years before, but that was Gd's doing. Was his being a NA'AR also Gd's doing? Very possibly.

When all is said and done, we would be narrow-minded to see Yosef in this one-dimensional way. Yosef starts out as a 'typical' teenager even to the extent that Rashi tells us he was still primping himself when in the house of Potifar. And he goes through trials and difficulties that are more than physical; we can't imagine the emotions that he feels when he realizes the intense dislike of his own brothers.

Somehow, and maybe the turning point was when he is confronted with the challenge of Potifar's wife, he finally "grows up" and realizes that his fancy coat and his father's doting are not the real world. Reality is much more complicated and it involves

more than only himself. In prison, we finally see him relating to others and being concerned. A step out of himself. Maybe the fact that he finally reaches this point and sees what life is really about is why we consider him a Tzadik. He didn't start out like Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov with clearly sterling characteristics. He started out (at least according to the simple meaning of the text) as a 'normal' kid, lacking emotional intelligence. And he had to overcome that, grow, develop, and flower into the unique and talented leader that he was. Rav S.R. Hirsch defines a Tzadik thusly: "The tzadik looks at everything objectively, at nothing from the standpoint of his own interests..." (No'ach p.136). This is the opposite of how Yosef started out. He overcame his self-involvement and he became that person responsible for myriads of others, not only for himself. Yosef HaTzadik. 🌸