



Parashat Vayeshev

Joseph's Fabulous Technicolor Dreamcoat

by Gregg Drinkwater on Saturday December 16, 2006

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Genesis 37:1 - 40:23, Shabbat

A colleague recently told me about his experience of teaching the story of Joseph to a group of teenagers at a synagogue in California. After considering all the details the Torah has to offer on Joseph, one young girl blurted out, with the utmost conviction, “Isn’t it obvious? Joseph was, like, so *gay*! I mean, he’s got this fabulous rainbow-colored coat, everyone comments on how cute he is, and he refuses to sleep with that Egyptian hottie. He’s totally gay.”

Little did this teenager know that she was echoing the great medieval commentator, Rashi. While Rashi didn’t quite argue that Joseph was gay, he did argue that Joseph “dressed his hair,” and “touched up his eyes so that he should appear goodlooking.” Apparently even Rashi thought that Joseph had a certain “sensibility.” As we shall see, Rashi’s insights echoed those of earlier midrashic commentary, which suggests there is indeed something about Joseph that has intrigued Torah scholars throughout the ages.

Few Torah scholars would agree with this California teenager and argue that Joseph was gay, with all the modern-day assumptions we ascribe to that word. But there is enough evidence to suggest that Joseph was in some sense “queer”—an outsider dwelling on the inside, a figure apart from his family, and someone who doesn’t quite fit in. Let’s explore the evidence of Joseph’s “queerness” step by step.

Joseph the *Na’ar*

The description of Joseph in the opening lines of this week’s *parasha* has perplexed commentators for two thousand years. These lines describe Joseph as a 17 year old who tends the flocks with his brothers, but in this same passage the Torah also tells us that he was a “na’ar” – a “youth” or “lad.” In biblical times, a 17-year-old would certainly be an adult, so why is Joseph described as a *na’ar*? Torah scholars generally assume that repeated phrases, contradictions and subtle shifts in the Torah are there for a reason, so if an adult is being called a youth, there must be some significance.

In the midrash, the sages suggest that although Joseph was indeed 17, he “behaved like a boy, penciling his eyes, curling his hair, and lifting his heel” (Genesis Rabbah 84:7). Today, wouldn’t



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the more obvious interpretation of a man who wears make-up, does up his hair and prances about be that he was behaving like a woman, or to follow cultural stereotypes even further, that he was gay? While this might seem to be the case from our contemporary perspective, in ancient cultures, particularly Greek culture, the line between a boy (as opposed to a man) and a woman was blurrier than it is today. Calling Joseph a boy is a way of feminizing him while also questioning his emotional and social maturity.

Other commentators, also trying to understand the use of the term *na'ar*, note that the complete line says: “*V’hu na’ar et-bnai Bilhah v’et-bnai Zilpah*”/“And he was a *na’ar* with the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah” (Genesis 37:2). They suggest that what is really being implied is that Joseph was a helper to his brothers (the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah) or perhaps even a servant. Other ancient Mediterranean cultures, most famously the ancient Greeks, allowed adult men to become sexually involved with male youths in certain contexts, particularly young men who behaved or looked like girls—again echoing the complex gender dynamics of ancient cultures. So, if Joseph was a servant to his brothers, does that mean he was used “as a youth” by his brothers in a sexual way? While this sexual implication of *na’a* is probably far fetched, the use of that term in reference to Joseph certainly supports the idea of him being a “queer” figure in the sense of being apart from the rest of his family and being feminized by his brothers.

A Special Coat for a Special Son

Joseph’s father, Jacob, always put Joseph on a pedestal. Right after the “*na’ar*” verse, the Torah tells us that “[Jacob] loved Joseph more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he made him a coat with long sleeves.” (Genesis 37:3). This coat, or *ketonet passim* in Hebrew, is often described as a “coat of many colors,” or in our own times, as Joseph’s “amazing technicolor dreamcoat.” Once again, it sets Joseph apart from his brothers: “When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him” (Genesis 37:4).

Was the coat symbolic, expressing a deeper reality, or a way to mask Joseph’s immaturity, his “*na’ar*-ishness”? Biblical Hebrew has several different terms for clothing: including *begeg* and *levush*. *Begedim* are clothes that impart an image, or give significance to the wearer – making it clear that this person’s actions and role are important. *Levush* is used to hide something, or cover up and make someone look like they are more than they really are. So what of Joseph’s coat? Most Torah scholars would argue that Joseph’s *ketonet passim* clearly falls in the *begeg* category, honoring Joseph as someone who would grow to become a *tzaddik*, or righteous person. Joseph’s brothers, however, clearly read the coat as *levush*—as both an attempt by Joseph to put on airs and as material evidence of their father’s failure to see Joseph for what he really is, or at least, what they perceived him to be.



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What about Joseph himself? Did the coat help him cover up his own insecurity, the pain he felt growing up without a mother (his mother, Rachel, died when he was young)? Did the coat allow him to act with an authority that he wasn't quite up to? Did he use his flashy "queer eye" coat as a crutch to project a false public image of confidence? Certainly, the emotional maturity that Joseph shows later in the story, when he finally seems to deserve the "chosen-ness" placed upon him by his father and the coat, is nowhere to be found in these early verses.

Potiphar's Purchase

With Joseph's entry into Egypt we return to the question of sex. As far-fetched as it may seem to have suggested any sexual abuse between Joseph and his brothers, the idea of Joseph as a sexual plaything of those more powerful comes up elsewhere in Genesis. This time, it elicits a frank and explicit response from the sages.

After Joseph's brothers sell him as a slave, Joseph makes it to Egypt, where "Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him from the hands of the Ishmaelites" (Genesis 39:1). Throughout the Joseph narrative we are continually reminded of just how beautiful he was. After he arrives in Egypt, we are told once again that he is "well built and handsome" (Genesis 39:6) just before Potiphar's wife makes a pass at Joseph. All these references to Joseph's good looks lead the sages of the Talmud to come to a surprising conclusion about why Potiphar bought Joseph. As we are told in Tractate Sotah 13b, "[Potiphar] bought [Joseph] for himself; but Gabriel came and castrated [Potiphar], and then Gabriel came and mutilated him for originally his name is written Potiphar but afterwards Potiphara." Let's unpack this. When the rabbis write that Potiphar bought Joseph "for himself" they are suggesting, quite explicitly, that he bought him to use sexually. Potiphar is an official of the royal court – in Hebrew the term is *saris* (*sarisim* in plural). The same term is often used in the Tanakh to refer to castrated men, or eunuchs, some of whom served as officials in royal courts. In Tractate Sotah, the rabbis, motivated in part by the use of this term, are arguing that the angel Gabriel, angered by Potiphar's sexual abuse of Joseph, castrated him to prevent him from using Joseph as a sexual object.

Even if Joseph's sexual service to Potiphar is true, does that make Joseph gay? The object of sexual abuse or predation is clearly the victim, so the immediate answer would be no. But there is yet more to the story.

Sexual Advances

Our California teenager, in her list of reasons why Joseph was "totally gay," has already referenced the final piece of "queer" evidence. Shortly after joining Potiphar's household, Potiphar's wife makes an aggressive pass at Joseph – a pass that he refuses. And this isn't the only time he refuses such an advance. As the midrash says, "when Joseph went forth to rule over Egypt, daughters of kings used to look at him through the lattices and throw bracelets, necklets, ear-rings, and finger-rings to him, so that he might lift up his eyes and look at them;



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yet he did not look at them” (Genesis Rabbah 98:18). Although Joseph has a wife and children, he is portrayed as sexually chaste, or at least as a man with minimal interest in women. Certainly, a man who refuses the casual advances of women in Egypt’s court shouldn’t automatically be labeled gay. There are plenty of other, perfectly obvious and admittedly honorable reasons. Joseph gives one himself, telling Potiphar’s wife, “How could I do this most wicked thing, and sin before God?” Still, his sexual restraint does stand out when compared to so many other stories in the Torah.

Ultimately, the sexual evidence for Joseph’s “queerness” remains indirect and vague. But do we really need explicit reports of sexual behavior or ambiguous gender identity to look at Joseph in a new light? I would argue that we can understand him as being in some way “queer” because Joseph shares something in common with many LGBT people. He is, in every moment of his life, a man apart – an outsider dwelling on the inside – a man chosen by his father and by God for great things.



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