



JEWISH MOSAIC THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR SEXUAL & GENDER DIVERSITY
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torah QUEERIES

Welcome to Torah Queeries, a joint project of Jewish Mosaic and the World Congress of GLBT Jews! Check back regularly for creative and incisive “queer” takes on the weekly Torah portion or Jewish holiday, brought to you by some of the Jewish world’s most dynamic scholars, rabbis, activists and lay leaders.

The Bumpy Road to High-Drama Holiness

by **Maggid Jhos Singer**

Parashat Miketz -- Genesis 41:1-44:17

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While waiting on the schoolyard the other day for my kids to get out of their classrooms, I was chatting with a little clutch of fellow parents, none of them Jewish, when the issue of my working as a Jewish Spiritualist entered the conversation. One of the parents said something like, “It must be nice being so, well, you know, holy, you know, so spiritual and everything, you must feel really, uh, so peaceful.” I could feel my face take on a look of confusion and was aware that my head had slowly tilted, dog like, to one side. I wanted to say, “Are you on crack?!” But, being so spiritually evolved, I managed to just grunt a little and then, mercifully, the bell rang and all chaos erupted in the form of children streaming away from their day of state-imposed confinement, effectively ending the conversation.

I’m so sorry to have to report that the dominant culture seems to equate holiness and spirituality with superiority, enlightenment, a sense of tranquility; it also asserts that being close to God is the domain of a select and serene few. Most folks I talk to seem to think that they can’t be very holy or close to God because they are so screwed up, so imperfect, so, well, human. Being profoundly Jewish myself, as I listen to these ideas I usually feel a major sermon coming on, because I would contend that, at its root, my spirit path teaches exactly the opposite. This week’s Torah portion, Miketz (Genesis 41-44:17) is rife with examples of how our path twists and turns between moments of depression and elation, failure and triumph, betrayal and reconciliation, and that every step of the way is messy, but never the less leads us to high-drama holiness.

Parashat Miketz begins with Joseph’s release from an Egyptian jail, where he has been serving a sentence based on a trumped up sexual harassment charge, in order to interpret a dream of the Pharaoh (Joseph, rather like a spiritual cork, is pulled and plunged to the proverbial bottom only to bob back up to the surface over and over again). He reads Pharaoh’s dream to mean that Egypt will experience seven years of abundance followed by seven years of famine, and suggests that the dream was a warning to Pharaoh to conserve enough during the fat years to make it through the lean years. Pharaoh is pleased with the interpretation and appoints Joseph as his second in command, giving him the authority to implement his proposed plan. Poof, you’re a Viceroy!! Joseph goes from being an incarcerated Hebrew slave to being a top government official in a day. He serves for many years, gets married (to the daughter of his former accuser), has kids, and generally has a rich and fulfilling life.

The plan runs like clockwork and Egypt thrives. Then one day, during the famine years, a bunch of Hebrew guys come to Egypt seeking sustenance. Joseph recognizes them as his own brothers, who, a couple decades back, had sold him into slavery after abandoning a plan to leave him for dead in a pit. However, they don't recognize Joseph. Joseph does not reveal his identity to them, but instead, takes advantage of his position and anonymity to test their integrity and moral character. The brothers, especially the kingpin Judah, pass the tests with flying colors. They are honest, forthcoming and downright noble in their behavior towards Joseph, their father, and most importantly, each other. You'd never suspect these guys of attempted fratricide or kidnapping in a million years. The portion ends on an emotional cliffhanger, with Joseph just on the brink of coming out to his brothers in a moment of power, compassion, triumph and brotherly love. He has laid the groundwork for what will be one of the Torah's most beautiful moments of faith, love and reconciliation.

Everyone in this story goes through radical transformation based in spiritual binaries and contradictions. There is a lot of exchanging one set of attributes for their exact opposites. Judah the traitor becomes Judah the loyal, Joseph the Hebrew becomes Zaphenath-Paneah¹ the Egyptian, and then goes back to being Joseph the Hebrew, Jacob the provider becomes Jacob the needy, the captive becomes freed, the dreamer becomes the doer. Everything and everyone emerges from a state of flux into a moment of clarity. It is so real and so metaphoric, so familiar and so fantastic, that every year, when I read this Torah portion, I delight and then I join Joseph when he weeps. I find myself hooked and lost in my own memories of who and what I have been and some awe and dread at whom I am yet to be. To arrive at the other side of the binary system is to have been in flight, trapezing from one side of the circus tent to the other, on the platform, out of breath, heart racing.

The queer community is full of chapters like this one, because as yet we haven't settled on a Beaver Cleaver image of ourselves. We have dykes who are now dads, queens who are corporate, butches who are now Barbies, studs who have become celibate, separatists who are now soccer moms, and we have always, always, always had those glorious switch hitters, cross dressers and fence sitters of every kaleidoscopic variety who surprise us at every turn in the road. Similarly, today's Jews are now Orthodox, Reform, Conservative, renewed, born again and re-construed Hebrews. Bring it all together and you get Orthodykes, queer minyans, the Tri-hitza (two partitions dividing the congregation into a men's section, a women's section and a 'mixed' section) and well, Jewish Mosaic. . .

The Torah way is – well honestly – kinda schmutzic. Everything worth caring about, everything noble and glorious and precious seems to come out of the muck. Fratricide, incest, drunkenness – lying, cheating stealing – violence despair and sarcasm – eventually they all lead to redemption or revelation or revolution! It's a rough road to be sure, but it is full of wonder and miracle just the same. The Torah doesn't sugar coat the process required to achieve some degree of spiritual mastery, nor does it limit the pool of possible candidates for enlightenment. Any schmedrick who can lust or hate or scam has all the pre-reqs needed. Abraham was up for infanticide, he had a run of being a con man, and he was a dead-beat dad. Isaac ran the same con on Abimelech that his dad had run on Pharaoh, he played favorites, and frankly, he was a bit passive aggressive. And Jacob, oy, what a scoundrel and a scamster! Joseph, a braggart and a poser. Judah is a lying cutthroat. And yet also inside this rag tag crew was greatness, kindness, compassion, humor and most important, humility. Our tradition holds that these guys were incredibly close to God, and yet their flaws are incredibly apparent. Ultimately, each one of them rode through some nasty patches of regret, humiliation and guilt, and brilliantly each of them found wholeness and peace, and dare I say it, Holiness.

We read that Joseph framed his brothers to see if they will betray each other like they betrayed him. We study the moment when Joseph, their victim, is filled with compassion and love for them. We then anticipate the forgiveness that is coming in the next episode, and we are reminded that life is all about taking risks, and making gross errors only to learn and forgive. This life is all about making tshuvah (some would translate this as 'repentance' but I think 'spiritual rehab' is more accurate), and living through the humiliation of being wrong. It is imperative that we not think that a spiritual life is a life without blemish, flaws, or wounds. Indeed, true spiritual living begins with being young and stupid only to evolve into wiser and older versions of our selves. In the quest for enlightenment it is essential to remember that every decision we make could draw the "go to jail, go directly to jail, do not collect \$200" card, and like Joseph we could watch our fortune be dissolved or made in the blink of an eye. We have to pay attention, stay present and be engaged. The more we know the more anxious we become because we realize how utterly chaotic the whole mess is. Far from being a scene of tranquil quiet, the Jewish template for spiritual life is more like a clattering roller coaster. Our tzaddikim (enlightened ones) aren't superior or more pure than the average Joe, but they sure as heck are all survivors—streetwise and tough with a deep understanding of what is important. I would hazard a guess that every tzaddik has plenty of scar tissue to show off in Nirvana.

¹ A revealer of hidden things and an opener of things to come.

May we all be blessed with enough time in this life to fully integrate our inner idiot with our inner sage, and may we never see our selves or each other as anything less than holy – right here, right now, warts, bumps, scars and all.

About the Author:



Maggid Jhos Singer received ordination/semicha from Rabbi Gershon Winkler in 2002, and has served the Coastside Jewish Community in Half Moon Bay, California, as their rabbi/maggid since 2000. Jhos holds a degree in music from UCLA and when he isn't preaching to the flock he is playing and singing with them. Maggid Singer especially loves teaching on the paradoxical, profound, perilous and paranormal ways of the Jewish path. Being transgender, Maggid Singer is well suited to understand and transmit the Torah's many contradictions and complexities with insight, love, deep faith and good humor. Singer lives in Berkeley, California, where he tends a clutch of young children and enjoys a wonderful relationship with his bashert.