



Parshat Vayigash

Yosef is the only biblical figure referred to specifically as “Hatzadik” -- “the righteous one.” We know that the Torah is full of righteous individuals, so what is it exactly about Joseph that distinguishes him as the paragon of righteousness above all others?

In Joseph, we see a salient personality trait that notably sets him apart: he takes responsibility. Starting with his brothers, Joseph tells his father the mistakes he sees his siblings make. In Potiphar’s house, Joseph is a leader when he stands up for his values. In prison, Joseph ends up running the show. When he leaves prison, he is in charge of all of Egypt. When his brothers come to Egypt, it is Joseph, in spite of having been wronged so horribly, who first helps his brothers grow past their mistakes. Then, he makes a conscious choice to provide for the whole family.

We often think of a righteous person as someone who does a lot of good deeds. How does one quantify the good deeds? The Torah answers for us: It’s not enough to just “do a lot of good.” In order to be truly good, you have to take responsibility for others.

When we feel motivated to help others, the deed comes naturally; the true challenge of giving is when one chooses to give even when it isn’t the most opportune time. When we take responsibility for others, we are committing to giving, even when we don’t feel like doing so.

Giving to your friend means responding to his or her needs and sharing. Taking responsibility, however, means rebuking your friend sometimes, even though it might cause friction. It means listening to your friend and choosing to understand that individual, not just expressing your own opinion. It means taking time to figure out how to help your friend grow, then actively and patiently encouraging that friend to move in the right direction, even though they might resist initially.

The one who is willing to take responsibility for others in all areas of life -- no matter where it might take him -- is the truly righteous person. That was Joseph.

**Shabbat Shalom,
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