

SUBTLETIES IN THE STORY OF JOSEPH AND POTIPHAR'S WIFE

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Joseph's dramatic encounter with Potiphar's wife is related in Genesis 39:7-23. Just a few verses portray the daily attempts by Potiphar's wife to seduce the handsome and charismatic Joseph, as well as Joseph's struggle with his conscience, his imprisonment, and his rise to greatness.

The brilliant insights of our Sages allow us to obtain a more complete picture of the narrative by emphasizing the subtle cues in the text that indicate hidden struggles and intentions.

And it came to pass after these things, that his master's wife cast her eyes upon Joseph and she said, 'Lie with me.' But he refused [va-yema'en] and said unto his master's wife: ' . . . How can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?' And it came to pass, as she spoke to Joseph day after day, that he hearkened not unto her, to lie by her or to be with her. And it came to pass on a certain day, when he went into the house to do his work, and there was none of the men of the house there within, that she caught him by his garment, saying: 'Lie with me.' And he left his garment in her hand and fled outside (Gen. 39:7-12).

In the Jewish tradition, Joseph is a *tzaddik*, a righteous man. According to some of the Sages, that title was gained precisely as a result of resisting temptation. However, the text hints that this was no easy challenge for Joseph, and came only after a valiant struggle. Signs of an internal struggle are evident in the language Joseph uses when he refuses the advances of Potiphar's wife. Rather than a simple refusal, Joseph says over the course of two verses, 'Look, with me here, my master concerns himself about nothing in the house, and whatever he has placed in my custody. There is no one greater in this house than I, and he has denied me nothing but you, since you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?' (Gen. 39:8-9). This seems like a case of Joseph protesting too much, saying out loud the reasons he must not succumb to the advances of Potiphar's wife in order to convince himself. The Sages noted that Joseph was slowly being

worn down by Potiphar's wife, connecting the phrase *she spoke to Joseph day after day* (Gen. 39:10) with Esther 3:4, where the servants of the king inform Haman that Mordecai refuses to bow down to him, even though the latter was ordered to do so *day after day*.¹ Both are examples of a person no longer able to control his emotions, having his self-control eroded by daily provocation.

Joseph's struggle is hinted at in the very phrase the Bible uses to indicate that Joseph overcame his desires, *but he refused*. This Hebrew word (*va-yema'en*) is adorned with the elongated musical trope of *shalsholet* which appears only four times in the Torah, always carrying with it a sense of hesitation.² It appears three times in Genesis: Firstly, when Lot, warned by the Lord's messenger to flee Sodom, *lingered* [*va-yitmahmah*] (Gen. 19:16). The Midrash interprets this to mean that Lot found it difficult to leave behind the wealth he amassed in Sodom (*Genesis Rabbah* 50:11). Secondly, when the servant charged by Abraham with the grave responsibility of choosing a bride for his son, Isaac, appeals to the Lord to approve his choice on the basis of her kindness, first using the word *and he said* [*va-yomar*] (Gen. 24:12). Here, too, the Sages remark that the servant Eliezer wanted his own daughter to marry Isaac (*Gen. Rabbah* 59:9) and had difficulty overcoming his wish and seeking another bride for Isaac. Finally, in the Joseph story, *but he refused* is now qualified by an urge (temptation), accompanied by a struggle to overcome desire.

What was so special about that *certain day* when Joseph came *to do his work*? It is almost inconceivable that no servants of the wealthy and powerful Potiphar, Pharaoh's captain of the guard, were in the house. Indeed, the Talmud (TB *Sotah* 36b) interprets *to do his work* as an indication that Joseph was finally succumbing to the blandishments of Potiphar's wife, who had arranged to be alone in a house empty of servants. This interpretation emphasizes the challenge that Joseph faced, and hints at his own internal struggle. According to TB *Sotah* 36b, Joseph saw an image of his father Jacob and then *fled outside*; he needed a powerful reminder of his moral upbringing to strengthen his resolve not succumb to temptation.

It is not clear whether the garment she caught hold of had already been shed by Joseph. Shadal (S. D. Luzzatto), relying on the Bible's specific note that Joseph *went into the house*, explains that the garment she removed was a loose-fitting cloak worn outdoors. However, the true significance of "gar-

ment" is the fact that *begged*, the Hebrew term used here and repeated six times in this brief episode, recalls the root *b-g-d*, denoting treachery and marital infidelity, thus subtly reinforcing the theme of this story. Use of the term *begged* is particularly significant in light of Shadal's interpretation,³ since one would expect the word *me'il* to be used, denoting an outer garment.

With all the fury of a woman scorned, Potiphar's wife goes about defaming Joseph and accusing him of molesting her. As shown by Neḥama Leibowitz, she does so with exquisite subtlety. Potiphar's wife tells the members of the household: *See, he has brought in a Hebrew unto us to mock us; he came to me to lie with me, and I cried with a loud voice* (Gen. 39:14). The phrase *he has brought* indicates the subconscious contempt she has for her husband. By stressing *us* (and not referring to Joseph as a slave), she appeals to the solidarity of her Egyptian servants and infuriates them against the Hebrew outsider who molested her.⁴ To her husband she says, *The Hebrew servant whom you brought into our house came in to me to mock me* (Gen. 39:17). To Potiphar and his wife, Joseph is a lowly Hebrew slave, emphasizing the outrage of this brazen act.

Now Potiphar, whose *wrath was kindled* (Gen. 39:19), could easily have ordered Joseph's execution. Yet he doesn't fully trust his wife (see Ibn Ezra and Ramban), a point that may be hinted at in the narrative, which does not explicitly identify the object of Potiphar's anger.⁵

It is interesting to note that in *The Tale of Two Brothers*, an ancient Egyptian story which scholars often compare to this part of the Joseph narrative, none of these subtleties are found in the words of the accusing wife. There, Bata works for his older brother Anubis. One day, Bata is propositioned by his brother's wife, but he refuses her advances. To avoid getting into trouble, she tells Anubis that Bata propositioned her and so Anubis should kill him. The story ends with the brothers reconciling and the husband killing his unfaithful wife.⁶ The Egyptian story is plain and straightforward, with none of the nuances found in the narration or dialogue of Genesis 39.

As a mark of his esteem for Joseph (see Abrabanel), Potiphar merely places him in a *sohar*, a prison for high-ranking offenders. There he finds favor with the prison's commander and winds up as the person in charge. With poetic justice, it is precisely this sorry incident with Potiphar's wife that leads to Joseph's greatness.

NOTES

1. *Genesis Rabbah* 87:6.
2. Leonora Samuel, "Accentuation: A tool for interpretation of the Hebrew Bible," *JBQ* 33:3 (2005) pp.174-183.
3. Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary – Genesis* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989) p. 274.
4. Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Bereshit (Genesis) in the Context of Ancient and Modern Jewish Bible Commentary* (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, Department for Torah Education and Culture, 1972; fourth revised edition, 1981) pp. 417-419.
5. Sarna, p. 275.
6. Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997) pp. 61-64.



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