

Shabbat Vayeshev Sha'lom



Joseph and his Brothers by Ottavio Vannini

by Phyllis Chesler

Whenever Yosef appears, I think of Israeli poet Nurit Zarchi's rather shocking poem about him titled [*She is Joseph.*](#)

"Rachel sits in the tent/and gathers each curl closer/to hide them under the silken cap/of her little daughter Joseph...her shame is gone. For his father/Rachel brought forth a son/and she is her mother's daughter."

And while our Yosef is definitely a boy—there is also something feminine, dreamy, about him. In fact, as Shera Aranoff Tuchman and Sandra E. Rappoport, in [*The Passions of the Matriarchs*](#), remind me, according to Midrash Tanchuma, Yosef was supposed to be a girl, but in response to Leah's merciful prayers, God switched the sex of the babies in their wombs so that Rachel would bear at least two tribal sons. Leah

gives birth to Dina—whose own daughter, Osnat, will, based on Midrash, play a wondrous role in the Yosef story. She'll marry him, give birth to Efraim and Menasheh—and this union will reunite Dina with our tribal destinies.

In this parsha, we meet Yosef at seventeen; he is perhaps as beautiful as his mother Rachel and twice as chutzpadik. He is his father's favorite son. "And Yisrael loved Yosef more than any of his sons: *"v'Yisrael ohav et Yosef mecol banav* (37:2). As night follows day, Yosef is, therefore, hated by his older half-brothers. Yosef is a tale-bearer; he brings "bad reports" about Leah's sons, to their father. What's more, he boasts about his dreams, which signify a great and glorious future for himself, one involving his brothers' subordination to him.

They've had enough. Into the pit he goes and off with him to Egypt. When the brothers return Yosef's falsely bloodied coat to Ya'akov, they say *"Ha-ker-nah, (look at this, please identify it), is it your son's coat or not?"* (37:32) They do not say: *"Is this our brother's coat?"* A heartless phrase but one easily uttered by the kind of men who sat down to eat right after they threw Yosef into a pit. (37:25).

This phrase: *"haker-na,"* please identify this, appears again almost immediately afterward, in the story of Tamar and Yehudah (38:25). Tamar, Yehudah's twice-widowed daughter-in-law is pregnant but has no husband. Yehudah sentences her to death—until she shows him his very own staff, wrap, and seal and asks him to *"haker-na,"* identify them. *"Tzdkah memeni,"* (38:26) he says, *"she is more righteous than I am, the child is mine."*

Tamar did not have sex with Yehudah for the sake of pleasure or money. In pretending to be a harlot and having relations with her father-in-law, she sought to resurrect the names of her two dead husbands—Yehuda's sons Er and Onan. And she does just that. One of Tamar's twins, Perez, is an ancestor of Boaz, who will marry Ruth-the-convert (herself the descendant

of another act of female initiated sex—Lot's daughter); together, Ruth and Boaz will engender Obed, the grandfather of King David, one of whose descendants will lead, someday, to the Messiah.

But what is this story doing here? Is it to distinguish between female-initiated sex that obeys Jewish patriarchal law and is therefore considered "sacred," (Tamar) and female-initiated sex among pagan Egyptians which is seen as selfish, dangerous, and destructive (Mrs. Potiphar)?

Tamar's story may be contrasted with that of Potiphar's wife (why doesn't she have a name?—I'll call her Nubia), whose licentiousness is not about having a child to restore a dead husband's name in a levirate union. It is for her pleasure alone, and it is an expression of her power over her servant/slave Yosef. Once Yosef flees, naked, away from her, Nubia has to save herself. She has to accuse him before onlookers can accuse her. But this is the Torah. Thus, even Nubia's lust, arrogance, and lies are also part of the Divine Plan that leads to Yosef's imprisonment, his rise as second only to Pharaoh, and to the power he has and uses to save his brothers, father, and family from famine in the Holy Land.

Whenever Yosef appears, I also remember Dr. Shulamit Magnus's leyning for us at the Kotel: In the crisp, morning air, I can still hear her chanting: "Ha'Halom Hazei Asher Halamti" (37:6) and "Halamti Halom" (37:9).

Have the most wonderful Shabbos.