

Parshat Vayeshev: God as the Ultimate Caregiver Sarah Pincus, Class of '26

I have often wondered why Yosef, of all people, is known as a *tzaddik* (a righteous person). His life is undeniably eventful, but does it really reflect what we think of as the life of a *tzaddik*?

To explore this question, let's take a closer look at Yosef's time in prison. Yosef is joined in prison by Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker. The prison warden assigns Yosef to attend to them, and after some time, both the cupbearer and the baker have significant dreams on the same night. The next morning, Yosef notices their distress: "When Joseph came to them in the morning, he saw that they were distraught (*zoafim*)" (Bereshit 40:6). (Interestingly, this is the only time this Hebrew root is used in the Torah.) Concerned, he asks, "Why do you appear downcast today? *Madua pneichem ra'im hayom?*" The two then share their dreams, and Yosef, renowned for his skill interpreting dreams, provides insightful interpretations.

We often rush past this moment, focusing instead on the dreams and their meanings. But there's something deeply moving about what happens before the dreams are shared. Yosef, despite his own suffering, notices theirs. He doesn't retreat into self-pity or isolation. Instead, he reaches out with compassion, asking a question that acknowledges their pain: Why are you hurting today?

Bereishit 40:7 reads:

וַיִּשְׂאֵל אֶת־סֹרְיִסֵי פְרַעֲהָ אֲשֶׁר אִתּוֹ בְּמִשְׁמַר בֵּית אֲדֹנָיו לֵאמֹר מִדּוּעַ פְּנִיכֶם רָעִים הַיּוֹם:

He asked Pharaoh's courtiers, who were with him in custody in his master's house, saying, "Why do you appear downcast today?"

This verse is particularly intriguing in its phrasing. My hope is that through breaking it down phrase by phrase, we can gain a deeper understanding of why Yosef, above all others, is regarded as a *tzaddik*.

He asked Pharaoh's courtiers...

The verse could have simply said, "וַיִּשְׂאֵל אוֹתָם" ("he asked **them**"), but instead it emphasizes their status: "*s'risei* Pharaoh"—Pharaoh's officers. This detail reminds us that these men were not Yosef's peers. They were high-ranking members of Pharaoh's court, now fallen from Pharaoh's grace but still powerful enough that a misstep with them could have cost Yosef his life. As Ramban notes, to inquire about their well-being wasn't just an act of kindness; it was a bold and risky choice.

And yet, Yosef asked. He chose to see them not as threats but as human beings in pain. As Sforno explains, Yosef's position afforded him a measure of authority to care for them, but this was no ordinary prison hierarchy at work. Yosef's ability to take on such a role was because "the Lord was

with Yosef and showed him steadfast love” (Bereishit 39:21). This Divine favor wasn’t just about protection or prosperity. It shaped how others saw him, including the prison warden, who entrusted him with significant responsibilities. “The chief jailer did not supervise anything that was in Yosef’s charge, because God was with him, and whatever he did, God made successful” (Bereishit 40:23).

who were with him in custody in his master’s house...

The Or Hachaim draws our attention to the seemingly redundant language of the text—why mention that the ministers were with him and in the same prison? The repetition, he explains, emphasizes that even though they were now in the same confined space where social hierarchies might typically dissolve, Yosef remained acutely aware of his position and the responsibilities he was entrusted within the prison.

Yosef's approach was particularly noteworthy. He recognized that the ministers' distress could potentially reflect on his master, the chief warden. As a loyal servant, even while imprisoned, Yosef's primary concern was how he would make good on the task to supervise the other people in prison. In doing so, he took seriously his position that enabled him to extend the kindness that God showed to him (Bereishit 39:20-23).

saying, “Why do you appear downcast today?”

Instead of dismissing their sadness as par for the course of being imprisoned, Yosef keenly observes the subtle shift in their demeanor by asking them “why do you appear downcast **today**?” The emphasis on the word “today” highlights Yosef's acute emotional intelligence. He doesn't generalize or categorize their emotional state, but instead recognizes the specificity of their current moment of distress.

There’s no obvious reason why Yosef should have this kind of emotional awareness. Given his life experience—betrayed by his brothers, torn from his home, falsely accused, and unjustly imprisoned—one might expect Yosef to be mistrustful, bitter, or indifferent. It would have been entirely understandable if he had retreated into self-preservation, unwilling to engage with the pain of others. Left to his own devices, he might have done just that.

But Yosef is not alone. As the Torah reminds us, “The Lord was with Yosef” (Bereishit 39:21). God’s presence in Yosef’s life is not just protective; it is transformative. The text even says that God’s care was so palpable that it became evident to others. Yosef knows and appreciates what unconditional support can feel like, and, to the best of his ability, he wants to create that experience for others. With God as a model of the ultimate Caregiver at his side, Yosef is able to emulate God and provide some semblance of that care to others. It would have been easier for him personally not to, but a *tzaddik* knows that being a vessel for God's care and compassion in this world is worth it. Maybe



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that's why we call Yosef, Yosef Hatzaddik.

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