

Dvar Torah Joseph and Potifar's wife - Stephen Sandler

Shabat Shalom

Before I start my Dvar Torah today, it is going to be useful to explain a little bit about cantillation or chanting or laying from the torah scroll. If you look at your books you can see words have punctuation marks and sentences which guide us in the way that we interpret and translate the contents of the scrolls.

We also know that in the beginning the Torah was an oral tradition. It was not written at a single time but was compiled and edited over centuries, with its final form likely completed during the Persian period (539-333 BCE). While tradition holds that Moses wrote the Torah, modern scholarship suggests it emerged from earlier written and oral traditions, with the core material being collected and redacted by the 5th century BCE. The oldest known copies, like the Ketef Hinnom silver scrolls, date to the late 7th or early 6th century BCE.

This is the torah scrolls as they were written, but what of the way that we sing or chant the scrolls? Where did that tradition come from?

The Masoretes were groups of medieval scribes and scholars (6th -10th centuries BCE who meticulously standardised the Hebrew Bible text, adding vowel points (nikkud) and stress/chanting marks (cantillation or Tropes) to the consonant-only text to ensure accurate pronunciation and transmission, creating the authoritative "Masoretic Text" (MT) that forms the basis of nearly all modern Hebrew Bibles and Old Testament translations. Their work involved adding notes (Masorah) for textual accuracy and creating systems for grammar, preserving a vital tradition of scripture. My reason for starting my Dvar Torah in this way today will soon become obvious.

This week's parsha contains the story of Joseph and the attempt to seduce him by Potifar's wife.

Let's begin with Joseph, who was he and where did he come from?
Joseph had a good and long lineage.

Joseph's father was Jacob, who was the grandson of Abraham and son of Isaac, inheriting the covenant promises.

Jacob had twelve sons by two wives (Leah and Rachel) and their handmaids (Bilhah and Zilpah).

Yet of all of his brawny, hairy and alpha male offspring, he chose the fair Joseph as the favourite son.

How do we know Joseph was so good looking?

The idea that Joseph was good looking originates directly from the biblical text of the Book of Genesis, specifically Genesis 39:6, which states he was "handsome in form and appearance".

The Hebrew phrase used is a specific description for being attractive both in physical build and facial appearance.

The Hebrew phrase "yefeh to'ar veyefeh mar'eh" (יפה תואר ויפה מראה) translates to "**beautiful of form and beautiful of appearance**".

The phrase is often used in a biblical or classical Hebrew context to describe someone who is physically well-proportioned and good-looking.

This same phrase is also notably used to describe his mother, Rachel, as beautiful in Genesis 29:17.

We may therefore conclude that Joseph looked like his mother. All of this takes more importance when we look to see what happens next.

According to (**Midrash Genesis Rabba 84:7**).

The gift of the multi-coloured garment serves to enhance and even feminize his son's fine features, ones that Joseph highlighted further by curling his hair and painting his eyebrows, So, did Jacob love this son the most because he looked like his wife? The fact that Joseph was the favourite caused jealousy and some sources even say hatred, of Joseph by his brothers. He was a dreamer and his dreams Seemed to put him above his older brothers.

(You may recall his dream whereby his brothers' sheaves bowed down to Joseph's sheaf maybe suggesting that Joseph was somewhat superior to his brothers in his dreams?) This fuelled resentment, and the fact that Jacob gave Joseph a coat of many colours proved too much for Joseph's brothers and they got rid of Joseph by selling him to a caravan of Ishmaelites and eventually into slavery in Egypt.

Whilst in Egypt Joseph eventually rises to prominence by being put to work in the house of Potifar.

Potifar was a high ranking official and a powerful figure in Pharos's government. He purchased Joseph as a slave, recognised Joseph's talent, and placed him in charge of his household.

Potifar's wife soon notices the good-looking youth with the coat of many colours and she attempts to seduce him on more than one occasion. Joseph refuses her advances but on the last occasion he runs off leaving behind his coat of many colours. Potifar's wife is scorned and is determined to get her revenge by accusing him of rape high she sees Potifar throw Joseph into prison as the consequence.

This is the story so far.

If we read the portion this week and in particular if we hear it layned or chanted, we will hear that there is one note or trope that stands out as being very different from the others. It is the trope shalshellet.

The word "shalshellet" means "chain," and the musical notation is long and elaborate, emphasizing the emotional weight of the word it accents.

This trope is so special that it is only used four times in the whole Torah. It is used to highlight a moment of intense inner struggle, hesitation, or ambivalence by a key character. The four specific instances where the shalshellet appears in the Torah are:

Genesis 19:16, on the phrase Vayitmah'mah (וַיִּתְמַהְמַה) ("**and he delayed/lingered**"): This occurs when Lot hesitates to leave the city of Sodom despite the angels' warning of its imminent destruction, highlighting his uncertainty and reluctance to abandon his wealth and home.

Genesis 24:12, on the word VaYomer ("and he said"): This is in the passage where Abraham's servant, Eliezer, prays for divine guidance in finding a wife for Isaac. The shalshellet emphasizes his internal conflict, as he may have hoped his own daughter could marry Isaac.

Genesis 39:8, on the word VaY'maen (וַיִּמְאֵן) ("**and he refused**"):
This marks Joseph's refusal of Potiphar's wife's attempts to seduce him. The note underscores the intense moral struggle and temptation he faced in resisting her advances.

Leviticus 8:23, on the word VaYishchat ("and he slaughtered"): This is in the narrative of the anointment of Aaron and his sons as priests. The shalshellet on Moses' action is interpreted by commentators as reflecting his sadness or reluctance at having to give up the priestly role he had held, which was now being permanently transferred to his brother Aaron.

In each case, the shalshellet appears on the very first word of the verse, signalling a moment of significant personal crisis and a profound "existential truth" that defines the character's choice and identity.

Each and every day, Potiphar's wife would attempt to seduce him.

The Talmud (Yoma 36a) describes the techniques the woman used in order to persuade Joseph. "Each and every day," the Talmud says, "the wife of Potiphar would attempt to seduce him with words. Clothing she wore for him in the morning she would not wear for him in the evening. Clothing she wore for him in the evening she would not wear for him in the morning. She said to him, 'Surrender yourself to me.' He answered her 'No.' She threatened him, 'I shall confine you in prison...I shall subdue your proud stature...I will blind your eyes,'" but Joseph refused her. She then gave him a huge sum of money, but he did not budge.

Joseph's rejection required tremendous fortitude. The Talmud (Sota 36b) gives a graphic description of his inner torment:

"The image of his father appeared to him in the window and said, 'Joseph, your brothers' names are destined to be inscribed on the stones of the [high priest's] apron, and you will be among them. Do you want your name to be erased? Do you want to be called an adulterer?'"

A Thundering No

How, then, did Joseph overcome this enormous temptation?

The answer is captured in the three biblical words and in their "shalsholet" musical note: "But he refused."

Aware of the profound danger that he might fall prey to immoral behaviour, the first thing Joseph did was present the woman with a thundering "no."

As the thrice repetitive "shalsholet" note suggests, Joseph, in unwavering determination, declared three times: "No! No! No!" Forget about it, I will not do this! No ifs, buts, or maybes. Only afterward did Joseph allow himself the indulgence of the rational argument against adultery.

The story of Potiphar's wife and Joseph illustrates themes of **integrity, resisting temptation, and the potential consequences of upholding moral principles**. We can understand it as a lesson in the importance of fleeing temptation, maintaining loyalty and integrity in a difficult situation, and the potential for being falsely accused despite doing what is right. Joseph's story shows how to remain faithful and virtuous, even when it leads to unjust punishment, and that God can ultimately bring good out of bad situations.

There are key lessons to be found in this story.

- 1. Resisting temptation:** Joseph's refusal to "lie with" Potiphar's wife demonstrates a strong moral compass rooted in his relationship with God. He can say "no" because he has clear convictions about what is right and wrong.

- 2. Fleeing from temptation:** Joseph not only refused the advances but also wisely avoided being alone with her whenever possible. This teaches that a proactive strategy of avoiding compromising situations is important.
- 3. Integrity in a dishonest world:** The story contrasts Joseph's integrity with Potiphar's wife's desires and impulsiveness, showing that living with integrity is a difficult but worthwhile path that honours God.
- 4. Loyalty and faithfulness:** Joseph's refusal is based on his loyalty to his master and his understanding that sleeping with his wife would be a wicked act and a sin against God.
- 5. False accusation and unjust consequences:** Despite Joseph's righteousness, he is falsely accused and punished severely, which is a realistic recognition that standing up to sexual harassment can have devastating consequences.
- 6. God's presence in hardship:** The story is also a reminder that God was with Joseph through this ordeal, and while the situation was unjust, good can eventually prevail. It serves as a model for enduring unfair treatment by trusting God to make things right in the end.

So there we have it. A story, an example forms Chazanut or cantellation which gives us an emphasis. Finally the moral lessons and values can be drawn from the narrative leading us to a more moral and ethical way of living day to day.

Thank you