

VAYESHEV (3rd Part)

Bereshit (Genesis) 39:1 - 40:23

Eitz Hayim 238-245; Plaut 257-260; Hertz 147-151

Chapter 39 of Bereshit, which continues Joseph's life story, begins the third part of Parashat Vayeshev in the triennial cycle,. When last we heard of Joseph, he was taken from the pit and sold to passing Ishmaelites. In Chapter 39, the Ishmaelites take Joseph to Egypt where he is sold as a slave to Potiphar, the chief steward in Pharaoh's house-hold. There too Joseph's organizational abilities come to be known, and eventually he rises to head Potiphar's household. All this takes just one paragraph of text. The next *three* paragraphs are devoted to the futile efforts of Potiphar's wife to seduce Joseph and her claim that he tried to rape her. This is one of the most lascivious portions of our Torah, and, remarkably, it comes just after the story of Tamar and Judah, another lascivious portion. Fortunately, because we at Adath Shalom follow the triennial cycle, we are saved from having to study two such sex-fraught stories on the same week!

It will come as no surprise to learn that the attempted seduction of Joseph has inspired no end of commentary, which ranges in tone from the suggestion that the story is a male sex fantasy to the suggestion that Potiphar's wife recognized Joseph's link to the divine and was trying to get closer to God by coupling with him. In between are many more and less literal attempts to make sense of what appears in the text. The story has also inspired dozens of pieces of art, some more and some less modest in their garments, and some showing an anguished and others just a frightened Joseph.

We all know what happens with Joseph. Despite repeated opportunities, he resisted what must have been at least a physical urge to commit adultery with his master's wife. There is a special musical note called a *shalsholet* that drags out the tone and implies delay – delay that can be interpreted as repeated requests by the woman or as Joseph's own indecision about what to do. Joseph finally says that, out of respect for his master Potiphar and for God – and possibly also for remembering that the penalty for adultery was death in both Hebrew and Egyptian culture -- he must refuse and the rest, as one says, is history.¹ But it is only the history of Joseph. What do we know of Potiphar and his wife? Very little! Therefore, the rest of my d'var will be mainly about them – and, given that almost everything we know is conjecture and legend, please don't take this d'var too seriously.

One thing is clear: Both Potiphar and his wife (she has no name in the Torah or in the parallel story in the Qu'ran; more on that in a moment) play only an operational role in the Joseph story. They are there to move the story along, and, having done so, they disappear, never to be heard of again in the Torah.²

Potiphar's wife does have a second life in mediaeval writing. She finally gets a name, perhaps for the first time, in *Sefer HaYashar* (Book of the Upright One), a 16th Century commentary on the Torah. There she has the Arabic name Zulaikha, which means "splendorous beauty" and seems all too appropriate given the story. She also appears

as Zulaikha in many Islamic tales and in a Persian poem called *Yusuf and Zulaikha*. Poor, nearly cuckolded Potiphar is pretty much ignored in the Middle Ages, but he is revived in the modern musical, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, where he is said to have made his money by investing in pyramids. A line in one song goes:

*Potiphar had very few cares
He was one of Egypt's millionaires*

Even so, over the years Zulaikha has attracted far more attention than her husband. Of course, most of the attention was hardly complimentary. In Jewish, Christian and Moslem writing, she is generally regarded as a harlot, perfidious to her husband and her slave, who was supposed to obey both of them. Many commentators have noted that, when hearing the charge of rape against Joseph, Potiphar became furious (פא רחוי). But it does not say at whom he became furious, and many suggest that it was at his wife, not at Joseph. Still, there was that accusation and Joseph's cloak was in her hand, so Potiphar had to do something to cover up what he suspected was the real situation.³ 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 Zuleikha 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 (תיב רהסה),⁴ which is why Pharaoh's servants were there as well.

I have found one explanation, and one very different interpretation, of Zulaikha's behaviour. The explanation, common in Jewish texts, goes back to verse 39:6 where it says that Potiphar gave Joseph responsibility for everything connected with his household except his food. This can be taken literally. As we know from other verses, Egyptians (*Ber* 43:32) were very careful with food and ate only with other Egyptians of equal rank. It can also be taken to mean that Potiphar was only concerned about food and quite neglected Zulaikha. Still a further take stems from the two references to Potifar (37:36; 39:1) where he is described as a *s'ris* (סירס הערפ), which is commonly translated as courtier but which more commonly means eunuch. Some people say that it was a time when the Hyskos 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 Potifar's household. Whatever the situation, Zulaikha appears to be bored and sexually frustrated. As one modern, female Islamic writer comments: "With her husband unable to fulfill her sexual rights, Zuleikha is, from an Islamic perspective, legitimately suffering, though of course the Koran makes clear that her sexual advances outside of marriage are prohibited."¹⁵

¹ Asma Uddin's essay, found in <http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Zuleikha?offset=1&max=1>

The different interpretation of the story comes from the Sufi mystics, according to Elif

Shafak, a French-Spanish-Turkish literary scholar. She writes:²

As wicked as Zulaikha might be in the eyes of the conservative Muslims, she was considered in a completely different way by the Sufis. For the Sufi mystic, Zulaikha simply represented someone purely and madly in love. Nothing more and nothing less.

Something of this sort is suggested by the text when it says in 39:6 that Joseph was well built and handsome (יהו הפי-ראת הפיו הארמ), a phrase almost identical to the description of his mother Rachel (29:17) but used nowhere else in the Torah. And it is backed up by a story³ that Zulaikha was mocked by other Egyptian ladies for being infatuated with a slave. Therefore, she invited her friends to her home, and gave them oranges along with sharp knives for peeling. Then Zulaikha had Joseph walk through the room. Distracted by his appearance, all the ladies cut themselves, whereupon Zuleika scolded them by pointing out that she had to see Joseph every day. Now this sounds like another male fantasy, but some Persian Sufis saw more in the story. Zuleika's obsession with Joseph is seen as a symptom and manifestation of the soul's deep longing for God, which they insist is equally true of one person's love for another.

Early post-Biblical Jewish writing continues the characterization of Zuleikha as an evil temptress (for example Ber. R. 87:7). However, later in the first millennium, the view begins to change. Midrash Tanchuma⁴, a 6th century homiletic work, is said to be:

. . . more even-handed in its description of the main protagonists. Both Joseph and Potiphar's wife are more complex and nuanced characters. Potiphar's wife attempts to exonerate herself by demonstrating the irresistible nature of Joseph's beauty . . . [and] Joseph is said to bear responsibility . . . because of telling tales about his brothers.

To my knowledge, little more is said by Jewish writers about Zuleikha. Perhaps, we should give the last word to Elif Shafak who is the author of an essay entitled "Women Writers, Islam, and the Ghost of Zulaikha:"⁵

² <http://wordswithoutborders.org/article/women-writers-islam-and-the-ghost-of-zulaikha#ixzz26OGihE2d>

³ Asma Uddin, *op cit.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ <http://wordswithoutborders.org/article/women-writers-islam-and-the-ghost-of-zulaikha#ixzz26OGihE2d>

In the history of Islam, perhaps no woman has been as widely (mis)interpreted as Zulaikha, the beautiful and perfidious wife of Potiphar in the story of Joseph.

But Shafak's explanation does not satisfy me. Yes, Zulaikha was lonely and frustrated, but, with the death penalty as a possible outcome, it is hard to excuse her accusation that Joseph tried to rape her. It is even harder to excuse her use of Joseph's Hebrew origin as a racial insult. To my knowledge, this is the first time that explicit anti-Semitism appears in the Hebrew Bible, and we Jews know what a terrible toll racism can take.

Shabbat shalom,

ENDNOTES – For further thought or some future d'var

-
1. Joseph's response to Potiphar's wife is interesting in that he gives three reasons: first, Potiphar has been very good to him, and he cannot betray his trust; second, that going to bed with another man's wife is a violation of the property laws of the time; and, third, that it would be a sin against God. Now one might have thought that Joseph might have stated these three reasons in the reverse order, but I have not found any commentary on this subject.
 2. An alternative readings concludes that Potiphar is the same person as Potiphera, who was father of Asanath, whom Joseph later married. However, few people accept that the two are the same. Among other things, Potiphar is described as Chief Steward whereas Potiphera is described as Priest of On. It would be hard to combine those two jobs.
 3. Plaut comments dryly that this is the second time that his perhaps too-ostentatious garment has gotten Joseph in trouble. One wonders if had learned anything at this stage in his career.
 4. This is the only time this word appears in the Torah.
 5. Perhaps, as *Eitz Hayim* suggests, she recognized that other servants were jealous of Joseph's rapid rise to power and that they would therefore immediately corroborate her claim.