

How Yosef Became Yosef

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheil, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof and Pittsburgh, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Who was Yosef? While some reinterpret the direct meaning of the text and teach us that Yosef was always *Yosef HaTzaddik* (Yosef the Righteous), a straightforward analysis of the beginning of *Parashat Vayashav* simply does not support this interpretation. Rashi (1040-1105) quotes the *Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* (84:7) on *Bereishit* 37:2 on the words: “*v’hu na’ar* — and he was a young boy” and says: “that he [Yosef] practiced babyish actions such as primping his hair and using eye shadow in order to beautify himself.” As the *Midrash* notes, these certainly were not the actions of a 17-year-old young man. Instead, they were the behaviors of a vain and self-indulgent individual. Clearly, at this point in the Torah’s narrative, Yosef is someone other than a *tzaddik*.

Our *parasha*, however, reveals Yosef’s true mettle and ultimate potential. Pharaoh had two very disturbing dreams that eluded interpretation. He was beside himself with anxiety and mental anguish. Out of desperation, Pharaoh retold his dreams to his confidants and magicians, but remained disappointed with their inadequate interpretations. In a moment of high drama, Pharaoh’s cupbearer declared that he remembered someone who had been in prison with him who accurately interpreted dreams. He described the dream analyst as a “*na’ar*,” an “*ivri*,” and an “*eved*” — a

mere youth, a stranger and a slave. In short, Yosef was on the very lowest rung of Egyptian society and hardly worth mentioning. Yet, “desperate times call for desperate measures,” and the cupbearer nonetheless decided to share this information. His goal, of course, was to curry favor in Pharaoh’s eyes. Little did he know, however, that he would begin the chain of events that would eventuate in Ya’akov and his sons coming to Egypt, *Yetziat Mitzraim* (the Departure from Egypt), *Kabbalat HaTorah* (the Receiving of the Torah), and, ultimately, the fulfillment of Judaism’s messianic vision of the future.

Yosef was summoned from his pit and prison of despair. He shaved, changed his clothes and came before Pharaoh, the most powerful man on the planet. Pharaoh told Yosef that he had heard he was capable of accurate dream analysis. Let us think for a moment how most of us would have responded to the all-powerful ruler at this time. We probably would have said: “Yes, I can interpret dreams very well. In fact, your majesty, I haven’t been wrong yet. I’ve a gift that is now at your service. What did Pharaoh dream? Allow me to interpret its meaning.” Instead, in perhaps his finest moment, Yosef was transformed into “*Yosef HaTzaddik*” when he declared to Pharaoh: “*Bil’adai, Elokim ya’aneh et shalom Pharaoh* — it is not through my wisdom [Onkelos] that I shall interpret your dreams; G-d will provide an answer that will bring peace to Pharaoh.” In one fell swoop, Yosef became one of the greatest figures in Jewish history. Rather than responding to Pharaoh in an arrogant and self-serving manner, Yosef presented himself as the humble servant of the Master of the Universe and the mere conduit through whom Hashem’s dream interpretations would flow. Yosef’s humility proved him to be a true son of *Ya’akov Avinu* (our Father Ya’akov), and one who was worthy of the mantle of leadership that would soon be placed upon his shoulders.

I believe that Yosef's actions teach us a good deal regarding the proper way to serve Hashem. These ideas were further refined and given powerful voice by the Michah the Prophet when he declared: "He has told you, O man, what is good, and what the L-rd demands of you; but to do justice, to love loving-kindness, and to walk humbly with your G-d." (*Sefer Michah* 6:8, translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

With the Almighty's help and our fervent desire, may we strive to emulate Yosef's humility and declare as one, "*Bil'adai!*"

Shabbat Shalom and *Chanukah Sameach!*

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>
They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria Etengoff and the *parasha*'s name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: [**http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd**](http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd)

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.