

Parshat Vayeshev Five Tales of a Disrobing Miriam Lorie

“Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned” wrote the English playwright William Congreve. While we may rightly roll our eyes at the stereotype, it fits rather well with one woman in this week’s parasha - eishet Potiphar, the wife of Potiphar. We are told her story in colourful detail (technicolour, if you will). What is the function of her vivid tale?

Most commentaries - classic and contemporary - view eishet Potiphar as a device to show Yosef’s journey and new maturity. A long way has he travelled from the boy who bragged of his narcissistic dreams. According to Midrash Tanchuma, in his elevated station in Potiphar’s house, Yosef “began to eat and drink and curl his hair” - clearly still somewhat self-obsessed. So, the Midrash continues, The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him, “Your father is mourning and you curl your hair! I will let a bear loose against you” (Midrash Tanchuma, Vayeshev 8). Eishet Potiphar is that bear - she is the consummate siren with her daily seductions. And yet Yosef passes the test. He resists. The leining trop treats us to one of the four “shalshet” notes in the entire Torah on the word **וַיִּסָּרֵף** (“and he refused”) to illustrate the wavering that Yosef experienced, or maybe the core-shaking experience.

So Yosef succeeds in the challenge. And not only does he resist betraying Potiphar’s trust, but he also attributes his stance to God - the first time we’ve heard Yosef refer to God: “How then could I do this most wicked thing, and sin before God?” Sotah 36b tells us that in his moment of temptation, Yosef saw his father’s face and was jolted to remember who he was and the requirements of his faith. There is something stirring in this story of a lonely young man far from home, encountering what can only be understood as sexual harassment from a superior. Given the emotional context, Yosef’s response is doubly impressive. This story squarely sets Yosef up to be the steady, in-control protagonist of the coming chapters.

However, if “wow, look how he’s changed” was the only lesson the Torah hoped we’d learn, the story would have ended there, perhaps with the addition of Yosef being thrown straight into jail to explain how he ends up in his next station. Instead, we’re treated to a detailed script of “what happened next”.

Judy Klitsner, following the tradition of Nechama Leibowitz, encourages her students (I am lucky enough to count myself as one) to read the lines that follow, with the question “how many times is this story told?”

But he left his garment in her hand and got away and fled outside. When she saw that he had left it in her hand and had fled outside, she called out to her servants and said to them, “Look, he had to bring us a Hebrew to dally with us! This one came to lie with me; but I screamed loud. And when he heard me screaming at the top of my voice, he left his garment with me and got away and fled outside.”
She kept his garment beside her, until his master came home. Then she told him the same

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story, saying, *“The Hebrew slave whom you brought into our house came to me to dally with me; but when I screamed at the top of my voice, he left his garment with me and fled outside.”*

When his master heard the story that his wife told him, namely, “Thus and so your slave did to me,” he was furious.

Bereishit 39:12-19

In seven short verses, the story is told no less than five times:

- 1 - the Torah's account
- 2 - Eishet Potiphar's rapid assessment of the situation, and the story she tells herself
- 3 - Eishet Potiphar to the people of her household
- 4- Eishet Potiphar to her husband
- 5 - the version Potiphar hears

Each of these is subtly different, and as Nechama Leibowitz says “the slightest variation in phraseology, and addition or omission, may contain a world of significance.”

In her rapid assessment of the crime scene, eishet Potiphar realises that there are two incriminating details - the garment is left *in her hand* and Yosef *fled outside*. Her panicked address to the servants of her house, subtly changes these details: “he left his garment with me” and he “got away and fled outside”. But more pernicious is her opener “Look, he had to bring us a Hebrew to dally with us!” “He”, we understand, is Potiphar, and his wife appeals to the special grudges that her servants may have against their master, bringing them on-side. The use of “a Hebrew” appeals to undertones of anti-Semitism that we see elsewhere in this story. And he was brought “to dally with us” creates a bloc of solidarity against the common enemy - the Hebrew - where naturally the servants may have sided with their fellow servant.

When Potiphar does get home, he is treated to a subtly different story. The words **הַעֶבֶד הַיְהוּדִי** - the Hebrew servant - are used, creating a double distance - of class and race - between Potiphar and Yosef. There is a jarring note of accusation in the words “whom you brought into our house”. The account of Yosef fleeing is simplified to amplify his guilt. And once again she references the story of her crying out to compound the portrait of victimhood.

By far my favourite telling of this story is the one we are told Potiphar *hears*. The root of DVR is repeated over and over in the pasuk:

וַיְהִי כִשְׁמַע אֲדֹנָיו אֶת־דִּבְרֵי אִשְׁתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר דִּבְרָה אֵלָיו לֵאמֹר כַּדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה עָשָׂה לִי עֶבְדְּךָ וַיַּחַר אַפּוֹ.
When his master heard the story that his wife told him, namely, “Thus and so your slave did to me,” he was furious.

Bereishit 39:19

He heard just words words words. The phrase **כַּדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה** could easily translate to “yada yada yada”. We get the impression that Potiphar does not believe the story for one moment. Potiphar, a eunuch according to Ibn Ezra, may well have experienced his wife's explorations beyond his bed in the past. Yes, we are told that Potiphar is furious... but could it be not Yosef, but his wife, who is the object of his ire? It would track that the prison he escorted

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Yosef to (presumably to save his wife's dignity) is a very gentrified prison for Pharaoh's own prisoners...

This is Yosef's second disrobing, and for me it is the more interesting one. We see a scheming attempt to win different groups round with different narratives, each re-aligning loyalties and enemies. Perhaps eishet Potiphar is not only a temptress to Yosef; perhaps we all sometimes experience the temptation to subtly change details, to show a different face to each crowd, to hide less flattering details and to align and exclude as suits our interests. Like Yosef, may we too have the strength to "refuse". May we pursue only honesty, straight-forwardness and integrity, however shalshet-like a struggle it proves to be.



Miriam Lorie studied at Midreshet Harova and the Pardes Centre for Jewish Educators, as well as co-founded a local Partnership Minyan in 2013 - the first such minyan to regularly meet in the UK. She has worked at Lead, developing Jewish leaders for the UK Jewish community, where she collaborated with the London School of Jewish Studies to develop an online Jewish literacy course for community leaders, which she continues to run. Miriam was named one of the Jewish Chronicle's "Sixteen under 30's to watch in 2016" and in the Jewish News' "40 under 40" in 2020. Miriam lives in Borehamwood UK with her husband and two small boys.