



Parashat Vayeshev

Ba'al Ha'Chalomot: Keepers of the Dreams

by Karen Erlichman on Thursday November 29, 2007

19 Kislev 5768

Genesis 37:1 - 40:23, Shabbat, 19 Kislev 5768

They saw him from afar, and before he came close to them they conspired to kill him. They said to one another, "Here comes that dreamer [ba'al ha'chalomot]! Come now, let's kill him and throw him into one of the pits; and we can say, 'a savage beast [chaya ra'ah] devoured him.' We shall see what comes of his dreams!" —Genesis 37:18-20

This week's parasha, Vayeshev, focuses on the story of Joseph, a dreamer and a visionary who was reviled and exiled by his own siblings. He shared his spiritual gifts with those around him, risking his own life to speak Divine Truth. Guided by an inner spiritual compass, Joseph's clarity of vision and purpose guided him in every moment, even when faced with an unrequited offer of seduction from a woman, or a near death experience at the hands of his own brothers.

Parashat Vayeshev is profoundly relevant to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer Jews. Many of us can recall our first feelings of being outsiders – an intuitive sense that we were somehow different. Whether uniquely gendered, or whether we fell in love or lust with another person of the same gender, like Joseph our inner compass was guiding us to a deeply felt inner truth, a dream or vision of our truest selves. Parashat Vayeshev illuminates several encounters in which Joseph makes surprising choices or decisions, except when viewed through the queer lens.

Acting out of anger and hatred, Joseph's brothers strip him of his famous coat of many colors, "the ornamented tunic that he was wearing" (37: 23). This coat, a gift from his father, Jacob, had stirred the resentment of Joseph's brothers, because the coat suggested to them that "their father loved [Joseph] more than any of his brothers" (37:4). Joseph's brothers saw him as different – as standing apart, something they felt their own father had confirmed through his preferential treatment. The brothers then cover the coat in blood, using this very marker of Joseph's "inner truth" to trick Jacob into thinking his son is dead – a savage end to an object of dreamlike beauty.

Later in the text, As Joseph's story continues, his brothers have cast him into the pit and subsequently sold him into slavery to the Ishmaelites, who bring him to Egypt (37:28). He is



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then sold to Potiphar, a member of Pharaoh's court, and brings tremendous success to Potiphar and "everything he owned, in the house and outside" (39:5). Shortly thereafter, the text describes him as "*yafeh to-ar viy'feh mar'eh*," well built and handsome; yet he rejects summarily the sexual advances of Potiphar's wife. "She coaxed Joseph day after day, [and] he did not yield to her request to lie beside her, to be with her (39:10)."

Like Joseph, we all have a part of us that is, as the text says, *ba'al ha'chalomot*, master/keeper of the dream, and that is *chaya ra'ah*, a savage beast. We risk loss, ostracism and betrayal, but we also follow that inner compass with a deep faith. We may dress in ways or speak truth that others find quite threatening. We also cultivate a powerful set of tools for navigating through multiple coexisting realities. Joseph's gifts as a dreamer and a visionary engendered fear and fascination, and challenged the conventional assumptions of the time for Jews and Egyptians alike.

Reading this section of the *parasha* reminded me of the part of our Shabbat morning liturgy that teaches us "*Elohai Neshama Shenatata Bi Tehora Hi*/My God, the soul you have gifted me with is pure." It is in our *neshama* that we envision our dreams and experience our authentic selves. And this *parasha* states explicitly that HaShem does not abandon Joseph; even when he was in prison, *vaye'hi YHVH et-Yosef*, God was "with" Joseph (39: 20-21). This section of the *parasha* goes on to state more emphatically, "because the Lord was with him, and whatever he did the Lord made successful" (39:23). Like Joseph, when we live our lives in a manner that reflects our true selves, we feel God's presence and we experience divine blessings.

What are our graced responsibilities as drag-wearing, gender-transgressive, sexual-outlaw, boundary-crossing queer Jews at this particular moment in history? Our spiritual, cultural and political roots are inextricably entwined with our brother Joseph, and like him, our tasks are to utilize all of our best skills when needed, to remember our ancestry and identity even when our own families have exiled us, and to honor our deepest truth, as it is a manifestation of that *neshama tehorah*, our pure soul.

Just like Joseph, when we are expressing our true queer Jewish selves, God is "with" us. When we come out, God is "with" us. When we articulate our dreams and visions for a fully inclusive and celebratory Jewish community that invites every one of us to be fully present, God is "with" us.



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