

Adult Bnai Mitzvah Group, Parashat Vayeshev, 5776, December 5, 2015



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Parashat Vayeshev, Genesis 37-40, is jam-packed with narratives about family fates, personal destiny, losing and gaining identity, dreams of greatness, and experiences of trauma. At the beginning of our parsha, Yoseph, the 11th son of Yaakov and first son of Rachel, is favored by his father and receives a coat of many colors. His brothers resent him, plot against him, and leave him injured in a pit. He is sold into slavery and taken to Egypt. Then comes the interlude with Tamar and Yehudah, which the last Adult Bnai Mitzvah group so ably interpreted.

We begin our Torah reading, today, with Genesis, chapter 39, verse 1. We studied these verses for months, looking deeply at each word, its shoresh, or root, and all its possible meanings. Today, we will read you our own word by word translation of this section. Then, we will alternate between chanting from the Torah and sharing some of the questions and interpretations that arose from our collective Torah study and personal reflections.

Group translation of Genesis 39:1- 40:23

-When Yosef was brought down to Egypt, Potiphar, a minister of Pharaoh, chief of the guardsman, an Egyptian man, purchased him from the hands of the Ishmaelites, who had brought him down there.

But Adonai was within Yosef and he was a successful man, while he was in the house of his Egyptian master.

And his master saw that Adonai was within Yosef, and everything that he did Adonai made successful in his hand.

Yosef found favor in Potiphar's eyes and he served him, and Potiphar put him in charge of his household. He placed in his hands all that he owned.

From the time that Potiphar put him in charge of his household and all that he owned, Adonai blessed the house of the Egyptian because of Yosef. Adonai's blessing was on all that Potiphar owned in his house and in his field. He left all that he had in Yosef's hand and with him there, he paid no attention to anything, except the food he ate. Yosef was beautiful in form, and beautiful to see.

- And it was after these things that his master's wife lifted her eyes toward Yosef and said, "*Lie with me.*"

But he refused, saying to his master's wife, "**Look with me here, my master gives no thought to anything in this house, and all that he owns he has placed in my hand**".

"There is no one greater in this house than I. Potiphar has withheld nothing from me except for you since you are his woman. How could I do this great evil and sin against Adonai?

And she spoke to Yosef day after day. But he did not listen to her- to lie with her, to be with her.

- And it was on that day that he came into the house to do his work; and none of the people of the house were there in the house. And she grabbed him by his garment, saying, "*Lie with me*".

But he fled, leaving the garment in her hand, and went outside.

And she saw that he left his garment in her hand, and he fled outside.

She called out to the people of the house and said to them, "*Look, he brought a Hebrew man to play around with us; he came to me to lie with me, and I called out in a loud voice. And when he heard me raise my voice, and I called out, he left his garment in my hand and fled and went outside.*"

And she kept his garment near her until his master came home to his house. She spoke to him things of this sort, saying, "*The Hebrew slave that you brought to us, came to me to play around with me. But when I raised my voice and called out, he left his garment with me and fled outside*".

When his master heard his wife's words that she said to him, saying, "*Your slave did things like this to me*", Potiphar's face blazed.

So Yosef's master took him and put him in the prison house where the King's prisoners were confined.

- While he remained there in the prison house, Adonai was within Yosef and extended kindness to him. Adonai gave favor to Yosef in the eyes of the chief jailer. The chief jailer put in Yosef's hand the care of all the prisoners that were in the prison house. All that they were to do there, he did.

The chief jailer had to see to nothing that was in his hand, because Adonai was within Yosef and Adonai made him successful.

Sometime later, the cupbearer and the baker of the King of Egypt sinned against their master, the King of Egypt. And Pharaoh burst out in rage at his officials, the chief cupbearer and the chief baker.

And he placed them into the custody of the house of the chief jailer, in the prison house, the place where Yosef was confined. The chief jailer assigned Yosef to them and served them. They were in custody for days.

The two of them dreamt a dream; each man his own dream in a single night; each man according to the interpretation of his dream; the cupbearer and baker of the King of Egypt who were confined in the prison house.

Yosef came to them in the morning and saw them. Behold, they were distraught!

And he asked Pharaoh's officials who were with him in the custody of his master, "**Why your bad faces today?**"

And they said to him, "We dreamed our dream and there is no one to interpret them"; and he said to them, "**Surely G-d can interpret. Please, tell them to me.**"

And the chief butler told his dream to Yosef, "In my dream, there is a vine in front of me. "On the vine there were three winding tendrils. And as It was budding, its' blossoms burst upwards and its' clusters ripened into grapes."

"Pharaoh's cup is in my hand; and I took the grapes and squeezed them into Pharaoh's cup, and I put the cup onto Pharaoh's palm."

Yosef said to him, "**This is its interpretation: The three tendrils are three days.**" "**In three more days, Pharaoh will lift up your head and return you onto your position; and again, you will put Pharaoh's cup into his hand as was the former custom when you were his cupbearer.**"

"But keep me in mind when it goes well with you. Please do me the kindness, and call me to mind to Pharaoh and you will have me brought out from this house."

"For I was stolen, yes stolen, from the land of the Hebrews, and here to I have done nothing that they should have put me in the pit."

And the chief baker saw that he had interpreted for good and he said to Yosef, "Also, I was in my dream and there were three bread baskets on my head". "In the uppermost basket was food made for Pharaoh, baked goods; and the bird ate them from the basket that was upon my head."

And Yosef answered and said, "**This is its interpretation: The three baskets are three days. In three more days, Pharaoh will raise your head from on you and hang you on a tree. The bird will eat your flesh off of you.**"

- And it was on the third day, Pharaoh's birthday, and he made a banquet for all his servants. And he raised up the head of the chief cupbearer and the chief baker from among his servants.

He returned the chief cupbearer to his cupbearing position, and he put the cup on Pharaoh's palm.

And the chief baker, he hung; just as Yosef had interpreted to them.

But the chief cupbearer did not remember Yosef and he forgot him.

DRASH Part 1 on Genesis 39: 1-10

As a woman, Mrs. Potifar lived successfully in a male-dominated culture largely due to her husband, whom we assume she had managed to attract using some skill-set; but also due to good fortune. Yoseph is in a similar position as a man who has also been successful, in part through personal traits and in part through luck. Yet no matter how competent, Yoseph remains a slave, and Mrs. P. remains a woman. Yoseph and Mrs. P. can be viewed as reflections of the same process. They are examples of the non-dominant “others” who live outside and beyond, yet *within* dominant cultures.

Sidnie White, a modern feminist biblical scholar writes, “Jews in the diaspora are in the position of the weak, as women are, and must adjust their political and economic power and learn to work within the system to gain what power they can”.

Some of us are like Yoseph: no longer living in our own homeland, but doing well in the dominant culture – that very culture and people who, in the past or even now, might have tried to decimate our people.. How do we remain committed to the worldview of our ancestors?

Following a spiritual path and using free will can aim us to do good and help elevate us above urges that can compromise and limit us. In Bob Dylan’s words:

Like Cain, I now behold this chain of events that I must break.

In the fury of the moment I can see the Master's hand

In every leaf that trembles, in every grain of sand

By saying no to Mrs. Potiphar “day after day”, Yoseph is doing what he believes Adonai would command if Adonai did appear before him. This is a moment of greatness for Yoseph, and it is why this particular story about saying “no” to appetite is important. In much the same way that the child proves his or her adulthood by internalizing the voice of the parent, Yoseph, by intuiting what Adonai wants of him, is in effect reading Adonai’s mind. Yoseph has taken a moral leap, and in doing so, is earning his place as our Patriarch.

Yoseph was a practitioner of Radical Acceptance, accepting life on life’s terms, saying yes to what comes, not trying to change it, not complaining about it and/or, in Yoseph’s case, not holding a grudge. All the while remaining true to himself, not trashing his values because he may have hit a barrier.

Or, Yoseph may just be one of the Faithful, trusting in HaShem, or the Life Force, to take care of him, to not give him more than he, Yoseph, can handle.

Which leads us to ask, which comes first? Radical Acceptance or Faith? Or are they inextricably intertwined, each feeding the other in progression. It seems that you can’t have one without the other.

I believe Yoseph to be motivated by altruistic ideals rather than personal ambition or opportunism not because the writers of Torah imbued him with a fundamental goodness; but because *I* need him to be good to make his story meaningful to me.

-How does someone adapt and survive under slavery? What is success under these conditions?

What could it mean – how might it feel - to have "the Lord **with** you?" Was Yoseph even aware of this abiding and assisting presence?

What personal strengths does it take to resist ongoing temptation?

How can we maintain integrity when faced with enormous challenges or potentially great rewards?

DRASH Part 2 (on verses 39:11-23)

I like to think that Yoseph felt most deeply himself at those times when he was favored, central, and indispensable, as he was with Potiphar, and again, later on, with Pharaoh. Being loved and needed in the midst of comfort and plenty is soothing like balm and intoxicating like wine. When I take the time to actually slow down and really feel the goodness of my life, I find myself filled with gratitude, including gratitude for our tradition, which commands that we do just this, and on a regular basis. But it can feel all too easy to lapse into laziness and complacency, to take for granted the good things in my life, or to hold on to them too tightly. This same complacency made Potiphar oblivious to what was going on right under his nose, and prevented him from acting before it was too late. When does intoxication become stupor? When and how do we cross the line? Perhaps it is when we start to believe we have actually earned the privileges and prosperity that really we just lucked into. Or when we forget where we came from and become addicted to pleasure or profit or power.

Potifar's wife's behavior was treacherous both to Yoseph and to her husband. It is interesting to note that she uses Yoseph's forcedly discarded garment as evidence. The Hebrew *shoresh*, or root, for the word garment (bet, gimel, dalet) is also the same *shoresh* as the Hebrew word connoting treachery or unfaithfulness. So the garment, in fact, serves as evidence of Mrs P's own guilt, rather than Yoseph's.

Yoseph is no longer the spoiled, little boy he once was, He still needs to grow. He still needs to mature. He still has challenges he needs to face. And this is just what happens. He is subjected to struggles - struggles that will help him grow. One struggle he now has to face is learning to deal with Power. Earlier in the story he deals with his brothers' brute force and now he has to deal with the sexual and slavery power of the advances of Potifar's wife. When he rejects her advances, he shows some strength of character and knowledge and belief in Adonai. Maybe Yoseph's leaving of a garment behind is like us leaving previous pieces of life behind. Sometimes we need to leave clothing - tangible evidence of our identity, relationships, and other parts of our life behind - in order to grow into ourselves.

We see Yoseph challenged when he is falsely accused of raping his master's wife, Mrs. P; and we witness him standing up for what he believes. Although at first he seemed to be very naive about Mrs. P's attraction to him, he responded with great integrity, calling upon the teachings of his father and Adonai. Now he is an exemplar of trustworthiness and trust. Which calls out this question: If you don't trust others, can you yourself be trustworthy?

Was Yoseph so connected to Adonai, that he was a *luft mensch* with his head in the clouds, not seeing reality around him? Did he need to be once more brought down to earth in order for him to deepen his understanding of others' feelings?

We read in verse 39:2 "But Adonai was within Yosef and he was a successful man, while he was in the house of his Egyptian master." and, in verse 23, "because Adonai was within Yosef and Adonai made him successful." How would things have been different without intervention from Adonai? What would the outcome have been? And, are you born a leader or can these traits be acquired?"

The portion reminds us that, when we least expect it, we might be confronted with facts that change everything, that call into question our most basic assumptions and our trust. And demand that we look deeply within, even to rewrite our own story. And at the same time, we may need to act decisively to restore propriety and order, so that healing can take place.

DRASH Part 3 (on verses 40:1-23)

Yoseph has been in jail for quite some time and he suddenly finds himself with two cell mates, as both the baker and the cup bearer have also fallen out of Pharaoh's favor. One night, both of his cell mates have troubling dreams. Yoseph pre-dates Freud, so we know he wasn't trained in Freudian dream interpretation. His ability to interpret dreams, according to Yoseph himself, comes straight from Adonai, herself. With those kind of credentials, why did the story need the middle men, Yoseph's prison mates, to prove his uncanny ability to correctly interpret dreams?

Where does the wisdom to interpret dreams come from?

Are dreams a kind of psychic reading of information about the world or ourselves that most of us do not have access to or do not try to understand?

Are dreams predictive or is the dreamer's dream a metaphor for his/her internal reality?

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin wrote, "The fact of the matter is that a person can dream when he's asleep and can dream when he's awake. But only the dreams that one dreams when he/she is awake can become transformed into the visions which change reality." Can a distressing dream sometimes reveal to you aspects of your situation that you are finding hard to look at head-on, in the light of day?

Was being asked to interpret dreams a test by Adonai of Yoseph's faith, or was it rather a proof of his connection to Adonai?

Life is full of small mysteries. There are times that we behave and we don't know why, but we want to understand. The meaning of dreams is often hard to grasp. We create them, we are moved by them, maybe frightened by them. What do they mean? Do they have import in our future or past? By sitting with our dreams, by re-experiencing them, we can begin to find some meaning. Are we frightened? Are we at peace? Are we anxious? We can begin to find threads of understanding. Can we do better than threads of understanding? Can we find a narrative and a prediction for the future? Possibly not. But comfort with dreams is a gift.

Yoseph saw the expressions on his fellow prisoners' faces the morning after their dreams, recognized their emotional distress, and asked them about it. He spoke of the injustice of his own imprisonments, saying, in verse 40, " I have also done nothing that they should have put me in the pit."

Thus we see that he understood concepts of justice and expressions of emotion. Yet when he told the baker the dire meaning of his dream we do not see him soften his tone or attempt to comfort the man. It looks like Yoseph was callous here for no apparent reason.

Knowing what to say or how to proceed in the aftermath of conveying distressing news is a particularly challenging skill for many of us. Speaking with pure objectivity does not seem an adequate approach.

Yoseph may have been a *tzaddick* in some sense, but he was no *mensch*.

As with much of the Torah and particularly in this parsha, the facts are laid out and the emotions are left out. How does the baker move forward knowing that his life will end soon?

Was Yoseph's offering to interpret the dreams of the cupbearer and the baker coming from a place of empathy, or from pragmatism? It seems Yoseph was leveraging his gift as a way to help him get out of prison, by asking the cup bearer to intercede and put in a good word for him with Pharaoh. Was Yoseph

being opportunistic or was he just taking advantage of an opportunity, grabbing on to a possible means of escape and an anchor of hope?

Why did Yoseph ask the cup bearer to intercede and put in a good word for him with Pharaoh? It's sort of a quick afterthought by Yoseph, thrown in when the cupbearer gets released. Of course the request goes unanswered. The unsaid part is: don't trust in other people to bail you out, Yoseph. Trust in the Almighty to do it. There are powers bigger than human memory and loyalty at work.

Some believe that fate is a predetermined state; others believe that the future is a series of circumstances that can be controlled through deliberate actions. I believe that I cannot control my life; things happen in spite of my best intentions and best laid plans. Sometimes the harder I try, the more elusive the prize. I think the best I can do is to be prepared with a deep sense of faith; one that I can call on in both moments of great joy and despair.

Yoseph had the gift of being able to interpret dreams. At least in the literal interpretation of this text, having a gift seems to mean one is favored by Adonai or has a special connection to Adonai versus not having a gift, or the lack of a gift, which seems to mean one is not favored by Adonai or does not have a special connection to Adonai. Having a gift often leads to feelings of security and even empowerment. On the other hand, not having a gift can give one a sense of shame and limitation.

Yet it is possible to take on those "*not gifts*" as challenges.

Sometimes we don't understand how our gifts can open doors we never expected in our lives, doors we often may not see opening even as they are opening before us. Potentially, as was the case with Yoseph, they can give one the opportunity to save one's own life!

How does that idea of a gift as meaning one is favored by Adonai "'sit" with us? What do you consider to be *your* gifts?

This process of preparing for our B'nai Mitzvah, together, has, for all of us, asked us to step forward in to areas where we have special gifts; and exposed for us areas where we are not gifted, our areas of challenge and vulnerability.

In the cupbearer's dream, the grape vines grow and flourish with tendrils, buds, and blossoms shooting up and transforming into ripening clusters. I have watched, day by day, the grapevine in my backyard as the vines grow longer and longer, and the tendrils reach out for something to grab onto. The vines and the tendrils are tenacious: when they can't find anything else to grab on to, they curl around themselves. Like the grape vines looking for a place to anchor themselves, all one's gifts can still leave you hanging out there. And, on the other hand, a lack of a gift is not an impossibility: with insightful teachers and mentors, a supportive community, and a certain amount of tenacity, the lack of a gift can be worked around and sometimes even overcome.

How, as a woman of great privilege, can I safeguard against becoming insensitive to the suffering of those who are peripheral, marginalized, and enslaved? These are questions that I wrestle with daily, and ones that this portion has challenged me to consider afresh. The answers I have arrived at are the same as ever: to stay conscious of the blessings I have been given, to feel and express my gratitude, and to give generously of my energy, resources, and love.

According to the Hebrew,

Yoseph *descends* into the "pit" three times in this parsha: the pit he was thrown into by his brothers, the pit of slavery to Potifar and then down to the prison of Potifar. Each time he is tested and each time, after being "humbled", Yoseph is redeemed and taken out by Adonai. I know that I create my own personal "pits of

despair" and must reach out, to redeem myself through my attention to Torah and through remembering what is expected of us by Adonai.

As a Jewess by choice, my identification with Judaism serves to connect me to a tradition that helps me make sense of all of my experience. Additionally, it offers narratives for rites of passage and eventual incorporation of the different parts of myself. As a Bat Mitzvah and Indian woman, I feel that my stepping up to the Torah is a movement toward integration of self.

Torah study is one path to finding truth. By reflecting on our successes and setbacks in life, reading and thinking about Torah narratives and other texts, we hope to free ourselves from our own personal prisons and rise up to be worthy of the trust of others and to be in positions of power where we, like Yoseph, can engage fully with our community and loved ones.

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Some Individual Drashot (that were incorporated into the final drash during the Bnai Mitzvah ceremony), shared by their writers

Genesis 39:1-3 Karen

In my parshat, Genesis 39:13, I was moved by the change and transition, Joseph endured in just three lines. One way to understand the Joseph story is as a rite of passage, no pun intended. Mary Joan Winn Leith discusses, in **Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel**, the tripartite pattern of the rite of passage: rites of separation, transition rites, and rites of incorporation. (1) In this light, my parshat consists of great activity that fits with the notion of "rite of passage". In three lines Joseph moves from near death to an unimaginable ascent to power. This is an existential rollercoaster ride as Joseph was left in a hole by his brothers; found and taken hostage as property by the Ishmaelites; and sold to Potiphar as slave and servant. Then, he experienced a rise in his master's opinion and ascends the hierarchy of servants. A close reading of the Hebrew suggests that Joseph both found himself at the top, and got himself to the top. As a "rite of passage", his story could have ended at this point, but it was just beginning. Instead, the wild ride continued: Mrs. Potiphar and her attempt to seduce; being wrongfully accused; descending to prison and the dreams; meeting with Pharaoh; an even higher ascent as #2 man in Mitzrayim. Then, his family of origin reentered the story.

"Enough already", I was thinking, "what exactly was his rite of passage?" There were so many examples of existential separation, transition, and incorporation that my philosophical and psychological head was spinning. Something profound regarding the narrative was trying to enter my consciousness.

In **Gender and Difference**, feminist biblical scholars discuss how women were viewed as "the other" by those who wrote, and interpreted the Torah. Generally, most of the characters of Torah were in need of being fleshed out, which the Oral Tradition set out to do, largely with male figures. Much less effort was spent on female characters of Torah, including Mrs. Potiphar. Nevertheless, Mrs. P. had a strong role, comparatively, as the seductress whose selfish and carnal cravings regarding Joseph force him down a path of chaos and destruction. Mrs. P. might be considered a distant cousin to the Mesopotamian goddess Inanna/Ishtar who, as a "goddess of society", was considered sexually attractive, seeker of lovers, desirous of power and warfare, and roaming, restless, and chaotic. (2) The Rabbis viewed Mrs. P. as dangerous to Joseph with a hidden reference, perhaps, to the dangers of Pagan beliefs and practices

wherever and whenever Jews were living in a dominant culture that did not hold their worldview. From this vantage point, one might consider the relationship between Joseph and Mrs. P. differently, perhaps, as mirror images that reflect a specific rite of passage. Consider Mrs. P. as a woman who is similar to Joseph in that she is part of a population standing outside of the dominant group men.

As a woman, Mrs. P. lived successfully in a male dominated culture largely due to her husband whom we assume she had managed to attract using some skillset, but also due to good fortune. Joseph is in a similar position as a man who has also been successful, partly through personal traits and luck. No matter how competent, Joseph remains a slave, and Mrs. P. remains a woman. Joseph and Mrs. P. can be viewed as reflections of the same process. They are examples of the nondominant “others” who live outside and beyond, yet within dominant cultures.

Sidnei Ann White from the abovementioned text writes, “Jews in the diaspora are in the position of the weak as women and must adjust their political and economic power and learn to work within the system to gain what power they can”. (3) Suffice it to say that I had found the source of the deeper pull that I felt regarding Joseph’s existential ups and downs.

Growing up as a tribally enrolled member of the Mdewakantán of Minnesota and White, I lived in two worlds. Two countries, actually. My father’s reservation, where I am enrolled, is one of seven that make up the sovereign nation of the Dakota in the United States. We are our own country, which exists within the dominant culture that has gone to war with us; executed some of us in what was the largest execution in the history of the United States; and allowed hundreds of us to die in what was essentially a concentration camp. And yet, I’m existentially doing quite well in dominant society. Like Joseph, I no longer live in my homeland. Like Joseph I threw myself into dominant culture while quietly remaining committed to the worldview of my ancestors.

As a Jewess by choice, my identification with Judaism serves to connect me to a tradition that helps me make sense of all of my experience. Additionally, it offers narratives for rites of passage and eventual incorporation of the different parts of myself. As bat mitzvah and Indian woman, I feel that my stepping up to the Torah is a movement toward integration of self. For the future, I can imagine that a dedicated and disciplined study of any and all of the threads of thought and emotion connected with Joseph’s story would teach me everything that I need to know about Judaism, and lead to further incorporation and integration.

1, 2. Peggy L. Day (ed.), **Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel** (Minneapolis: Fortress Press).

3. Day, **Gender and Difference**, 167.

Genesis 39:9-10

David N

“After a time, his master’s wife cast her eyes upon Joseph and said, “Lie with me.” But he refused. He said to his master’s wife , “Look with me here, my master gives no thought to anything in this house, and all that he owns he has placed in my hands. He wields no more authority in this house than I, and 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 much as she coaxed Joseph day after day, he did not yield to her request to lie beside her, to be with her.””

Joseph, a slave in Potiphar's household, refuses the advances of Zuleika*, his master's wife. "Day after day", she beckons Joseph to "Come lie with me", and day after day he refuses her. What are we to make of this refusal? Why did Joseph say "no"? What did the writers of Torah have in mind here? Should we assume, simply, that Joseph, one of our patriarchs, "a man of God", said "no" because he knew to do otherwise would be wrong? Is this nothing more than an anecdote about a moral man doing what we expect of him? Torah is, after all, filled with stories of "good" people doing "good" things. Maybe Joseph is simply setting an example for the rest of us to follow. Maybe this is all the writers of Torah had in mind.

One could also see Zuleika's advances, Joseph's refusal, and Zuleika's false rape accusation as unimportant filler: a bridge to the much more momentous events that happen later in the story. After all, unless Joseph ends up in prison, how else is he to end up interpreting Pharaoh's dreams and saving Egypt from starvation? It is tempting to see the interplay between Joseph and Zuleika as a plot device moving the story along. However, if we stop for a moment and kick a bit of dirt off the surface of this story we begin to uncover the bones that lie below. Perhaps, by exploring Joseph's motives for denying Zuleika we can learn more about this enigmatic man whose outward story we know so well, but of whose thoughts Torah tells us

* Although it does not appear in the Torah, Potiphar's wife is often given the name, Zuleika, in Jewish and Muslim tradition. nothing. And perhaps, as we delve into Joseph's motives we can learn a bit about ourselves in the process.

One can imagine many reasons for Joseph's denial of Zuleika. He simply may have not been attracted to her. Isn't this the most obvious explanation? He may, in fact, have been repulsed by her. Joseph was a young man, barely out of adolescence, and she was an older married woman. Why should we assume that she appealed to him? We are told that Joseph was attractive, "handsome of form and handsome of appearance", but we are told nothing about what Zuleika looked like. Torah gives us no reason to assume that she was beautiful. Maybe, at least in Joseph's eyes, she was unattractive. And what about Joseph's sexuality? Why should we assume Joseph's heterosexuality? If one looks, there are plenty of clues to suggest otherwise. If Joseph was gay we do not have to look further for an explanation of his denial of Zuleika's advances. In the absence of text telling us that Joseph desired Zuleika there is no reason to assume the mutuality of their attraction. Or is there?

This "lack of interest" interpretation of Joseph's refusal gives rise to a number of troublesome questions. Listen to Joseph's words. When he tells her "no", that he won't "lie with her" he gives her a host of reasons for his refusal; that she is married, that Potiphar has been good to him, that it would be a sin, and that sleeping with her would offend his God. He says nothing that suggests he does not desire her. Why wouldn't he just tell her that she holds no interest for him? This may simply be a "white lie" to protect her feelings, (or to protect himself from her wrath lest she be offended by his lack of interest). But would Joseph lie? Maybe. Precedent exists for our Patriarchs lying. Isaac lied when he claimed Rebecca was his sister, and Jacob deceived his father by pretending to be his brother, Esau. However, given what we know of Joseph, such a trivial lie seems out of character. Consistently, throughout Joseph's story, we are shown a man of the highest integrity, a man concerned with not offending God, a man wanting above all else to live a moral life. He does not seem like someone given to speaking petty untruths. If he were to conceal from Zuleika that he was not attracted to her in order to protect her feelings would this not have presented a moral challenge to him: a challenge we, the consumers of Torah, would have heard about? Yet the narrative gives no indication that he has lied or that he has wrestled with having told a lie.

We must also question why, if Joseph was not attracted Zuleika, we are not told this important fact. There seems no reason to withhold this information from us. If Joseph had no desire for Zuleika , even if he had withheld this from her, certainly we would know the truth. To withhold that information from us not only makes no literary sense, it seems counterproductive from a theistic aspect as well. When lies are told in Torah, such as in the above cases, are we not told the truth that lies beneath the lie? Isaac may have been fooled by Jacob's lie, but we know the truth. What lesson can be revealed from a truth that remains hidden? If Joseph did not desire Zuleika we would know it.

The most compelling reason of all to reject the notion that Joseph said no to Zuleika because he was not attracted to her, lies with the banality of this explanation. The spurning of a sexual advance because one party is not attracted to the other is so commonplace that one has to ask, why include it here? Whether we understand Torah to be the word of God given to a “Chosen People” as a guide for living a righteous life, or we accept it as literature, a collection of stories that resonate across the ages because of their power to captivate our interest, it makes no sense to conclude that Joseph does not desire Zuleika, because if that is true there is no lesson to be gleaned or story to be appreciated.

Not only do I reject the idea that Joseph was disinterested in Zuleika, I also reject the image of him as resolute and unwavering in his refusal of her advances. “Day after day” he says no to her. He never seems to waiver. He appears as unyielding as an ancient oak. And yet, I am not so sure about this. If he was so resolute why was he alone in the house with this woman who has made clear her desire for him? Certainly, if he was as committed to his continence as his words imply it would have been prudent to avoid putting himself in such a vulnerable position. We are told he entered the house to “do his business”. This language, like Zuleika’s pleas to “come lie with me” seems ripe with sexual connotation. Is Torah suggesting that Joseph is not as innocent as the traditional narrative would have us believe? And what about Zuleika? While we have been focused on Joseph, let’s stop for a moment and turn our lens on at her and ask “why has she persisted ‘day after day’ to pester poor Joseph”? In today’s parlance; why hasn’t she picked up the clue phone? I don’t buy the explanation that Joseph was so beautiful that she couldn’t help herself, that she was so intoxicated with lust that she had lost all perspective on reality. If nothing else this interpretation promulgates the pre-feminist stereotype of the unchaste woman not in control of her sexual appetite. The explanation that rings truer to me; is that she remains hopeful because she has gotten some encouragement from Joseph—that she has reason to believe, at least in this instance, that “no” does not in fact, necessarily mean “no”. What I see when I look at these two people standing there in Zuleika’s bed chamber is mutual desire. Zuleika, perhaps in love with Joseph, seems untroubled by any moral constraints. Joseph on the other hand is clearly in crisis. You can hear the anguish in his voice as he cries out “how can I do this great evil and sin before god”. All but overcome with desire for her, standing on the brink of capitulation he understands the peril in which he finds himself. Against his better judgement, he has been drawn into the house by his desire for Zuleika; and yet in the end he turns away and runs from the house. Zuleika, encouraged by Joseph’s unchaperoned presence, by his apparent willingness to succumb to her overtures, is angered when at the last minute he balks and flees.

So what was going through Joseph’s mind as he fled the house? Why did he ultimately say “no”? Fear is as likely an explanation as any. Sleeping with the master’s wife is a dangerous and reckless move for any slave. Objectively, Joseph had much to lose and little to gain by giving in to Zuleika. But if he fears the worldly consequences of acquiescing to her advances, fear is not among the reasons he gives to her for saying no. “There is no one greater in this house than me”, he boasts. Does this sound like a man governed by fear? Maybe this bravado belies a sense of precariousness that Joseph thinks best to cover up? Perhaps. But why not take him at his word? To do otherwise questions his trustworthiness, or at least his understanding of his own motivations. While Joseph’s vulnerability seems obvious to us, the story gives us nothing to suggest that Joseph’s refusal is based in fear. On the contrary, the story makes it abundantly clear that Potiphar has complete trust in Joseph, that he has absented himself from the running of the household and that he has placed in Joseph’s hands the care of all that is his. It seems probable to us, and most likely to Joseph as well, that if he did sleep with Zuleika, he had little to fear from her husband.

What about gratitude and loyalty to the master who has given him so much? This explanation comes closer to Joseph words. “He has withheld nothing from me but you”. This sounds like a desperate plea not to force him into betraying her husband. It is not unreasonable to assume that heartfelt gratitude, possibly even love, may have motivated Joseph’s denial. And yet, isn’t there also a tone of incredulousness or even a hint of scorn in Joseph’s words? “Look with me here, my master gives no thought to anything in this house...There is no one greater in this house than me”. Remember that Joseph has known freedom and true parental love most of his life. That he feels a debt of gratitude, let alone love, for this man who has deprived him of his freedom,

his home and basic rights of self-determination, seems unlikely. No, what I hear is a barely disguised contempt for this foolish master who has trusted him with so much, and has left him with the opportunity to “lie” with his wife.

What about ambition? Could Joseph’s rejection of Zuleika possibly have been motivated by a desire to maintain his privileged position in Potiphar’s household? One could see Joseph’s trajectory from humble slave to the second most powerful person in Egypt not as his “just” reward for his righteousness, or as the result of chance, of being in the right place at the right time, but as the product of a carefully plotted course. Joseph may have been attracted to the master’s wife, but chose to look the other way, because to do otherwise threatened his ambitious intent. This dark and cynical view of Joseph runs contrary to the narrative we have come to accept about our hero. However, if we choose to read the story this way we are given little to contradict it. It does have an internal logic that explains much that we otherwise have to take on “faith”. Yet, while this alternative narrative has a certain literary appeal, I reject it because to understand Joseph in this way, as primarily motivated by ambition, or worse greed, makes him despicable. To view Joseph in this light, as not just flawed, but contemptible, runs contrary to my understanding of what Torah is. As Jews we have assigned to Torah a place apart from other books. It is not simply literature, but scripture. By that I don’t imply that we ascribe a Devine source to the words of Torah. Many of us, myself included, do not. But, whether or not we accept its Devine inspiration, we still look to Torah for guidance, truth, understanding and comfort. Torah can be viewed as simply literature, but to do so, by making it just one more book in our library, strips it of much of its power. If we find cynicism in its words how can we lean on it for comfort or guidance? For inspiration and comfort we need sympathetic heroes not antiheroes. I believe Joseph to be motivated by altruistic ideals not because the writers of Torah imbued him with a fundamental goodness, although I do believe this to be the case, but because I need him to be good to make his story personally meaningful.

What about the notion that Joseph’s rejection of Zuleika was motived by his belief that his God demand this of him. Perhaps he was attracted to her, was even tempted to give in to his desire, but turned away from temptation out of “religious” conviction. This is the traditional interpretation of this story, and Joseph’s words do seem to support this conclusion. “How then could I do this most wicked thing, and sin before God?” This sounds convincing, but can we take Joseph at his word? How do we even know that he is a believer? And if he is a believer, why does Joseph assume that his God would demand this of him?

Torah takes considerable pains to portray Joseph as “a believer”. Throughout the biblical story of Joseph we are told repeatedly by the narrator that God “was with him”. Even Joseph’s Egyptian enslavers (Potiphar, Prison guards, and Pharaoh) see him as a man favored by God. Later in the story Joseph tells his brothers “I am a God-fearing man”[Gen 42:18]. So if we are to take Joseph at his word, and we are to believe those who knew him in his time, we are to understand Joseph as a “godly man” whose actions are predicated by his faith. I am willing to accept this. I am also willing to accept, because I reject a more cynical view of Joseph, that in saying “no” to Zuleika he believes that he is doing what God wants him to do. Joseph was a man of deep faith. There is nothing in Torah to suggest otherwise.

We have accepted that Joseph was attracted to Zuleika, that he desired her as much as she desired him; and we have accepted that he said “no” to her advances because he believed that this is what God wanted him to do. But we have not answered the question of why he believed this. Can we go deeper into Joseph’s psyche and uncover why he concludes that God wants him turn away from his desire and reject Zuleika? It is this question that I believe that lies at the heart of this story. But it is also at this juncture that the light of Torah goes dark. We have entered a dark cavern where there are no words to guide us, and blind speculation becomes our only way forward.

If, as we have accepted, Joseph believes God wanted him to say “no” to Zuleika, it was not because God spoke to him directly. The story lacks a “burning bush” scene where God warns Joseph not to give in to his desire. Joseph also is not adhering to a written code that prohibits sleeping with another man’s wife. This story precedes the giving of the Ten Commandments and the proscription against adultery. Torah also does not

provide us with any evidence that Joseph would have been abiding by a “common law” concept of adultery as a “sin”. There is no historical context for this, at least in the words of Torah up to this point. When Joseph says: “How then could I do this most wicked thing, and sin before God?” he seems to be pulling this idea out of nowhere. While giving into Potiphar’s wife’s advances would have been a crime against Potiphar, most likely seen contemporaneously as a “property” crime and not as a spiritual transgression or sin, the reason that Joseph believes that it would have been a crime against God, at least as Joseph would have understood God, is not clear.

Clearly Joseph believes that to give into his desire for Potiphar’s wife would be an act against God, but why does he believe this? Joseph does not generally waver when good things come to him unbidden. Joseph is no ascetic. He has no difficulty accepting riches, favors and power when they are presented to him. If we accept that Joseph desired Zuleika, why when she offers herself to him, does he not assume that God is behind her advances? This seems like a logical conclusion for Joseph to have reached. And yet he turns away from his lust out of a belief that this is what God wants him to do. I find this seeming inconsistency perplexing.

The lack of an extrinsic voice commanding him to say “no” to Zuleika forces us to conclude that the voice that Joseph is responding to comes from within. We can of course conclude that God is speaking to Joseph internally, in a voice that we are not privy to: that God has “implanted” directly into Joseph’s head the idea that to “lie” with Zuleika would be wrong. But if it is the silent voice of God that Joseph is listening to when he turns away from Zuleika, Torah does not tell us that this is what happened. I would expect the familiar “And God spoke to Joseph and commanded him [to say no to Zuleika]”. But on the contrary we are given no such indication that there was some kind of divine intervention prompting Joseph to turn away from his desire. I take Torah’s silence on this matter as evidence that this is not the explanation for Joseph’s behavior that the writers of Torah had in mind.

What else then, could explain Joseph’s belief that God wanted him to turn away from his lust? Having discounted the premise that Joseph was responding to the literal voice of God commanding him not to give in to his desire, we are left with the conclusion that Joseph is reacting to an internalization of God’s voice. By saying no to Zuleika, Joseph is doing what he believes God would command if he did appear before him—say in the form of a burning bush. This is a moment of greatness for Joseph, and it is why this little anecdote about saying “no” to appetite is important. In much the same way that the child proves his or her adulthood by internalizing the voice of the parent, Joseph, by intuiting what God wants of him, by in effect reading God’s mind, has taken a moral leap, and in doing so is earning his place as our Patriarch.

Genesis 39:14-17 Becky and Annie

Since we were assigned almost twin portions, one right after the other, relating how Potifar’s wife recited and embellished her false accusation of rape by Josef, we decided to write our d’var Torah together. While meeting together this summer, we discovered that we had very similar approaches to the study of our Torah portions. We were both looking for relevance in terms of our own personal growth, as well as moral and psychological implications and lessons.

Interestingly enough, though the portions were quite similar, (Becky’s relating how Mrs. P spoke to the household staff, and Annie’s relating how she told the tale to her husband), there were significant differences between the tropes used for the same words in each portion. For instance, the chanting of the word “garment” in the section directed to Potifar, had a more elaborate trope than in the previous portion. This was probably to emphasize and dramatize its importance to Mrs. P’s case against Joseph as presented to her husband.

Not unexpectedly, we identify with different aspects of the story, bringing with us different life experiences. But the parallels between Annie’s Jewish yet not religious upbringing and personal

practice derived from Chinese culture, and Becky's Chinese heritage that went little deeper than food as she studied Judeo-Christian religious culture out of personal interest were lively topics to explore.

Three major themes jumped out at us. We understood them as virtues which were being contrasted with anti-virtues.

1. Loyalty vs. Treachery
2. Integrity and Trust vs. Blame
3. Acceptance/Surrender to Divine Will vs. Resentment and Disdain

Josef's abiding loyalty was to G-d. He never wavered in his belief and faith. He resisted Mrs. P's advances by calling both on his connection with the divine as well as the memory of his father's teachings. Mrs P's behavior was entirely treacherous both to Josef and her husband. It is interesting to note that she uses Josef's forcedly discarded garment as evidence. The Hebrew word for garment shares the same shoresh (bet, gimel, dalet) as the Hebrew word connoting treachery or unfaithfulness. So the garment, in fact, serves as evidence of Mrs. P's own guilt, rather than Josef's. Unlike Tamar at the beginning of this Parsha, she uses a garment treacherously to falsify rather than verify the truth.

Josef, continues to function with great integrity throughout, despite the blame that is heaped upon him. Even though he is accused and imprisoned for being an attempted rapist, he still became the most trusted person in the jail. He trusted G-d, G-d was with him, thus it was natural that he kept being entrusted. Integrity means sticking to your principles, but not forcing your will on others. Josef as a leader wasn't trying to impose his will on anyone, he just continued to be competent, godly, and prone to doing good for others. We are shown through this story/parable, that we can and should place our trust in the Divine, even when things do not turn out well in the short run.

Perhaps, one the more salient lessons in this, is that if you don't trust you can't be trustworthy. Just look at Mrs. P who in some writings was described as a barren woman drawn to Josef in hopes of becoming pregnant. She accuses Potifar of bringing Josef into the household for the purpose of taunting her.

Josef appears to have accepted his fate without complaint. Because of his trust in G-d, he evidently easily surrendered to the path that was ahead of him. In contrast, all Mrs. P complains and accuses others, resenting them for her own pain. Anyone can be prone to blame and mistrust, but we have found that accepting our "fate" and engaging in self-examination leads to a more productive and peaceful life.

In furtherance of self-examination, we both saw that we identified more with Josef than with Potifar's wife. Annie has felt abandoned in a pit that she had to make her way out of. Becky has felt like a favored child, trusted with responsibilities by government officials.

We want to be careful not to overlook Mrs. P's point of view though. While Potifar has been suspected of being a eunuch and Josef might have been gay, we did not come across any commentary suggesting that Mrs. P's accusation against Josef the paragon was actually true. Other women of the Torah-- Sarah, Rachel and Hannah demonstrate the pressure on women to bear children. Mrs. P may have been motivated by a strong desire for motherhood. Or as others suggest, she may have been driven by lust-- Josef may have been so beautiful that he was impossible to resist.

Current stories about how campus rape allegations are handled and magazine covers about Bill Cosby's victims suggest that the story of a woman making a false rape accusation for tainted motives still has power. It is not difficult to see how misogyny permeates our culture, blaming and mistrusting women.

Facing a false accusation and not being believed when one is telling the truth are both extremely difficult situations to find oneself in. Torah study is one path to finding truth. By reflecting on our

successes and setbacks in life, reading and thinking about Torah stories and other texts, we hope to free ourselves from our own personal prisons and rise up to be worthy of the trust of others and to be in positions of power where we can help our community and loved ones like Josef. (Becky and Anne)

Genesis 39:19-20

Laura

Like many in this community, I have what might be called a knee-jerk, feminist reaction to the term “Potiphar’s wife”. A nameless female, defined solely by her status as the spouse of a powerful man ? Others have left Judaism for less.

But with a little digging and googling, I learned that, in the Muslim tradition, “Potiphar’s wife” has a beautiful name, Zuleika, which does in fact mean, “the Prince’s wife”, but oh well. As this same story is told in the Koran, some things that are implied in the Torah are spelled out more clearly for us: We are told that Zuleika is attracted by and ultimately overwhelmed by Joseph’s physical beauty. “Smitten” is the word Thomas Mann chooses, in his massive 1500-page midrash, “Joseph and His Brothers”, which I read this year, and which has admittedly influenced my reading and rereading of our portion. By the way, Mann gives Potiphar’s wife the name Mut Em Enet, and she gets a plausible backstory as well.

Zuleika. The prince’s wife. The woman led astray. The mistress who harasses and seeks to exploit her slave. The liar. The false accuser. The vehicle through which Joseph fulfills his up-and-down destiny and lands once again in the pit. And the complicated, impassioned woman who Joseph has known for years prior to the showdown scene that my particular lines describe. But can we see her some other way?

In the Koran, after she propositions Joseph and is refused, Zuleika, in her own defense, sets out to demonstrate that any — and here I feel compelled to add the word “heterosexual” — woman who saw Joseph up close would be similarly overcome. She gathers her women-friends together, gives them each a lemon and a knife to cut it with when given a signal, and then has Joseph enter the room. The signal is given, and every woman in the room is so distracted that she cuts her own hand rather than the lemon, drawing blood. I picture that room full of women all bleeding for Joseph. And I can almost feel the acid sting of the lemon juice in a fresh, clean wound. For me, this scene evokes the pain Zuleika must have felt as Joseph refused her day after day. And who among us has not known unrequited love? Certainly the experience of wanting and not being wanted back was a theme in my youth, and one that shaped the woman I became.

But, going deeper, in the Sufi tradition, Zuleika’s love for Joseph is thought to teach us of the soul’s unrestrained passion for G-d. Love that knows no limits, no rules, no boundaries. Love made all the fiercer by being denied, with the harshness of denial only pushing the lover further towards the bliss of union with the divine. I can vividly remember a time in 8th grade when I thought I would drown in unrequited love, for a strange, sad, boy who didn’t return my affection. This was not long after the Beatles broke up, an event as cataclysmic in my emotional world as Joseph’s not un-analogous falling out with his brothers. What consoled me most at that time was a haunting song on John Lennon’s first solo album, the song called “Love.” It has a simple, hypnotic melody, like the steady repetition of a few familiar tropes. And the lyric, “Love is feeling, feeling love” especially consoled me, because John Lennon — my generation’s foremost authority on love — was speaking to me directly, telling me that my love, though unrequited, still “counted”, and *was still love*, with all of its transformational power, and its link to something much larger and loftier than whatever “going steady” meant in 8th grade, in 1970. Perhaps, in listening to John in my moments of anguish, I entered the blissful state the Sufi’s seek, if only for a moment.

But my particular lines in this portion are not about Zuleika’s feelings; they actually describe Potiphar’s anger upon being told by his wife that Joseph, quote, “did these things” unquote, to her. As we know, Joseph did *not* “do these things”, in fact he refused to, over and over, ostensibly out of loyalty to Potiphar. One interpretation of the story tells us that Zuleika’s words, “He did these things to me,” were spoken in the marriage bed, as in

“these things that you are doing to me, Joseph did as well.” After which, according to the Torah, Potiphar’s “wrath burned.” Given this context, of course we can understand Potiphar’s rage: this is the rage that springs from humiliation and betrayal and the knowledge that what one has learned has changed everything forever. The sudden sense that all is lost, and that, inexplicably, we have been shamed. Not only did Potiphar realize in an instant that he would lose Joseph, who he greatly valued and relied upon, but also that his marriage was in jeopardy, and that he stood to lose the delicate balance that had sustained his prosperous, well-regulated household. It is no struggle for me to understand these feelings, for I have felt them too. The portion reminds us that, when we least expect it, we might be confronted with facts that change everything, that call into question our most basic assumptions and our trust. And demand that we look deeply within, and even to rewrite our own story. And at the same time, we may need to act decisively to restore propriety and order, so that healing can take place. For Potiphar, this meant putting Joseph in prison, post haste.

A few words about Joseph. In the two lines that I learned to chant and have spoken about, Joseph goes from being second in command at Potiphar’s estate to being incarcerated. It is one of several times when he falls precipitously from a position of ease and success to one of deprivation and peril. In essence, Joseph is falsely accused and summarily imprisoned, with no chance to defend himself and without due process. If we take the story literally we are outraged on his behalf. But if Joseph himself experiences rage, a sense of betrayal, or feelings of humiliation this is nowhere mentioned in the text. We are told only that Joseph is blessed by G-d with charisma and, of course, a gift for dream interpretation. And we learn that, through these gifts, he eventually finds favor with Pharaoh and returns to a position of prominence, power and wealth.

Rather than see him as ambitious or opportunistic, as Thomas Mann conveys, I like to think that Joseph felt most deeply himself at those times when he was favored, central, and indispensable, as he was with Potiphar, and again, with Pharaoh. Joseph, as we know, was Rachel’s long-awaited first-born son, and Jacob’s favorite among his 13 children. As a psychologist, I have long been persuaded that children who are welcomed and cherished have a special layer of protection or resilience that allows them to survive harm, misfortune, and discrimination. Often, they are the ones who go on to find meaningful work, connect with loving partners, and raise secure and responsible children. Some say that G-d is love. Although I struggle with the jealous, impulsive, and distinctly male G-d that is portrayed in Bereishit, the idea of G-d as love — and love as G-d — feels true to me, and I like to think that John Lennon would agree. Maybe the idea that Joseph was favored by G-d really means mainly that Joseph was a loved and wanted child who felt a deep sense of security, and great clarity about his identity and his purpose. I too was a loved child, and my parents are very present for me in everything that I do. In the great happiness of my marriage, the joys and challenges of parenting, and the astounding, daily privilege of doing good work I, like Joseph, have come to feel favored, central and indispensable, something that eluded me in my younger years. I try to live up to it.

Being loved and needed in the midst of comfort and plenty is soothing like balm and intoxicating like wine. When I take the time to actually slow down and really feel the goodness of my life I find myself filled with gratitude, including for our tradition, which commands that we do just this, and on a regular basis. But it can feel all too easy to lapse into laziness and complacency, to take for granted the good things in my life, or to hold on to them too tightly. Surely Joseph’s refusal to gratify Zuleika reflected in part his reluctance to risk the comforts he had grown accustomed to. I think it was this same complacency that made Potiphar oblivious to what was going on right under his nose, and prevented him from acting before it was too late. When does intoxication become stupor? When and how do we cross the line? Perhaps it is when we start to believe we have actually earned the privileges and prosperity that really we just lucked into. When we forget where we came from and become addicted to pleasure or profit or power.

How, as a woman of great privilege, can I safeguard against becoming insensitive to the suffering of those who are peripheral, marginalized, and enslaved? Less available to the lonely, the outcast, and the have-not’s? Less ready to drop what I am doing and go where I am needed? These are questions that I wrestle with daily, and ones that this portion has challenged me to consider afresh. The answers I have arrived at are the same as ever:

to stay conscious of the blessings I have been given, to feel and express my gratitude, and to give generously of my energy, resources, and love. Shabbat shalom.

Genesis 40: 5-6

Barbara H

Life is full of small mysteries. There are times that we behave and we don't know why, but we want to understand. The meaning of dreams is often hard to grasp. We create them, we are moved by them, maybe frightened by them. What do they mean? Do they have import in our future or past?

In this portion Joseph said that he would take the role of interpreting the dreams of the butler and the baker. Although he says himself that only God can interpret dreams.

My own belief is that by sitting with our dreams, re-experiencing them, we can begin to find some meaning. Are we frightened? Are we at peace? Are we anxious? (Of course we are anxious, we are Barbara!) We can begin to find threads of understanding. Can we do better than threads of understanding? Find a narrative and a prediction for the future? Possibly not. But comfort with dreams is a gift

Genesis 40:10-12

Susan R

In my “parschette”, Joseph is in the dungeon and the cupbearer and the baker tell him their dreams, which he interprets for them.

In the cupbearer’s dream, the grape vines grow and flourish with tendrils, buds, and blossoms shooting up and transforming into ripening clusters, as in the Disney stop-motion nature movies about Life in the Desert that enchanted me as a child. So earlier this summer, I watched day by day the grapevine in my backyard as the vines grew longer and longer, and the tendrils reached out for something to grab onto. I noticed the tenacity of the vines and the tendrils: when they couldn’t find anything else to grab on to, they curled around themselves. But as the summer progressed, and as I was practicing chanting my portion – in the car, in deserted hallways and at my TWO (!) singing classes -- I found myself reflecting more and more on the idea of GIFTSthe ones you have and the ones you don’t have. And how both of those entail reaching out, grabbing on, and tenacity of vision and purpose.

Joseph had the gift of being able to interpret dreams. This gift showed his special connection to God. Or, in a slightly alternative understanding, his being favored by God with the insight into the meaning of dreams. Some people have the gift – to me such an enviable one – of being able to sing on key. But then it seems there is for these folks another arena that is much more challenging for them. In my more sanguine times, I have come to say, “We all have our challenges.” But one is not always in a sanguine place.

This process of preparing for our B’nai Mitzvahs opened up for us all our challenges, our vulnerabilities.....the arenas we are not especially “gifted” in, the things this process asked of us that did not come easily. But there is also what we do with those areas in which we are challenged – often we focus on them; we feel limited by them; we feel shame about them.

This summer, in my little three person group singing class, the other two women could easily sing on key, so to my mind, they were “home free.” Hardly. One of them thought her voice sounded terrible. And the other could sing as long as she sang, “la, la la” but not when she had to add in the words.

The situation was not all that different in our B'nai Mitzvah class. For some of us, learning to decode Hebrew was a gigantic challenge and some of us had learned it as kids and had a significant head start. In our group discussions, some of us could hardly wait to contribute whereas others were much more reserved but with comments often powerfully thoughtful in our at times raucous group discussions. More than a few of us were challenged by and had to wrestle with "the god/God problem" but for some, a way to think about god/God came easily and readily, without inner conflict. And of course, there were those for whom singing was a gift and those of us for whom it was anything but!

Joseph had the gift of being able to understand (see/garner/explain/interpret) the prophetic meaning of dreams – something neither the cupbearer nor the baker could do. I wonder about Joseph (but with Joseph now becoming the embodiment of us all): did Joseph view his ability to interpret dreams as a gift? How much empathy could he bring to understanding what it was like for those who were much more challenged than he, or lacked his gift altogether? Was he grateful for his gift and the advantages his gift brought him? Or did he, like the three of us in my singing class, see his gift as fairly "ho – hum". And focus only on what was more challenging? And if that was the case, what was it that was more challenging for him? What was the gift he didn't have?

A few verses on, we read about how Joseph tries to leverage his ability to interpret the cupbearer's dream as a means to be brought out of prison. Are his actions here uncomfortably opportunistic? Or understandable actions by someone who is desperate? Like the grape vines and tendrils, certainly he is grabbing on to a possible means of escape and an anchor for hope.

Like the grape vines looking for a place to anchor themselves, all one's gifts can still leave you hanging out there. And, a lack of a gift is not an impossibility: with insightful teachers and mentors, a supportive community, and a certain amount of tenacity, the lack of a gift can be worked around and sometimes even overcome.

Genesis 40: 18-20 Eliana

Then the baker told his dream. "There are three baskets of all kinds of baked foods and the birds ate them out of the basket on my head." "The three baskets equal three days," interpreted Joseph. "In three days, the Pharaoh will hang you and the birds will eat your flesh." It came to pass on Pharaoh's birthday that he made a feast for all his servants, including the baker and the butler.

How did it come to be that Joseph was seen as an interpreter dreams? Rabbi Shlomo Riskin once wrote, "The fact of the matter is that a person can dream when he's asleep and can dream when he's awake. But only the dreams that one dreams when he/she is awake can become transformed into the visions which change reality." Does the interpretation truly predict the meaning of the dream as with Joseph's gift or is the dreamer who brings the reality of the dream to light? Did the fate of the butler and baker come to be because of the new reality Joseph painted for them?

Joseph had the gift to see dreams and to understand the meaning of dream as it is came to be true in the Torah for the baker and the butler. As with much of the Torah and particularly in this parsha, the facts are laid out and the emotions are left out. How does the baker move forward knowing that his life will end soon? Why is it that Joseph's ability to interpret dreams is seen as true? Either way Joseph's dream interpretations provides Joseph an avenue to save his life as the story of Joseph unfolds. Sometimes we don't understand how our gifts can open doors we never expected in our lives as was the case for Joseph.