

Reading Joseph

Typically, the Torah tells us only a few things about its characters, leaving it to our midrashic imagination to fill in details and possible lessons. In the case of Joseph, who is the leading man in the novella that takes up the last fourteen out of the 50 chapters of the Book of Genesis, we get almost too much information. Well, maybe there are some blank spaces left to fill in – Thomas Mann managed to expand the details of the story into a four-volume novel!

Up to this point, Joseph and his brothers have traveled, and will travel again, along the Mediterranean coast between Canaan and Egypt. The trade routes would have taken them right through what we know today as Gaza, the focus at this moment of our horrified attention. The periodic battles of biblical times echo still, though the chariots, swords and arrows have been beaten into missiles and fighter jets. History is not past, it continues to weigh down the baggage that we carry along, both collective and personal. But back to Joseph, who had carried no suitcases along to Egypt, but did schlep plenty of personal baggage.

What we know, or can say, about Joseph depends on the lens through which we choose to read him.

Is Joseph the spoiled brat, favorite child of his father, a tease and a show-off, a goody-goody and a tattle-tale?

Is Joseph a genius, politically and psychologically astute and insightful? He dreams dreams, and later on, even more importantly, is able to interpret dreams. And he not only interprets, but immediately suggests an ambitious, far-reaching, and convincing economic plan that will consolidate Pharaoh's control of Egypt and Egypt's economic influence over the entire region. He is the brilliant forerunner of both Sigmund Freud and Henry Kissinger.

(By the way, Henry Kissinger is not the earliest example we could point to. Samuel ha-Nagid in Spain, in the early 1000s, became the advisor to the Prince of Granada. He was also a brilliant poet, scholar and writer. His son, probably quite intentionally named Joseph, did not fare quite as well, however. He inherited his father's position at court, but was killed in 1066 in a rare uprising against Jews in Muslim Spain.)

Is Joseph the first great model of Jewish assimilation? He transforms himself completely into an Egyptian, functions easily in the royal court, and completely cuts off contact with his family in the "Old Country."

Is Joseph gay? Over the past couple of years, several writers of “Torah Queeries” on the wonderful Jewish Mosaic website (www.jewishmosaic.org) have had a great time with Joseph. He was a master of disguise, presenting different faces to the outside world without revealing his inner conflicts. He manages to resist the sexually desperate wife of his master Potiphar. Was it difficult for him (as Thomas Mann tells it), or actually easy because he really just wasn’t that into women? The Technicolor dreamcoat that his father gave him is called in Hebrew “*k’tonet passim*,” a colorful striped tunic. The only other time this phrase is used in the Bible is to describe the garment of King David’s daughter, Tamar. Is it a style of dress more associated with a virgin princess? Like Joseph, Tamar suffers at the hands of a sibling, raped by her half-brother Amnon. (Unlike Joseph, she does not work her way back up from this violence.)

However one reads him, it is clear that he did not quite fit in. His very name, Yosef, suggests that he was “extra”, an add-on. Perhaps it reflects how he felt about his place in his family of origin. Whatever he was, he was different.

In one of the Torah Queeries (I can’t summarize the whole argument here, but look it up), Mijael Vera reads Joseph not only as a transvestite, but as a classic example of ‘transitioning.’ He switches from one culture to another, from one way of being a son to another, from chastity to voluptuousness, from poverty to wealth, from submission to power, from revenge to pardon, from a pastoral lifestyle to an agricultural one, [and even] from the masculine to the feminine.”¹

Is Joseph a tzaddik, a saintly, righteous man? So the rabbis call him, but that has always seemed to me a kind of over-compensating for the personal flaws that seem so apparent to a modern reader.

Spoiled brat, genius, assimilationist, gay man, tzaddik? Of course, these are not mutually exclusive categories – someone might be all of the above. Yet, how one reads Joseph will vary from person to person, or from year to year, perhaps depending upon where you are in your life.

But now I want to focus on one particular verse in this week’s portion, the dramatic moment at the beginning of chapter 45 when Joseph finally reveals to his brothers his true identity.

V’lo yachol Yosef l’hitapek l’chol hanitzavim alav vayikra hotzi’u chol-ish me-alay v’lo amad ish ito b’hitvada Yosef el-echav.

Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, “Have everyone withdraw from me!” So there was no one else about when Joseph made himself known to his brothers.

Here indeed is a quintessential coming-out scene, in which Joseph makes himself known to those who once were closest to him. Let me look more closely at two words of this

¹ http://www.jewishmosaic.org/torah/show_torah/56

verse. *L'hitapek* is translated as “control himself.” Joseph could no longer control himself, but he held it together long enough to order everyone out of the room except his brothers. Rashi says that it means that he could not bear the thought of the Egyptians seeing how ashamed his brothers would be. That is a reading of Joseph as righteous – his anger having been played out, he was now concerned about the dignity of his brothers. They would be ashamed, of course, when it was publicly revealed that they had sold their own brother into slavery. One might add that it would also mean that Joseph would be publicly acknowledging his own origins, but he has done that before, and presumably his foreign roots are no secret in the Egyptian court.

The root of *l'hitapek*, ***aleph-peh-kuf***, seems to mean here, “to control oneself.” It appears also two chapters before, when Joseph sees his brother Benjamin and has to excuse himself, go wash his face *vayitapek* – and regained his composure. So the word reminds us that Joseph has been struggling to be in control of himself all along in this narrative.

The root is also the name of an ancient walled city, Aphek, and may imply the image of a fortified enclosure. How do we fortify and enclose ourselves in order to avoid showing who we really are?

And it has another meaning that seems completely unrelated: a channel or a stream- or riverbed. This makes me imagine the personal effect of trying to hold in, disguise our true selves, and how that effort creates channels, cracks in our exterior that become the face we present to the world. One manifestation might be our own personal riverbeds, the channels through which tears have flowed when we are alone, trying so mightily not to let others in on the private pain and exhaustion that comes from working so hard not to be who we are.

This too is who Joseph is. However else one reads him, he is also a person who has worked very hard to present himself to others in very controlled and particular ways. This brings me to one other word in the verse that I find interesting: *alav*. Joseph commands to leave the room those who have been standing *alav*, around him. Our translation just calls them his “attendants,” and this is indeed the *peshat*, the simplest meaning of the phrase. For “*alav*” can indeed mean “round about” – those round about him, his attendants.

The word is often used this way, and the same word appears in the description of Jacob’s dream of a ladder reaching to heaven, with God standing “*alav*.” Here the commentators differ: perhaps God was standing “nearby,” as it were “in attendance” on Jacob, standing by to give him courage and confidence for his journey. But “*alav*” can also mean “upon it” or “on top of it.” The verse about the ladder dream might also mean that Jacob saw God standing “on top of” the ladder, from the meaning of *al*, upon.

And so I imagine here with Joseph, these Egyptian courtiers have not only been in attendance on him; they have also been standing *on* him. He has felt forced to conform to certain royal expectations. Of course, he was able to do this quite well, even with magnificent ease, as long as he could put aside deeper memories of his true self. But now finally, faced with his frightened and repentant brothers, he tells all the Egyptians, “Get

off of me.” It is a moment of personal breakthrough. The family must now rearrange its whole dynamic. Things will never be the same. Yet Joseph does not suddenly give up his Egyptian lifestyle. He remains the husband of his Egyptian wife, the father of two Egyptian children, second in command to Pharaoh. But he is, I imagine, finally able to be more fully Joseph.

The gifted, young and late-born son of a family of nomadic shepherds does not return to a pastoral life. That shift will wait several generations, until Moses – he of an Egyptian name and a royal Egyptian upbringing – will return to the desert as the shepherd of the flock of Israel. But that is a story that still lies ahead.