

Vayeishev: A light unto the nations

There are many thematic connections between this week's Torah reading and the festival of Chanukah. One episode in particular reflects the very essence of Chanukah and contains a stunningly beautiful message for our times.

After arriving in Egypt, Joseph is sold by the Midianite merchants to Potifar who appoints him as overseer of his entire house. Joseph's good looks catch the attention of Potifar's wife, and she begins to seduce him. Day after day she tries to persuade him to succumb to her advances. He refuses categorically exclaiming that such behaviour is a grave sin against God.

The Torah tells us that on a particular day, Joseph came to the house to perform his work. The Gemara (Sotah 36b) records a disagreement between Rav and Shmuel regarding the nature of this work. One held that it simply means that he went to perform his daily duties in the house, whereas the other held that 'work' is a euphemism meaning to surrender to his temptations. That day was an Egyptian festival, and everyone had gone to perform idol worship. Potifar's wife had feigned illness and remained at home alone in order to trap Joseph.

As Joseph entered the house, Potifar's wife caught his garment and said, 'lie with me'. The Gemara (ibid.) explains that just as Joseph was about to give in, an image of Jacob appeared in the window of the house saying "Joseph, your brothers will have their names inscribed upon the stones of the breastplate of the high priest, and your name is among them. Do you want your name expunged from amongst theirs and to be called someone who associates with harlots?" At that moment, Joseph regained his strength to resist and fled outside. While the story seems simple enough, there is great depth to this episode; Jacob's appearance in a window carries enormous significance.

A window usually allows light to come from the outside to illuminate the inside of our homes. In the context of the Gemara, this is symbolic of Joseph allowing external modes of behaviour to influence him. Promiscuity was a social norm in ancient Egypt and Joseph was moments from allowing that immoral way of life to influence his actions. His father appeared in a window to remind him that his responsibility was to resist the influence of Egyptian behaviour.

But just as a window can allow external light in, it also allows light from the inside to shine out. On Chanukah we light candles in our homes to remember our victory over the spiritual assault against our people, and our resistance to the influences of Greek culture. The Chanukah candles represent our responsibility to avoid assimilating the negative social mores of our time and assert our identity as a holy nation. May we all learn to shine our light through our windows into the world, to fulfil our role as an *Ohr LaGoyim* - a light unto the nations.

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