

July 2, 2017 - Gen. 39:1–23 - Joseph and Potiphar's Wife
Torah Reading: Gen. 39:1–23 - Joseph and Potiphar's Wife
Psalm 32
Haftorah - Isaiah 52:3-10 + 53:4-5

Joseph in Egypt

Another story of sex and debauchery!

But also of faith, and God's faithfulness:

Remember that Joseph symbolically "died" - torn by a beast proved by his bloody cloak. Plus, he was thrown into a pit of snakes, which the Talmud says means certain death.

"If one fell into a pit full of snakes and scorpions, we bear witness (that he is dead and we allow his wife to remarry, for he surely died there)." (B. Yevamot 121a)

According to a Jewish midrash, Joseph - whose whole life has fallen apart, and having been betrayed by his family, is trying to keep some semblance of his identity intact. He whispers the Torah as he goes about his chores as a slave in Potiphar's household.

The midrash points to Joseph's later statement - **Genesis 41:51**: "For God has made me forget completely my hardship and my parental home." Enslaved and in shock, he is only going through the motions, but God keeps making small miracles happen around him.

For instance, Potiphar would tell him to pour boiling water, Joseph would forget, but the water would boil as he poured it. Potiphar would ask for lukewarm water, and it poured at the right temperature without fail.

Thus:

Genesis 39:3 - "And his master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD made all he did to prosper in his hand."

Joseph's organizational abilities come to be known, and eventually he rises to head Potiphar's household.

Remembering and forgetting figures large in this story. Later in prison, the Butler "forgets" Joseph. Later he "remembers" Joseph was good at dream interpretation, and this saves the whole country. There would also be lots of "remembering" by Joseph of his brothers' treachery, or his brothers "remembering" their sins, and of Joseph eventually "forgetting" their trespass against him, by seeing through it to see God's hand in everything.

Genesis 50:20 - "...you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to

bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive.”

Both Jacob and Joseph tried to live simply in obedience and fear of God, but circumstances kept hammering them. Instead of quietly “settling” in the land as they desire, they are forced to be “strangers and wanderers” - Jacob is agitated to the point of despair by the loss of his son, and Joseph is jettisoned from the Land by the betrayal of his brothers.

The lesson - God knows that for innocence to be transformed into holiness, tribulation is necessary. As Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg explains in “The Beginning of Desire,” God has arranged for humans to be transformed in this life so as to exhibit “love - the capacity to act in a world where absolute clarity is not obtainable.”

Only in the days of Messiah would that peace be fully realized.

Jeremiah 30:10 “- Therefore fear thou not, O my servant Jacob, saith the LORD; neither be dismayed, O Israel: for, lo, I will save thee from afar, and thy seed from the land of their captivity; and Jacob shall return, and shall be in rest, and be quiet, and none shall make him afraid.”

Joseph ate nothing but dry bread, and yet, like Daniel and his companions, was well favored and of a goodly countenance. (R. Abraham Sepharadi apud Munster. in loc.)

What’s the back story on Potiphar and his wife?

Not much is known. Potiphar is the shortened form of the Egyptian name "Potiphara," meaning "he whom Ra gave" or "gift of Ra."

His wife is not even named. Legend fills in the rest.

From the two references to Potiphar (**Genesis 37:36; 39:1**), he is described as a *s'ris*, which is commonly translated as “courtier” but which more commonly means “eunuch.” Some people say that it was a time when the Hyksos (the Fifteenth Dynasty rulers) had conquered Egypt, and that an Egyptian had to be castrated in order to acquire wealth and status in court. Certainly, there is no mention of children in Potiphar’s household. Whatever the situation, his wife appears to be “dissatisfied.”

— See <http://www.adath-shalom.ca/Vayeshev-Potiphar.3B.pdf> for more legends of Joseph

Joseph resisted temptation, like Christ:

Hebrews 4:15 - “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.”

Joseph and his cloak - again!

The first stripping off of Joseph's cloak led to his enslavement.

This second stripping of a cloak would lead to an even lower rung on the ladder - imprisonment.

Compare to Jesus - "And they stripped him" (**Matthew 27:28**).

The normal punishment for rape would have been death. One story goes that Potiphar asked for advice from a reputable lady of the household. She said that, if Joseph's tunic was torn from the front, then he was guilty; if it was torn from the back, then she was guilty. The tunic was torn from the back. In any event, Joseph was not executed but instead sent to what seems to be a special prison for important people, which is why Pharaoh's servants were there as well.

Like Jesus, false accusers led to Joseph's imprisonment.

Like Jesus, her was "numbered with transgressors":

Isaiah 53:12 - "Because He poured out Himself to death, And was numbered with the transgressors..."

Another pit!

The word for "prison" has the signification of roundness, and may be rendered the "round house" or "round tower"; and some Jewish writers take it to be that it was made underground, and at the top of it was an hole which let in light, and at which they went into it. It's the same word used for the pit into which his brothers threw him.

We learn more about Joseph's treatment:

Psalm 105:17-19 - "He sent a man before them, even Joseph, who was sold for a servant: Whose feet they hurt with fetters: he was laid in iron: Until the time that his word came: the word of the LORD tried him."

Jesus was also bound:

Mark 15:1 - "They bound Jesus, led Him away, and handed Him over to Pilate."

Joseph continued there, some of the Jewish writers say (Pirke Eliezer, c. 39.) 10 years, others say 12 (Seder Olam Rabba, c. 2. p. 5. Shalshalet Hakabala, fol. 3. 2.)

This was Joseph's lowest point.

Nevertheless:

Genesis 39:23 - "The keeper of the prison looked not to any thing that was under his hand; because the LORD was with him, and that which he did, the LORD made it to prosper."

The Targums of Onkelos and Jonathan paraphrase it, "he saw no crime in him," [like Pilate's ruling on Jesus] either in the management of affairs he committed to him, or for which he was put into prison, and therefore did not use him as he did other prisoners: "because the Lord was with him; supplying him with his grace, giving him wisdom to do everything in the best manner committed to him, which caused the keeper of the prison to respect him as he did." - *Gill's Exposition*

A Blessing over the Pit

The Talmud says that when the term "cast" is used, as when Joseph was "cast" into a pit, it means the pit was deeper than 20 cubits, i.e. the bottom is not visible to the eye.

Joseph has been lost to sight, and "lost" to himself. He had disappeared into "ayin" or nothingness.

The Hebrew word for lost - *abad* - means both to perish and to be lost. A "lost" sheep is as good as dead (**Ezekiel 34:4,16** and **Psalms 119:176**). On the other hand the word includes the possibility of hope and return.

Further, the very idea of hope always depends on a previous loss.

The rabbis played with the similarity of the words "*shevar*," or brokenness, and "*sever*," hope.

In the blessing of Abraham God said "There was *shever* [brokenness] - "They shall enslave and afflict them" (Genesis 15:13); "There was *sever* [hope]" - "in the end they shall go free with great wealth." (Genesis 15:14)

So "There was *shevar* [brokenness]" - "Joseph was taken down to Egypt" (Genesis 39:1); "There was *sever* [hope] - "Joseph became ruler" (Genesis 42:6) — Genesis Rabbah 91:1

Thus Joseph when he returned to Canaan to bury his father, stopped at the pit where his brothers had betrayed him. "He went and looked into that pit." - (Genesis Rabbah 100:8)

"His brothers saw that Joseph went to make a blessing over that pit where they had thrown him. He made a blessing over it, as one should do over any place where a miracle happened to one: 'Blessed be God who did a miracle for me in this place.'" - (Tanhuma, Va-Yehi, 17)

(See "The Beginning of Desire," pages 312-313)

Like Joseph, we will have peace only when we can say a blessing over the people and circumstances that God uses to break us open, allowing us to experience hope.

For about 100 comparisons between Joseph and Jesus see here: "A Comparison between Joseph and Jesus" - Jews for Jesus - <http://buff.ly/2tyOeDV>