

## Sex, Joseph, and Potiphar's Wife

In this week's Torah portion, *Vayeshev*, Joseph is sold into slavery in Egypt. He is bought by a man named Potiphar, who puts him in charge of managing his household. He is very handsome, so Potiphar's wife tries to seduce him. We read:

After a time, his master's wife cast her eyes upon him and said, "Lie with me." But he refused. He said to his master's wife, "...All that [my master] owns he has placed in my hands...He has withheld nothing from me except yourself, since you are his wife. How then could I do this most wicked thing, and sin before God?" And even though she coaxed Joseph day after day, he did not yield to her request to lie beside her, to be with her. [Genesis 39:7-10]

In the end, enraged by his persistent refusal, she screams to alert everyone in the house, falsely accuses him of assaulting her, and has him thrown in jail.

Sex. The most potent force in the world, responsible for much happiness and good; and also much violence and evil. But we knew it all along. We didn't have to wait 4,000 years for Freud to tell us that. The Torah is full of stories that revolve around sex.

For example, Jacob's daughter Dinah is raped:

Now Dinah, the daughter whom Leah had borne to Jacob, went out to visit the daughters of the land. Shechem son of Hamor the Hivite, chief of the country, saw her, and took her and lay with her by force. [Genesis 34:1-2]

Her brothers Simeon and Levi are outraged, plot revenge, and through a stratagem end up killing all the men in the city. Their father Jacob is incensed that they did this and does not forgive them.

Another example: Tamar marries Judah's first son, but he dies. She then marries his second son, but he dies also. Judah is hesitant to give her his third and last son, so she disguises herself as a prostitute, seduces Judah and has twin boys by him, and thus becomes the ancestress of King David and the future Messiah. [Gen. 38]

More examples. It was almost a rule in those days that, when a man travelled alone with a beautiful wife, the local king would have the man killed and his wife brought to his harem. Abraham finds himself in that situation twice, once with Pharaoh and once with King Abimelech, [Gen. 12 and 20] and his son Isaac once with the same Abimelech [Gen. 26]. They save their lives by lying and saying that their wives are their sisters. The wives are still taken to the harems. But God protects Sarah by striking Pharaoh with diseases that do not allow sexual intercourse [Gen. R. 41:2]:

But the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his household with mighty plagues on account of Sarai, the wife of Abram. [Gen. 12:17]

As for Abimelech, God also intervenes by threatening him with death:

But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night and said to him, "You are to die because of the woman that you have taken, for she is a married woman." [Gen. 20:3]

Then there is the story of Abraham's nephew Lot, who lives in Sodom. He welcomes two traveling strangers in his house, not knowing they are angels. His neighbors demand he turn them over so they can rape them:

The townspeople, the men of Sodom, young and old—all the people to the last man—gathered about the house. And they shouted to Lot and said to him, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may be intimate with them." [Gen. 19:4-5]

Lot offers his two virgin daughters to the crowd instead, but to no avail:

They want the two men. So the two angels blind them and say to Lot:

We are about to destroy this place; because the outcry against them before the Lord has become so great that the Lord has sent us to destroy it." [Gen. 19:13]

So God has enough of this repulsive behavior and destroys the entire city of Sodom and its companion Gomorrah.

Later, when the Torah was revealed, it became clear that the regulation of sex was very high on God's agenda. It lay down very detailed rules on the matter. A lot of relationships, primarily with relatives, became forbidden. Sex was allowed primarily within the sanctity of marriage, and even then its timing was regulated. Judaism has always viewed sex as holy and very positive, but only within the bounds established by the Torah.

Way up in the Ten Commandments we read: "No adultery". Spouses must be faithful to each other. This is also one of the seven Noahide laws, applicable to all mankind. Furthermore, while a Jew is allowed to break all 613 commandments in order to save a life, this waiver excludes the

commandments against idolatry, murder and sexual immorality. This elevates sexual immorality extremely high among prohibitions; in that it is not permitted even to save a life. It is one of the big three no-nos of Judaism.

But, within marriage, sex is portrayed as the highest good. In the Bible, the erotic Song of Songs portrays God's loves for Israel as the love of a groom towards his bride.

When the Jews returned to Israel after the Babylonian captivity, they realized that they had to tackle two problems before moving forward: Idolatry and sexual licentiousness. Those two were largely responsible for their exile and the destruction of their Temple in the first place. The Talmud tells us what they did in a very colorful way. First, they "captured the demon" responsible for idolatry and killed it. After 1,000 years of regular and deep lapses into idolatry, the Jews stopped cold turkey and have been free from idolatry ever since. They were about to do the same with the "demon" responsible for sex, but didn't because sex is needed for procreation. Here is the story:

[The demon responsible for the] Evil Inclination [in sexual relationships] was handed over to them. [Zechariah the Prophet] said to them: Realize that if you kill him [also], the world will be destroyed. They imprisoned him for three days [to see what would happen], then looked in the whole land of Israel for a fresh egg and could not find it. [No sex, no reproduction.] [Yoma 69b]

The Midrash sums it up as follows:

Rabbi Hunia said in the name of Rabbi Dosa bar Tebeth: God created two evil inclinations in His world, the inclination to idolatry and the inclination to [sexual immorality]. The inclination to idolatry has already been uprooted [from the Jewish people]. The inclination to [sexual immorality], however, still exists. [Song of Songs Rabbah 7:14]

Yet, paradoxically, the Sages taught us that a small amount of "evil inclination" is good, because without it nothing worthwhile would ever be accomplished. The Midrash says [Genesis Rabbah 9:7]:

Naḥman said in Rav Shmuel's name: [When the Torah says of the world] "And, behold, it was very good!" [it] refers to the Evil Inclination. Can the Evil Inclination [then] be "very good"? That would be extraordinary!

Yes, [because] without the Evil Inclination, no man would build a house, take a wife, beget a family, and engage in work. So said [King] Solomon [in Ecclesiastes]:

And I saw that all labor and all achievement in work was the result of man's envy and rivalry with his neighbor. [Eccl. 4:4]

So we clearly need sex, but we must learn to take advantage of it in modesty and moderation. The great sage Nahmanides, from 13<sup>th</sup>-century Catalonia, hit the nail on the head when he said:

[The Torah says "Be holy!" What does it mean?] The Torah prohibits certain sexual behaviors, and prohibits certain foods and drinks. But it permits sex between husband and wife, and [permits] the consumption of kosher meat and [kosher] wine. This might allow a person to act in a lewd manner with his wife [even in public], gorge himself with meat, inebriate himself with wine, and use vulgar language as much as he desires. The Torah does not forbid any of these things, and he would be allowed to be a vile, disgusting person with the Torah's permission.

So, for Nahmanides, the injunction "Be holy!" in the Torah means "Restrain yourself even with what is permitted." A holy person is one who is not self-indulgent.

Now, what has been happening in our Western world? Since the sexual revolution exploded in the sixties, the ancient taboos have been falling away one after the other. Not just allowing prohibited relations, but also the ubiquitous display of sex in movies, television, novels, games, fashions, music, Web sites, advertising, public behavior, etc. It is all around us. What was once intensely private is now flaunted publicly, in-your-face. Publishers demand more sex from authors; movie makers must show more sex scenes, even gratuitously, because that sells well. Did we take a wrong turn? The plain reading of the Torah, even without the commentaries, answers with a resounding "Yes!"

Let us conclude by repeating and stressing Nahmanides' wise admonition: Holiness is restraint and modesty, even with what is permitted; and that includes, first and foremost, sex.

Shabbat shalom.