



Parashat Miketz

Hide and Thou Shalt Weep, Seek and Thou Shalt Find

by Moshe Ben Chacon on Saturday December 23, 2006

2 Tevet 5767

Genesis 41:1 - 44:17, Hanukkah

Leaving Mitzrayim (a narrow place)

1994 was a pivotal year for me. At the age of 16, I saw the release of three of my all-time favorite gay movies: *The Adventures of Priscilla: Queen of the Desert*, *Les Roseaux Sauvages* (Wild Reeds) and *Fresa y Chocolate* (Strawberry and Chocolate). I also saw the release of the album *Snivilisation* by Orbital, one of my favorite electronica CDs: Orbital cries out against a society that masks corruption and the hypocrisy of the status quo. I felt like I was living in the midst of a sort of revolution – a revolution I felt deep within me

1994 was also the year I went to my first queer dance club. I will never forget the adrenalin rush and the fear that someone from my small – but ubiquitous – Jewish community might be there watching me. I ran towards the cashier, paid the entrance fee and stormed into the abandoned warehouse that catapulted me into a new dimension of thought, perception and understanding. Those gates opened for me a life that, until that moment, I didn't know existed. Inside those gates, I witnessed a previously unimagined pluralism of colors, people and genders. Life was booming. Some concepts died, some assumptions were challenged. It was life beyond the hetero-normative spectrum of falsified certainties. 1994 was also the year that I came out of the closet.

“Although Joseph recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him” (Genesis 42:8)

Over the years, I've heard many stories from friends about running into their neighbors, uncles, cousins, brothers and sisters at gay clubs and parties. Re-reading this week's portion, I recalled the story of a drag queen who hosted a gay party at a popular club. She told me that the most shocking night of her life was the night she saw her hyper-masculine and homophobic brother walk into her club hand in hand with his boyfriend. He stopped and stared at her, in all her exuberant grace and splendor, and gave her a gleeful smile without having the slightest idea that the drag queen standing in front of him was his “brother.”



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“Now Joseph was the governor of the land, the one who sold grain to all its people. So when Joseph’s brothers arrived, they bowed down to him with their faces to the ground.” (Genesis 42:6)

In this week’s portion, Joseph’s brothers stand face to face with him. Although they look each other in the eye, Joseph’s brothers remain unaware that the man they’re bowing down to is Joseph – the brother they sold into slavery and who was now full of splendor and grace. But was Joseph happy? With power, glory and wealth, what else was missing in his life?

We know that Joseph spent two years in prison and seven years of glory in Egypt, but he never sought to reconnect with his father and his brothers all that time. Why was it that he waited so long to inquire about his family? Why did he wait such a long time to try to get closer to the family that had sold him and turned their backs on him?

“They said to one another – ‘Surely we are being punished because of our brother. We saw how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his life, but we would not listen.’” (Genesis 42:21)

The Torah portions we read during Hanukkah recount passages of deception and sadness. Yet they also provide insights into redemption and the basis for ethical living. As LGBTIQ people, friends, family and allies, we cannot help but ask: Is the closet – this game of hide and seek – worth it? By hiding, we may more easily attain glory, just as Joseph did. But when we’re lying how long can this glory be sustained? How can we be truly happy when we’re hiding from our community, and above all, hiding from ourselves?

“Then he threw his arms around his brother Benjamin and wept, and Benjamin embraced him, weeping. And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them. Afterward his brothers talked with him.” (Genesis 45:14-15)

Reb Nachman of Breslov taught us that it’s a *mitzvah* (a commandment or obligation) to be happy (*Mitzvah gedolah l’hyiot b’simcha tamid*). Can we fulfill this *mitzvah* with a lie? Joseph’s example may pose an answer. Can our families be truly happy if they sever their ties with us? Joseph’s reconciliation story may teach us a lesson.

Spreading the miracle of Light

Now let’s try this little recipe for a Sephardic *bunuelo* (equivalent of a doughnut – a traditional Hanukkah delicacy), just in time for the end of the holiday: Take Joseph’s story of being perfidiously sold by his brothers and then hiding and then seeking; and add the story of the Chasmonians and their refusal to give up on their true identity and their religion. Let it sit for one day, and in due time, it will be the end of Hanukkah. As in the title of the portion Miketz,



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“end” here is not the Hebrew “*sof*,” as in “*Sof Ona*” (End of the season) written on the windows of shops all over Israel to signal end-of-the-season sales, or “*Sof ha-sipur*” (End of the story). Here we say “*ketz*” – ‘end’ as “fulfillment,” or completion of a cycle. Joseph had to be sold, endure two years in prison, stay away from his family, lie to them, reconcile with his family, and finally, emerge as his true self, as a true leader.

For many in our community, this cycle of imprisonment, rejection, lie, disguise, and finally, respecting our true identity, is very familiar. Reconciliation is sometimes possible, at other times it’s too hard a task. Hanukkah stands out as an opportunity to reassess family ties, community relations, and our true selves and to immerse ourselves in knowledge and self-awareness. According to Beit Hillel in the Talmud, through each day of Hanukkah we gradually increase the amount of light in the world. In this spirit, we can only hope that at the end of this process our families and our communities will use the Torah as a tool for enlightenment rather than as a weapon or as a justification for division and exclusion. May the alarming rates of depression, isolation and suicide among gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth shame those who still see homosexuality and fluid gender identities as diseases that need to be fixed. May the light of Hanukkah and the lesson of Joseph’s reconciliation with his brothers bring understanding to those who “sell” their children into the streets, never accepting their true identities.



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