

**Date:** 11 Sivan 5786 (May 27, 2026)

**Torah Portion:** Nasso

**Topic:** Distance Is the Best Defense

It is written in the Book of Mishlei, “He who commits adultery with a woman is lacking a heart; he who destroys his own soul does it” (Prov. 6:32). Scripture does not merely condemn the act; it diagnoses the inner condition that produces it. The sinner is described as “lacking a heart” (חָסַר־לֵב, *chasar lev*) — not meaning the absence of emotion, but the corruption of understanding and spiritual perception. A person does not descend into grievous sin while fully perceiving reality. If the intellect were functioning properly — if the soul truly grasped the nearness of YHWH, the weight of covenant, the holiness of the body, and the consequences of rebellion — the act itself would appear irrational and self-destructive. Thus the verse concludes: “he destroys his own soul.”

Shlomo HaMelekh expands this idea further regarding the adulteress: “Whoever is simple, let him turn in here” (Prov. 9:16). The seduction of sin appeals not primarily to wisdom, but to simpleness — to a mind that has ceased guarding itself. “Stolen waters are sweet,” she says, “and bread eaten in secret is pleasant” (Prov. 9:17). Sin always disguises itself through distortion. The sweetness is temporary, the concealment deceptive. Scripture immediately unveils the hidden truth: “He does not know that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of Sheol” (Prov. 9:18). What appears pleasurable is actually a descent toward spiritual death.

The Midrash and the Talmud develop this principle into one of the foundational insights of Torah anthropology. Concerning the *sotah*, the Torah states: “If any man’s wife goes astray” (Num. 5:12). The word תִּשָּׁטֵה (*tis-teh*, “go astray”) is interpreted by the Sages as connected to שְׁטוּת (*shetut*), foolishness. Thus the Talmud declares: “A person does not commit a transgression unless a spirit of foolishness enters him” (Sotah 3a).

This statement is not psychological rhetoric alone; it is a profound theological revelation. Humanity was created בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים (*b'tzelem Elohim*), in the image of Elohim (Gen. 1:27). The human being possesses *da'at* — moral and spiritual consciousness. How then can such a being knowingly rebel against his Creator? The Sages answer: at the moment of sin, perception becomes clouded. A “spirit of foolishness” enters. The sinner temporarily loses clarity concerning reality, eternity, judgment, and consequence.

The Zohar explains that sin emerges when the *sitra achra* (“the other side”) obscures the light of holiness and causes separation between the soul and divine awareness. Temptation narrows vision until the immediate desire eclipses eternal truth. In this state, the person no longer sees clearly. What should appear bitter appears sweet; what should appear deadly appears harmless. This is why Isaiah warns: “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness” (Isa. 5:20). Sin disorders perception itself.

Yet this raises a troubling question. If a person sins only because a spirit of foolishness overtakes him, how can he be held accountable? Where is free will? If a mighty wind throws a man from a cliff, do we blame him for falling? The answer given by Torah is yes — but not because he was blown over. He is responsible because he chose to stand near the edge.

Free will often operates long before the moment of actual sin. A person chooses what influences to entertain, what environments to enter, what desires to cultivate, what thoughts to nourish, and what boundaries to dismantle. By the time temptation reaches full strength, the decisive battle may already have been lost. The “spirit of foolishness” gains power only where a person has opened a gate for it.

This is precisely why the Sages teach: “Whoever sees a *sotah* in her disgrace should separate himself from wine by taking the Nazirite vow” (Sotah 2a). The Torah’s strategy against sin is preventative before it is reactive. Holiness requires distance from spiritual danger before temptation fully matures. One does not wait until standing inside the fire before deciding to flee it.

The Torah repeatedly emphasizes this principle of distance. “Keep far from a false matter” (Exod. 23:7). “Make a fence around the Torah” (Pirkei Avot 1:1). The righteous do not merely resist evil at the final moment; they structure their lives to avoid its sphere of influence altogether.

This understanding illuminates the extraordinary merit of Yosef HaTzaddik. Midrash Tehillim comments on the verse, “The sea saw and fled” (Ps. 114:3): What did the sea see? It saw the coffin of Yosef descending into it. Elohim said: “Let the sea flee before the one who fled.” Yosef’s flight from the wife of Potiphar became the spiritual force that later caused the Reed Sea itself to split before Israel.

At first glance, this seems puzzling. Yosef had already received immense reward for resisting temptation. Bereishit Rabbah teaches that every aspect of his body that refused sin received corresponding honor and elevation. Why then was his fleeing considered uniquely meritorious — so much so that it became connected to the salvation of an entire nation?

The answer lies in understanding the true difficulty of Yosef’s act. Rejecting temptation intellectually is one level of righteousness. Fleeing from it physically is another. Yosef understood that victory over temptation is not merely about winning a single encounter; it is about escaping the domain in which temptation rules.

Genesis states: “She grabbed him by his garment, saying, ‘Lie with me.’ But he left his garment in her hand and fled and went outside” (Gen. 39:12). Yosef could likely have wrestled the garment away. Yet he refused to prolong the encounter even for a moment. He understood that every additional second inside the atmosphere of temptation increased danger. The garment was expendable; the soul was not.

The Zohar portrays Yosef as the embodiment of יסוד (Yesod), covenantal purity and spiritual foundation. His greatness was not merely self-control, but separation. He understood that holiness often requires retreat rather than confrontation. Sometimes the holiest act is not standing and arguing with evil, but running from it immediately.

This is why Yosef’s merit surpassed ordinary reward. His flight established a spiritual pattern for all generations: redemption comes through separation from impurity. Just as Yosef fled from corruption, the sea later fled before Yisrael. Measure for measure, creation itself responded to the power of holiness that refuses compromise.

The same principle appears throughout Scripture. David declares, “I will set no wicked thing before my eyes” (Ps. 101:3). Paul writes, “Flee youthful lusts” (2 Tim. 2:22). Bible Scripture does not merely say “fight” temptation; often it says “flee.” The righteous understand that wisdom sometimes means refusing the battle altogether.

Sin rarely begins with open rebellion. It begins with nearness — small compromises, tolerated influences, unguarded thoughts, spiritual carelessness. The “spirit of foolishness” enters gradually, until clarity becomes dimmed. Therefore Torah commands vigilance long before the moment of collapse.

The path of holiness is thus not merely the avoidance of evil acts, but the cultivation of spiritual clarity. A person must guard what enters the eyes, mind, heart, and environment. He must build fences before cliffs, not after falling from them. For the battle against sin is won not only in moments of crisis, but in the daily shaping of the soul.

As it is written: “Guard your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the issues of life” (Prov. 4:23).

Shalom.