

## Vayeshev - Rabbi Lerner - December 2, 2012

Perek 39 - Yosef in the House of Potifar

39:1: *And Yosef was brought down to Egypt, where Potifar, the officer (Seris) of Pharaoh, the Chamberlain of the butchers, a prominent Egyptian, purchased him from the Yishaelites who had brought him down there.* **Chizkuni:** Prior to the birth of the first galus of the Jewish people - Galus Mitzrayim which is starting now - the final redeemer of the Jewish people has been born - the seeds have been sown. In the previous perek we have the story of the birth of Peretz, born from Yehuda and Tamar - he will be the progenitor of the Davidic dynasty and ultimately, the Moshiach Ben David. So Hashem is planting the seeds for the final redeemer - the final redemption is in place even before the first galus takes place. This is why the previous story with Yehuda also begins with the word *Vayai'rad* - he went down - the same word as we find here in beginning of this perek - *VeYosef Hurad Mitzraymah*.

39:1: Potifar is a Seris Pharaoh, Sar Hatabachim... - he was in charge of executions and all Egyptian justice. But was he a Seris Pharaoh, meaning an officer, or was he just a eunuch? When Yosef is propositioned by his wife, it seems that Potifar is actively involved with her, as we see from 39:9 where Yosef says that she is the only thing denied to him since she is Potifar's wife.

39:2 *Hashem was with Yosef and he became a successful man - an Ish Matzliach; and he remained in the house of his Egyptian master.* **Kli Yakar:** this pasuk has a strange construction, with the word *Vayehi* used three times. We learn from here that Yosef he was bumped up, promoted, to three different levels - Potifar elevated him three different ways when he saw that everything he touched was successful. This corresponded to three different realizations of Yosef's talents, each preceded by the word *Vayehi*. The first elevation is when Yosef felt Hashem being behind him in all of his endeavors - this gave him personal confidence. The second elevation of his personality is that he is an Ish Matzliach - he brings good luck to others, to all who come in contact with him - he brings success to his master in all of his actions - Potifar recognized this. The third elevation, *Vayehi Bevais Adonav Hamitzri* - his whole household was successful. His success radiated out from him, to Potifar, and then through the whole house of Potifar. Everyone recognizes his success. We then see him elevated in his status accordingly in 39:4: *Yosef found favor in his eyes, and he attended him; he appointed him over his household, and whatever he had he placed in his custody.* He was elevated to be in charge of Potifar's whole household, all that Potifar has control of - his household and his huge fortune.

39:6: *He left all that he had in Yosef's custody and with him present he concerned himself with nothing except for the bread that he would eat.* **Rashi:** bread here means his wife - she was the only thing off limits to Yosef's control; the Torah just wants to allude to this without openly stating it out of modesty. **Ibn Ezra:** some say that this is a euphemism for the sexual relations that existed between Potifar and his wife, but this is very remote from the truth - this is not the peshat. It cannot refer to his wife because Potifar was a eunuch - he cannot have relations with his wife. So it literally means Potifar's bread - Yosef could not only not eat his bread, he could not even touch it, because he was a Jew. As it says later in 43:32, the Egyptians would not eat bread with a Jew - they could not touch Egyptian food as per their religion - it was a religious doctrine of Egyptian society - their food would be contaminated if a Jew touched it. **Targum Yonasan Ben Uziel:** Potifar purchased Yosef because he was strikingly handsome, and he was sexually attracted to Yosef; he desired him for homosexual purposes; he did not know he would

be successful in all his endeavors. Immediately because of this, there is a decree against Potifar from God that rendered Potifar impotent to protect Yosef from his advances. He then became a Seris Pharaoh as a result of becoming impotent. So, nothing could go on between Potifar and his wife as well, which might be why his wife was more attracted to Yosef. But evidence for the other opinion can be seen in 39:17: *Then she told him a similar account - **Kadevarim Hoaela** - saying "The Hebrew slave whom you brought to us came to me to sport with me. **Rashi**: after Yosef ran away from his wife, she told her husband what happened, that he came to seduce her; these words **Kadevarim Ha'Elah** - Potifar was told this by his wife when the two of them were having intimate relations - she showed him the things that Yosef was trying to do to her; so Rashi again claims that Soris means officer, not eunuch. **Abarbanel**: there are different opinions of what is the meaning of Soris, with disagreement about whether this is a sexual reference or not; it seems best that Rashi is correct.*

39:6: *...and Yosef was handsome of form and handsome of appearance.*

39:7: *After these things, his master's wife cast her eyes upon Yosef... She seemed to proposition him, not the other way around; but the meforshim are in disagreement about this as well, with some saying Yosef had some culpability here, that he wasn't a tzadik from beginning to end. We see this in **Rashi**: when he saw that he was catapulted from a slave to the head of an important household and huge estate, and he was eating and drinking well - which helped him look that much better - he was again indulging in his appearance, like the old Yosef at the beginning of the parsha, where it says he was a *Na'aar* who was captivated by his good looks. Hashem now says "your father is in grief and mourning, and you are curling your hair and looking at yourself in the mirror? I will send the bear after you (Potifar's wife)."*

Yosef in 39:9 says to Potifar's wife that she is the only thing held back from him (which gives added support for Rashi's opinion); in 39:10 it says she doesn't give up and tries each day to seduce him. **Da'as Zekanim**: on the statement that she grabbed him by his garment to have relations with her - this was going on for 12 months - she was continuously soliciting him for a full year; we get this from the words *Yom Yom* - we see this from Megilas Esther where it says *Meyom Leyom*, a full year. Towards the end of the year, he begins to weaken. Gemorrah in **Sota** quotes a machlokes between Rav and Shmuel: In 39:11 when all were gone from the house for a pagan holiday - one Amorah says that he had real work to do; the other says that he knew she was alone in the house and he came to have relations with her. **Oznayim La'Torah**: why do we suddenly say bad about things about Yosef? She did not go to this pagan holiday to worship - this was the day for her opportunity - he had no business going into the house - he knew that no one was there to supervise them; he knew that no one was there needing his help and that no one was there to inhibit her; that is why he was fully intending to cave in when no one was around; at the end he finally came around to his senses and fled. Those who say he was always a tzadik, he also might have thought it was safe because it was during the daytime, when it is unusual to have sexual intimacy.

What saves him at the last moment? **Rashi**: He saw the image of his father. He might have seen his father's image in the window looking at him. **Rav Yaacov Kaminetsky**: there is a powerful lesson here of Jewish continuity - Yaacov is speaking to him at this moment, asking him do you not want your name to remain engraved on the ephod worn by the Kohen Gadol? Do you want to give all of that up? This is an incredible pillar of Jewish education, that a parent has to be thought of by a child as important as an angel; to be a successful parent in chinuch, you have to appear holy and righteous in the eyes of your child - that will prevent your child from sinning. Otherwise there is nothing to stop the children from straying; the memory and images

we create for our children is the barrier against passion for our children. If we act that way, then that image will hold our children back from sinning. This is how Yosef was able to hold himself back at the last moment.