

One of the main threads running through Bereshit, through the Torah, and through the entire TaNaKh is our moral code that ensures respect for our fellow humans, for animals, and for all of nature, set against the unbridled, ego-driven exercise of power found in most of the rest of the world. And through this thread runs the thread of love and trust versus unchecked animal instincts – in other words, sexual purity in a world of licentiousness. There have been seven variations on this theme since we began reading the Book of Genesis this year:

- 1.-3. Twice famine drives Abraham and once drives Isaac to flee into foreign lands, and because of prevailing conditions, all three times the husband is afraid of being killed to enable the ruler to take his wife into his harem, forcing the “white lie” about traveling with his “sister.” All three times, the moral code prevails and both Abraham and Isaac prosper.
4. Lot is certainly not as morally strong as his uncle Abraham. He is beginning to assimilate in Sodom. He has property there, and things are going well for him. His moral code prevents him from exposing his guests to the will of the townspeople, but he has no qualms about turning his virgin daughters over to them in this world of sexual free-for-all. Read it as you will: His guests – or his MALE guests – take precedence over his daughters. My eternal question: How would he have behaved had his guests been women, or had he had sons, rather than daughters? Would he have upheld the code of hospitality to the detriment of his own flesh and blood?
5. The story of Schechem and Dinah in last week’s parashah is a bit different, but there was certainly violence involved, both on the part of the young man, and on the part of Shimeon and Levi, while love and trust were blatantly absent.
6. The story of Judah and Tamar, which interrupts the Joseph story in our parashah, is yet another permutation of this theme, this time involving broken promises and dereliction of duty: Like his uncle Esau, Judah marries a Canaanite woman, and here, the Torah does not disapprove! He takes a Canaanite woman named Tamar as wife for his oldest son. The son dies, as does the second son, and Judah, disregarding the law of levirate marriage, refuses to give his last son to Tamar for fear of losing him too. Levirate marriage was sacrosanct because it not only ensured the continuation of the family, it also guaranteed that the widow was not forcibly taken by some other man. Tamar, the righteous outsider, finds a noble way to rehabilitate Judah, and does it without shaming him in public. And now we understand the Torah’s approval of this union: Peretz, one of the twins Tamar bears to Judah, will become the ancestor of King David.
7. Joseph, good looking, spoiled, arrogant, and untrained in diplomacy, winds up in Egypt. And here we have a sinister instance of feminine use of sexual power. Potiphar’s wife seduces him, he resists her advances, she accuses him of attempted rape and has him thrown in jail. Contrast Potiphar’s wife with Tamar – two completely different worlds!

I want to digress here, but not really, as you will see, to a rare trope (Torah chanting melody) sign called *shalsholet* (chain). It only occurs four times in the Torah, and the 3rd time it appears is in the story of Joseph and Potiphar’s wife. It is a long bit of melody, winding up and down, back and forth, yes, no, yes, no ... It always comes near the beginning of a verse, and always over a singular verb form. The subject of the verb is obviously suffering from indecision! It is used the first time when Lot *lingers* when leaving Sodom וַיִּתְמַקְּמָה – he just can’t tear himself away! The 2nd time doesn’t really apply here, but it has provided our sages with lots of opportunity for argument: Abraham’s servant muses about his success in finding a suitable wife for Yitzchak וַיֹּאמֶר – *and he said* (to God – asking for a sign). Why the hesitation? Rashi thinks it’s because he secretly hopes his mission will be unsuccessful so his own daughter can marry into the family. Others interpret it as his standing in awe of his enormous responsibility. In the end, Rebecca goes voluntarily with the servant, and our first real love story is in the making. So, this story actually does apply: If we agree with Rashi, the servant’s daughter would have had no choice, but Rebecca was free to choose.

The 3rd *shalsholet* tells us that Joseph is a healthy male animal: Potiphar’s wife tries to seduce him and he וַיִּמְאַסֶּהָ *refuses*, but obviously not without a bit of wishful thinking. The 4th *shalsholet* will come in Parashah Tzav at the end of March.

Our *shalsholet*, this wonderfully descriptive chain of indecision is poised on that narrow bridge between violence and humanity, between unbridled sexual desire and responsible love – and ultimately between the microcosmic and the macrocosmic: the good of the self, versus the good of the whole. A healthy ego ensures the health of the whole; an unhealthy ego ultimately destroys the whole. But let’s face it, we’re only human, and indecision, that old familiar wrestling match between the *yetzer ha ra* (the evil instinct) and the *yetzer ha tov* (the good instinct) is simply part of our human nature. All we can do, is just keep trying to let the *yetzer ha tov* win.

Shabbat shalom and chag Chanukah sameach!