

Joseph and Potiphar's wife – *Etz Hayim*, pp. 239-241

Joseph's mistress – i.e., the woman he works for – attempts to become his mistress in another sense by seducing him. He manages to resist. How? What was he thinking? She was probably quite attractive – likely a “trophy wife” of a powerful official – and, the text makes clear, quite persistent. Joseph's conduct stands in contrast not only to his brother Judah (see earlier in today's reading) and other Biblical figures like Samson and King David, who got in trouble lusting after beautiful women, but also to the conduct of many men in all ages.

Here are the words of some ancient commentaries.

*Jubilees* 39:8-9, cited by the modern scholar James L. Kugel<sup>1</sup>:

And she pleaded with him for one year and [then] a second one, but he refused to listen to her. She embraced him and held on to him in the house in order to compel him to lie with her, and closed the doors of the house and held on to him; but he left his garment in her hands and broke the door and ran away from her to the outside.

*Testament of Joseph* 3:1-3; 9:1-2, 5, cited by Kugel:

[Joseph recalled:] How often did the Egyptian woman threaten me with death! How often did she give me over to punishment, and then call me back and threaten me, and when I was unwilling to lie with her, she said to me: You will be my master, and [master] of everything in my house, if you will give yourself to me.

[Even after I was imprisoned,] she often sent to me saying: Consent to fulfill my desire and I will release you from the bonds and deliver you from the darkness. But not even in thought did I ever incline to her ... When I was in her house, she used to bare her arms and breasts and legs, that I might go with her, and she was very beautiful, splendidly adorned to beguile me. But the Lord guarded me from her attempts.

The latter reading seems to exaggerate Joseph's virtue. It's one thing to behave correctly despite temptation; but the last sentence, “But the Lord guarded me from her attempts,” could be interpreted as a denial of feeling tempted. Another that seems to exaggerate Joseph's virtue:

*Genesis Rabbah* 87:5:

He told her: “It is the practice of the Holy One, blessed be He, to choose the beloved of my father's house for a burnt offering, as He bade Abraham, ‘Take now thy son, etc.’ Shall I then hearken to you? Perhaps I have been chosen for a burnt offering, and I will become unfit [through this sin].”

Other commentators in *Genesis Rabbah* picture Joseph expressing fears such as:

- God might reveal Himself to Joseph when Joseph would be unclean from this sin.
- His punishment would be much greater than the banishment of Adam and Eve from Eden, as Joseph's would be the greater sin.
- Jacob would regard Joseph like Reuben, who was also guilty of immorality.

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<sup>1</sup> James L. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible*, Free Press, New York, 2007

- Potiphar. She responded to his identification of his fear by saying she would kill her husband, and Joseph replied that would make him party to murder as well as adultery.
- God. She responded “But he is not here.” Joseph quoted from Psalm 48:2 (never mind that it hadn’t been written yet – such details don’t trouble Midrash) “Great is the Lord and highly to be praised,” to say God is everywhere.

Not all of the rabbis of the Talmud felt Joseph was quite so innocent.

Babylonian Talmud, *Sotah*, 36b:

R. Hana b. Bizna said in the name of R. Simeon the Pious: ... Joseph sanctified the heavenly Name in private .... As it is written, *And it came to pass about this time, that he went into the house to do his work.*<sup>2</sup> R. Johanan said: This teaches that both [Joseph and Potiphar’s wife] had the intention of acting immorally.... Rab and Samuel [differ] One said that it really means to do his work; but the other said that he went to satisfy his desires. ‘*And there was none of the men of the house etc.*’ – is it possible that there was no man in a huge house like that of this wicked [Potiphar]! – It was taught in the School of R. Ishmael: That day was their feast day, and they had all gone to their idolatrous temple: but she had pretended to be ill because she thought, I shall not have an opportunity like today for Joseph to associate with me. *And she caught him by his garment, saying etc.*<sup>3</sup> At that moment his father’s image came and appeared to him through the window ....

According to this reading, Kugel (*op. cit.*) suggests that Joseph should have known that the men of the household would be away celebrating their holiday, and since Potiphar’s wife was at home, he should have anticipated that she might try again to seduce him. The Torah’s expression, that he “went into the house to do his work,” might be a euphemism suggesting that Joseph was agreeable to a tryst and only changed his mind at the last minute.

Is it better to be beyond temptation? Perhaps life is easier for such an individual, but most of us aren’t wired that way. Most of us can relate better to Joseph as one who is tempted, and in this interpretation, he sets a better example for us. We’re not mere animals; we have consciences that make it possible for us to resist the temptations of actions that appeal to us but that we know are wrong.

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<sup>2</sup> Gen. 39:11

<sup>3</sup> Ibid 12