

Shabbat Vayigash ShaLom



by Phyllis Chesler

Imagine Yehudah's shock when Egypt's beardless vizier, dressed in very fine linen, wearing black eye-liner, face makeup, with animal tattoos on his arms and an elaborate headdress over his shaved head—suddenly reveals to him that he is Yosef, the brother whom Yehudah and nine other older half-brothers threw into a pit and then sold into slavery.

What kind of trick is this? The vizier is also wearing Pharaoh's large signet ring and his heavy gold chain. How can this man, whose servants address him as Tzafnat Paneiach be Yosef? Surely, he is a Prince of Egypt, just as Moshe will be.

And yet this vizier is speaking perfect Hebrew...is Yehudah dreaming? Has he lost his mind? And now Yosef/Tzafnat is weeping upon Binyamin's neck (45:14), who is the only brother who weeps upon Yosef's neck; Yosef is kissing all his brothers

(45:15), assuring them that they've done nothing wrong, that what happened was all part of God's plan. Yosef stresses that while they did "sell" him (45:4), it was really God who "sent" him to Egypt (45:5; 7; 8).

Yosef is weeping, his older brothers are not. Why? Does Yosef regret his former tale-bearing which led his brothers to hate him? Does he understand that, as much as he enjoyed and even flaunted his father's oversize love for him, that this embittered his older half-brothers who had already lived through their mother's being dishonored, feeling that she was "hated"? Did Yosef resemble the much-loved Rahel?

Powerful, untouchable, Yosef, Israel's first Prince of Egypt, may now be able to forgive his shamed brothers. He's also learned his lesson. He never tells his father what his brothers did. (This was pointed out to me by the late Rabbi Allan Schranz, of the Sutton Place Synagogue). In fact, this might be the reason he never "wrote home." What could he possibly have said that would not have broken Ya'akov's heart?

Yosef advises his family to tell Pharaoh that they are shepherds and herders of livestock, so that they will live in Goshen. But why? The Egyptians worship cows and sheep and view working with/slaughtering them as an "abomination." Why must Israel live apart in Goshen? To avoid the temptations of assimilation and intermarriage?

Yosef has lived among pagans for more than seventeen years, yet he remains acutely aware of God, God's presence, and God's power. Yosef attributes his dream interpretations to God, and refuses to take any credit for himself. Maybe he is different than others, our Yosef the Tzadik.

The men are all unusually emotional in this parsha. The Torah is about to resolve the unbearable tension between first-born and later-born sons, a theme which has plagued most of Bereshit. Until then—

Shabbat Shalom.