



**SERMON EREV VAY'CHI:
ONE-ON-ONE**

Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Friday 10 January 2019
Cardiff Reform Synagogue

- 1 In 2010, James Knight, a dentist in Iowa, fired his hygienist, Melissa Nelson. He was very open about the fact that she hadn't done anything wrong or inappropriate, and that he had no complaints to make about her performance in the job. So why was she sacked? She was too attractive. He feared, he said, that he would inevitably embark on an affair with her if she continued to work with him in close quarters.¹
- 2 This is, of course, absurd, on many levels. Why would James Knight assume he was so irresistible to women that she would want an affair with him? Why was his primary view of Ms Nelson as a sexual entity rather than as a fellow professional? Why would he think it's acceptable, in this day and age, to adopt a policy of (essentially) never employing female hygienists?
- 3 Above all, though, how could he have so little faith in his self-control? Most of us manage to walk past banks without robbing them. Most of us manage to walk past bicycles without stealing them. Why would Knight assume that, as soon as he was left on his own with a woman other than his wife, he would have no option but to embark on an immediate affair with her?
- 4 Being one-on-one with someone is an interesting place to be, of course. In the right circumstances, it can be romantic, and thrilling, and exciting. Or it can be cosy and friendly. Or it can be boring. Or awkward. Even scary and threatening. Rabbis and student rabbis are constantly cautioned about the



risks of closeting oneself with a congregant, yet so much of our congregational work depends on building one-on-one connections.

- 5 What it means to be in **התיחדות**, to be alone with another person, is about context.
- 6 Joseph, apparently, did not like to be alone with his father. He was only willing to visit when accompanied by a chaperone. This seems odd. He was Jacob's favourite child, and when found miraculously alive after many years of being presumed dead, we would have thought they would spend every moment together, making up for lost time. Yet, the rabbis tell us, while Jacob had one of the best houses in Egypt, moments way from Joseph's quarters, they barely ever saw each other.²
- 7 Why? Because Joseph was afraid that his dad would ask him about how he ended up in Egypt, then Joseph would end up telling the whole story of his brothers selling him as a slave, and Jacob would rage against his elder children and curse them. To avoid that difficult situation developing, Joseph withdrew his affection from Jacob altogether. They became estranged. Joseph was so afraid of the force of his father's love that he decided it was better to do without it. Jacob, of course, will have had no idea that this was the reason. All he saw was his most beloved son keeping his distance.
- 8 Of course, Joseph had some reason to be wary of being in a one-on-one situation with another person. When he was alone in Potiphar's house with his master's wife, she tried to take sexual advantage of him – of course, we should blame her for this, since she was in the position of power, yet the rabbis are insistent in blaming Potiphar for employing Joseph in the first place. Yehuda ha-Nasi, the editor of the Mishnah, said: "Do not appoint a steward over your household. Had Potiphar not appointed Joseph as



steward within his house, Joseph would not have got involved in that incident.”³

- 9 Joseph, with the agreement of Yehuda ha-Nasi, clearly saw himself as morally culpable for inflaming the passions of Mrs Potiphar, even though we know that he did nothing wrong and was simply doing his job like any responsible slave. Any fault lies with the harasser and not with the harassed. It wasn't Melissa Nelson's fault for being too attractive, it was James Knight's fault for objectifying her. Yet Joseph took in the lesson that it was his fault, and clearly resolved to withdraw from all potentially intimate situations and relationships so as to protect his conscience from further assault.⁴
- 10 I think he was wrong. He was victimised by Mrs Potiphar, but he then went on to victimise his father by withdrawing the affection that was so desperately needed. He assumed that, if one-on-one with Jacob, he would inevitably end up blurting out his story and ratting out his brothers, just like James Knight assumed that if one-on-one with his hygienist he would inevitably end up cheating on his wife. They're both wrong.
- 11 As Rabbi Israel Mattuck put it,⁵ “When we do something which shows some moral weakness, the act is frequently condoned by the comment: ‘It's human.’ But there is another side to our nature. It is not only human to feel temptation, but it is also human to resist. Every day, people make sacrifices. By the power of the spirit they overcome the force of mere instincts. Their victory is the triumph of the human over the human. It is human to be weak; it is also human to be strong.”
- 12 May we never victimise, discriminate against or marginalise others to compensate for our own weakness. Let us confront our human failings head-



on, determine to convert them into strength, and uphold the dignity and rights of all. Kein y'hi ratzon, may this be God's will.

Check against delivery.

GKW 10.01.20

¹ Joanna L Grossman. "Too Hot to Be a Dental Hygienist?" in *Nine to Five: how gender, sex, and sexuality continue to define the American workplace* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 10-16.

² Pesikta Rabbati, piska 3

³ bBerachot 63a (see also Hilchot Issurei Bi'ah 22:15)

⁴ bSotah 36b records that what ultimately deterred Joseph from giving in to Mrs Potiphar's advances was a sudden apparition of his father's face. Freud would no doubt link this with Pesikta Rabbati, *ibid*.

⁵ Quoted in *Siddur Lev Chadash* (London: Liberal Judaism, 1995): 356.