

Seeing the bigger picture

Most of you will have heard about the Milgram experiments. Participants were told they were part of an experiment. They were taken to a room and told to administer shocks to a 'learner' who was visible in an adjacent room, strapped to a chair so, the participant was told, they couldn't escape. The 'learner' and the 'teacher', who was administering the shocks, were then taken to separate rooms but they could hear each other. The person in charge of the experiment told them to increase the electric shock incrementally. Eventually when the shock reached an intensity the 'learner' cried out and eventually after being given fatal shocks, they fell silent.

This study, rather than being about teachers and learners was about testing people from various backgrounds to assess their/our obedience to authority figures. It was conducted by Yale University by psychologist Stanley Milgram. The experiment found, unexpectedly, that a very high proportion of subjects would fully obey the instructions, albeit reluctantly. Milgram devised his psychological study to answer the popular contemporary question: "Could it be that Eichmann and his million accomplices in the Holocaust were just following orders? Could we call them all accomplices?" The experiment was repeated many times around the globe, with fairly consistent results. Presumably the participants knew that hurting others, and torture, was wrong but in these circumstances they overrode their moral compass and obeyed authority.

Some of us may also have seen documentaries of young children, such as, 'The Secret Life of 5 Year Olds.' Here the children are given some chocolate goodies on a plate and told, while the adult is out of the room, they are not to eat it. If they resist temptation, they will get to eat that chocolate and more. The adult leaves the room and...you guess it...most of the time the children succumb even though they've been told not to eat it and the rewards for having done so would have been great.

The BBC recently released the results of a survey about morality. During the course of the BBC's research it emerged that not everyone practices what they preach - at least three in five of those adults who say it is never acceptable to be adulterous have also cheated on their partner. Why is it that we get led astray even when we do so against our strongly held morals? Perhaps a tale from our rabbinic literature, the Talmud, might help us out. We are told that a man came from the South – he was exceedingly beautiful – utterly gorgeous, just like our Joseph. He was a shepherd and, as was his habit he stopped to look in a spring to soak in his dashing looks in the reflection. But this time a voice came to him and said – 'Evil one! You are taking pride in what is not yours, that which is destined to become dust, maggot and worm.' The man realises that he is on a path of self-destruction and, rather extremely, takes up a strict Nazirite vow of chastity and abstinence. [Sifre Numbers 22].

This Talmudic tale mirrors our story today when Joseph, again drop dead gorgeous – literally in the Hebrew, good to the eye, is tempted by Potiphar's wife. One of our medieval commentators, Rashi, says that after Joseph became rich, wealthy and stable he started to be concerned with his looks, just like our shepherd from the South. Joseph began, Rashi tells us, to curl his hair and to enjoy his food and drink. He forgot his slavery and his people. It was at this point that Potiphar notices him and approaches him – perhaps realising the possibility of this change in him. Two of our sages, Rav and Samuel, point us towards a significant moment in the story. The verse reads, 'And much as Potiphar's wife coaxed Joseph day after day, he did not yield to her request to lie beside her, to be with her.' The next verse says – 'one such day, he came into the house to do his work - תִּנְכַּח לֵאמֹר מִן הַבַּיִת שׁוֹתֵי עֵלְוָה – none of the household being there inside'. The Sages ask what was happening – was he doing his work (wink, wink, nudge, nudge), yielding to Potiphar's wife whilst everyone was out or was he simply doing his actual work? You can decide what you think... Of course, the rabbis surmise that he did not do anything untoward. Rather, he was tempted but was saved at the last minute. By what you ask? The image of his father flashed into his mind, so the sages say, and any thought of being with Potiphar's wife was vanished... He was reminded of the traditions he had inherited, the

teachings he had been taught by his father and, much like the symbols of the kippah, tzitzit, tallit and mezuzah, he was reminded of his responsibility and the bigger picture.

This is, in part, what we are doing here today and every time we practice our Judaism. We are reminding ourselves of the bigger picture. Getting a different perspective. We can see with our shepherd and with Joseph that idolatry, and immorality, takes place when we see something material as the whole of all existence. What we are doing here is to connect ourselves with something bigger than ourselves – call it God, call it humanity, the universe, the planet, nature, energies, the ever-flowing-ness of life – whatever you name it – recognising it through prayer, ritual and community enables us to step out of our egos and stories and to smash those idols. To reflect, to take stock and to even laugh about the things that we have become obsessed with or addicted to. We open our eyes and see both the beauty and the pain around us. Through working our soothing system we are able to respond, not react, to the world around us. What we do here matters. We reconnect, replenish and re-fuel. We step outside of everything so we can gaze at everything. In order that we can leave ready to do and respond, to the people around us, our needs and the needs of the most vulnerable in this society. We don't do this type of self-care for itself. We are not gazing into the spring besotted with our own beauty – we reflect, we struggle and we step out of our stories.

We make the effort to listen – shema – to pay attention to what is really going on inside of us. What pain are we bearing? How are we taking it out on others? What are we afraid of? What is holding us back? What gives us life? How do we experience love? What can save us? What enables us to see the other? This is vital work and it can transform us, and through us, our world. As we come to Chanukah and light the lights each night we may want to ask ourselves these questions. Through so doing we bring light to the darkness in ourselves and our world. Ken Yehi Ratzon – May this be God's will, amen.

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