Light and Rejoicing: Thoughts for Parashat Vayeshev

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Vayeshev

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

“Light is sown for the righteous, and rejoicing for the upright of heart. Rejoice in the Lord, righteous ones, and celebrate His holiness in praise.” (Psalm 97)

In this passage, the Psalmist identifies two categories of people: the righteous and the upright of heart. What distinguishes each group?

The righteous one (tzadik) is devoted to the light of truth. The tzadik pursues truth with singular commitment and resists diversionary temptations. While this pursuit can be a source of satisfaction, it also can lead to loneliness and alienation from others. The tzadik operates on a deeply intellectual and spiritual level that not everyone can appreciate.

The upright of heart (yishrei lev) are distinguished by warm-hearted relations with others. Whereas the Psalmist refers to tzadik in the singular, he refers to the upright of heart in the plural. Whereas the tzadik is rewarded with light, the yishrei lev are filled with rejoicing. If the tzadik is “a lonely man of faith,” the yishrei lev are sociable and well-liked. The tzadik finds satisfaction in the pursuit of truth; the yishrei lev find satisfaction in warm friendships and social interactions.

The Psalmist consoles the lonely tzadik. You are not alone! There are others who share your commitment. These tzadikim also find happiness…but their chief joy is rejoicing in the Lord. If most human beings do not appreciate or understand the tzadikim, God does! And that’s the ultimate source of rejoicing and personal fulfillment.

In rabbinic tradition, only one character in the Torah is given the title tzadik: Joseph—Yosef haTzadik. Some say that he was described as tzadik because he resisted the advances of his master’s wife. Yet, to be labeled as a tzadik would seem to reflect on Joseph’s overall character, not just his virtuous behavior in this once circumstance.

Looking at the range of stories in the Torah about Joseph, we see that he regularly calls on the name of the Lord. Instead of taking personal credit for interpreting dreams, he ascribes the power to God. He is only a humble servant. When he later reconciles with his brothers, he tells them not to feel guilty for

their role in getting him sent to Egypt; it was part of God's plan so that he could become a source of sustenance to his family.

Unlike Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Joseph was never addressed directly by God. Nevertheless, he felt God's presence and strove to live a Godly life. Joseph was a tzadik in that he put his life in the context of relationship with God.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik described biblical Joseph as a basically lonely and misunderstood individual. In spite of external signs of success, he did not seem to enjoy warm relationships with family and associates. It was the spirit of God that gave light to his life.

Although being a tzadik is surely a great achievement, it often entails being spiritually and socially isolated. The joy of the yishrei lev—the warm-hearted and sociable people—is missing.

Whereas the Psalmist refers to tzadikim and to yishrei lev, the ideal is to incorporate both qualities in our lives. Our steadfast commitment to truth and Godliness can be—and should be—accompanied by the joy of warm-hearted relationships with others. One who combines the virtues of the tzadik with those of the yishrei lev is one whose joy is full.