

1 The question that has been haunting us remains: In what way was Joseph the *Tzaddik* worthy of his title?

In the Midrash the answer is simple: because Joseph was able to overcome his sexual urges. Despite the atmosphere of overt sensuality that prevailed in Egypt, he resisted adulterous wives, Potiphar's and others: Day after day Joseph saw a number of princesses and courtesans, some covered with jewels, others with perfume, still others . . . with nothing at all; and every one of them was seductive. But Joseph remained chaste.

Another text offers this image: When Joseph went in and out of the royal palace, the princesses stood at their windows and threw him their jewels, earrings and bracelets, to attract his attention—but he never even looked up. For our ancient sages, that evidently was reason enough to crown him *Tzaddik*.

Not for me. I readily admit that a *Tzaddik* should be able to resist temptations, but I would prefer to see the concept enlarged to include temptations beyond those inherent in sexuality.

3 Let us go back once more to the incident at Shechem. Joseph went there to meet his brothers, unaware that they were lying in ambush for him, ready to kill him. But who had sent him? Jacob. The visit had been his idea. He was the one who had asked Joseph to go and see his brothers, just like that, for no particular reason. At that crucial moment, while his brothers were binding him and throwing him to the ground, Joseph tried to understand, to remember. And suddenly a searing, terrifying thought crossed his mind: Was it possible that his father knew, and had sent him here because he *wanted* this to happen? Because he *wanted* him to be killed? The motive? Still the *Akeda*. The memory of Mount Moriah. At Peniel, Jacob had wanted to imitate Isaac; here he could be wishing to emulate Abraham by sacrificing a son, his favorite son.

Joseph, with his sharp, intuitive intelligence, could have reached a conclusion of this sort. Is it sheer coincidence that the two episodes, that of Shechem and that of Moriah, both open in fear and end with a miracle? And that both Isaac and Joseph are designated by the same word: *naar*, adolescent? And that, called by God, Abraham said:

2 First let us define the term *Tzaddik*. In Arabic it means friend. In Hebrew it is the opposite of *Rasha*, wicked. *Rasha* is he who sins against man, not necessarily against God. He who deserts his community is a *Rasha*. He who harms his friends is a *Rasha*. To betray one's comrades, to flout one's people, those are acts of a *Rasha*.

Conversely, the term *Tzaddik* is defined by relationships between men, not necessarily between man and God. A *Tzaddik* is he who resists temptations, not necessarily tests. Tests imply God; temptations are human. Abraham, tested by God, was not a *Tzaddik*. Joseph was.

Joseph had to overcome inner obstacles not in order to come closer to God, but to his fellow-men. His own brothers. He had good reasons to repudiate them, to hate them, to drive them from his house and memory; for him they represented a source of grief and evil.

He had equally good reasons to distrust women; the most beautiful and powerful among them caused him to be thrown into prison.

He had every reason to distrust people in general. He even had reasons to feel bitter toward his father.

*Hineni*, here I am. While Joseph, sent by his father, responded also by *Hineni*? And that while Isaac was saved by the sudden appearance of a ram, Joseph was saved by a passing caravan? Does this explain why Joseph was so petrified that he could not speak? And why, hurt and humiliated, he decided later to break with his family and forget his past? How can one blame him? Did he not have valid reasons to repudiate his enemy brothers who had plotted his death? And to detach himself from their father, who had handed him over to them? And to opt against all of them and for the society that had offered him shelter and happiness? His hostile reaction was normal and human; had he not broken, or thought he had broken, definitively, completely, with his family's world and their laws? It was only natural that he felt closer to the Egyptians than to the Jews. And even to his political duties than to the God of the Jews. It was only normal that he withdrew from this family he could no longer love and thought of vengeance. Yet this was only a first impulse; he quickly pulled himself together: he would not be an avenger. There is rare virtue in forgoing justified reprisals, overcoming well-founded bitterness. It is not easy to resist dealing out deserved punishment. Only a *Tzaddik* forgives without forgetting.

ARTICLE: Joseph or the Education of a *Tzaddik* by Elie Wiesel