



Parashat Vayeshev

Lie With Me

by Joseph Shapiro on Friday December 19, 2008

22 Kislev 5769

Genesis 37:1 - 40:23

Joseph's looks and handsome figure

Had attracted her attention

Every morning she would beckon

'Come and lie with me love'

Joseph wanted to resist her,

Till one day she proved too eager

Joseph cried in vain

'Please stop!'

from *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* lyrics by Tim Rice

I begin with a disclaimer: I am not a Torah scholar, and this is my first attempt at Torah commentary. That said, what gay man is not intrigued by the story of Joseph? And when you are a gay Jewish man named Joseph, who had an uncle Joseph whose son is gay, whose father's gay cousin is named Joseph, and whose great-grandfather Joseph took his life, inexplicably, at the age of fortywell, indeed, who can resist considering this week's *parasha*, the story of Joseph.

But there is more to this introduction. For I am also a gay man, one of many, for whom coming out at an early age was not an acceptable option, and who came to believe, by means of my Jewish upbringing and my blind acceptance of societal norms, that heterosexual marriage was the only option. Eighteen years later (In terms of the number-to-Hebrew letter transformation called *gematria*, 18 is the number that corresponds to the Hebrew word *Chai*; a coincidence?), a father of three, I came to terms with my homosexuality, and began life anew.



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And so we circle back to *Vayeshev*, and the Biblical Joseph. Preparing for this commentary, I was fascinated to read Gregg Drinkwater's 2006 , [drash on this parashat](#) as he revealed the considerable evidence of Joseph's "queerness." This is Joseph whose "ornamented tunic" ('Technicolor Dreamcoat' for the Broadway inclined) has also been described as the *ketonet passim*, a garment worn by virgin princesses (Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*). Gregg relays the *midrash* wherein "the sages suggest that although Joseph was indeed seventeen, he 'behaved like a boy, penciling his eyes, curling his hair and lifting his heel' (Genesis Rabbah 84:7)." Is it coincidence that Joseph is described (Genesis 39:6) as "comely in features and comely to look at," the exact same words that were used to describe his mother, Rachel (Genesis 29:17) (Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*)?

It is, however, the story of Joseph's encounter with Potiphar's wife that speaks so poignantly and painfully to me as a formerly married gay man (you will recall that Joseph's brothers, having decided to spare his life, sold him into slavery, where he was taken to Egypt and purchased by Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, from the hands of the Ishmaelites (Genesis 39:1); and he was put in charge of the household).

"And it happened after these things that his master's wife raised her eyes to Joseph and said, 'Lie with me.' And he refused." ... "And so she spoke to Joseph day after day, and he would not listen to her, to lie by her, to be with her." (Genesis 39-7,8, 10,11) A straight interpretation of these words might reflect on an ethical decision to not sleep with a married woman, or the fear of sleeping with the boss's wife. As a queer man, the story of this rather effeminate, fashion conscious, self absorbed young man refusing the sexual advances of a woman screams otherwise to me.

And yet it does more than that. It speaks so clearly to a painful reality. For there was no more profoundly and singularly disturbing an experience in my life, and that of too many others in our LGBT community, than having found myself laying next to my heterosexual spouse in bed, having finally accepted my homosexuality, and listening to my spouse say, "Lie with me," and wanting to – needing to – refuse.

But there are consequences that follow such refusals. In Joseph's case, he could take it no more. "And she seized him by the garment, saying 'Lie with me.' And he left his garment in her hand and he fled and went out." (Genesis 39-12,13) He ran naked out of the house, rather than succumb to her sexual demands. But she would not accept this humiliation (who was being humiliated?), and insisted that the sexual advances were his, leading to his imprisonment.

Need I even draw the parallels between this part of the *parasha* and my own experience? Indeed, is it more humiliating and shameful to tell your wife that you are gay, or for your wife to hear from her husband that he is gay? Does anyone believe that such an admission does not strip one naked, and send him running from the house (whether literally or figuratively)?



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There is, as in many good stories, an interesting and ironic twist toward the end of this tale. “And he (Joseph) was there in the prison-house, and G-d was with Joseph and extended kindness to him, and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison-house warden. And the prison-house warden placed in Joseph’s hands all the prisoners who were in the prison house ... the Lord was with him, and whatever he did, the Lord made succeed.” (Genesis 39-21, 23)

While there may not be many more difficult experiences than coming out to one’s spouse, there is also, at least in my experience, no more profoundly liberating and self-realizing experience than crossing that threshold. And in my case, it meant not only coming out to my wife, but to my children, siblings and parents. I have, indeed, felt G-d’s favor as a result of what I have done; and I know that I could only have done it with the knowledge that G-d was, indeed, with me, giving me the strength and courage to succeed. And G-d was there for my (now ex-) wife and (now adult) children, helping us all to set things right, and to maintain love in the face of incredible stress.

Joseph was a dreamer, and so, too, am I. I dream of a day when no one will feel such an inability to accept who and what they are; and when no one will be subject to a lack of acceptance from others. Joseph’s brothers rejected his dreams. At least I can say that my brothers accept mine.



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