

SEARCHING FOR REDEMPTIVE READINGS: GRAPPLING WITH HOMOPHOBIA

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Students want to read rabbinic texts for coherence. Many seek it out, even demand it. Ambiguities and contradictory ideas within a text are unsettling. Undoubtedly, stereotypes cloud their reading practices, most especially their view that the rabbis of the Talmud are homophobic.¹ Driven by the prohibition in Leviticus 18:22 (and 20:13), “Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; it is an abhorrence,” or the mishnah’s punishments of stoning (m. Sanhedrin 7:4) and *karet* (excommunication) (m. Keritot 1:1) for homosexual acts, no doubt they have fodder to support their understanding of the rabbis’ anxiety regarding male-male sexuality.²

¹ I have chosen to use the word “homophobia” because the texts analyzed here focus on male-male sexuality and the rabbinic struggle to define what characterizes manliness. My decision not to use the term “queer” is intentional. Queer or queerphobia references a far larger category of sexual identity not taken up in these particular texts, inasmuch as there needs to be more analysis of rabbinic texts that points beyond homosexuality.

² David Halperin points out that it is not clear whether in antiquity there was a conceptual category similar to our use of the term “homosexuality” that highlights the gender of the object of one’s sexual desire (see David M. Halperin, “One Hundred Years of Homosexuality,” in *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and other Essays on Greek Love*, ed. David Halperin [New York: Routledge, 1990], 15-40). This has led scholars to use the term,

In many rabbinic texts, sexuality differentiates who is within the boundaries of rabbinic society and culture and who is not. Therefore, when students look to the rabbis, they see them arguing for a type of “natural” male/female sex, defined as a relationship that can produce offspring. They view the rabbis as working to maintain a “proper” and cohesive religious social order that makes no room for “others” in their own world, not to mention among today’s community of readers. As a result, rabbinic literature poses a challenge to students, many of whom are struggling with their own sexuality. And so I ask, how can students learn to read rabbinic texts in a way that reduces the distance many of them feel between the texts of the rabbis and the individuals who they are? How can we teach them to read these texts and not make automatic presumptions about their authors?³

Approaching this conundrum as a scholar of rabbinics, I am drawn to highlighting the historical and cultural context, explaining away difficult texts as possessing ideas that no longer belong to us. We can rationalize the texts our students read, describing them as bearing different moralities born of a different time and place.⁴ And yet, because we live in a world

“homorotetic” when discussing the sexuality of two people of the same gender (see, for example, Michael L. Satlow, *Tasting the Dish: Rabbinic Rhetorics of Sexuality* [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995], 185, n. 2). For the purposes of this article I have chosen to use the word “homosexuality” in instances where I am dealing with the rabbis’ male-male sexual concerns, despite its semantic limitations. This is because of the bridge I want to build between the rabbis and the lives of students in today’s society.

³ See *Learning to Read Talmud: What it Looks Like and How It Happens*, eds. Jane L. Kanarek and Marjorie Lehman (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2016) where professors teaching rabbinics classes in universities and seminaries offer case studies discussing how they teach students to read Talmudic texts. For one example from outside of Jewish Studies regarding the development of anti-homophobic attitudes see, Kathy J. Phillips, “*Billy Budd* as Anti-Homophobic Text,” *College English* 56, no. 8 (1994). She writes the following about her concern regarding students’ reactions to Melville’s *Billy Budd*: “If students found homosexuality in the story, some might consider it a forbidden topic, then or now; some might not want to talk about it, but feel impeded, fearing that I or their peers might disapprove if they spoke sympathetically” (897). Phillips explores the ways in which studying *Billy Budd* led students to recognize homophobia and combat its harming effects.

⁴ John Dewey argues that “instead of thinking of our own dispositions and habits as accommodated to certain institutions we have to learn to think of the latter as expressions,

where homophobia continues to surface, I am also interested in what it means to teach rabbinic texts in an anti-homophobic way, which means shifting the ways students come to and read rabbinic texts, not to mention what they see in them.⁵

I have therefore chosen to look at rabbinic interpretations of Joseph and his interaction with Potiphar's wife in Genesis 39 as an example not only of texts that question Joseph's heteronormativity, but also that invite us to engage with the tension between homophobic and anti-homophobic rabbinic attitudes. Drawing in part from Menachem Fisch, I want my students to recognize how comfortable the rabbis are with redacting texts that emphasize an "anti-traditionalist" perspective, set against the backdrop of a traditionalist-sounding presentation of their universe.⁶ Such a process begins with preparing students to feel comfortable with a text's counter-coherence,⁷ that is, with the fact that rabbinic texts have come together over centuries and bear the mark of many sources woven together that do not always share the same view. To hone this approach and make it more understandable to students, I also root myself in Daniel Boyarin's (now twenty-five year old) approach, which exhorts us to pay

projections and extensions of habitually dominant personal attitudes" that arguably need to be rethought ("Creative Democracy: The Task Before Us," in *The Essential Dewey: Pragmatism, Education, Democracy*, eds. Larry A. Hickman and Thomas M. Alexander [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998], vol. 1, 340). Dewey wrote this essay in 1939.

⁵ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 14.

⁶ Menachem Fisch makes this argument in his analysis of b. Berakhot 19b, showing how the Talmud redacts objections and debates in ways that emphasize an "anti-traditionalist" practice of halakhic reading, set against the backdrop of a traditionalist-sounding presentation of the rabbis' halakhic universe. The Talmud for Fisch (and I would include here Midrash as well) recognizes halakha while teaching its rabbinic readers (and leaders) to think about it according to constructive skepticism. See Menachem Fisch, "Berakhot 19b: The Bavli's Paradigm of Confrontational Discourse," *The Journal of Textual Reasoning*, vol. 4, no. 2 (2006). See also the introduction in this volume by Peter Ochs and responses by Aryeh Cohen, Shaul Magid, and Jacob Meskin.

⁷ Meike Bal, *Death and Dissymetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 17.

attention to the ruptures and the discontinuities that highlight cracks in the rabbis' systems of power, ones that emerge when we pay attention to the very sources that comprise a rabbinic sugya or a collection of midrashic pericopes (like those that comment on Genesis 39). Ultimately, I am advocating for a kind of reading that resists collaborating with dominant perspectives or presumptions, but that also resists rejecting the texts because of what they fail to say.⁸ While Boyarin argues that, in locating these disruptions, the rabbis leave us a record of their opposition to the values they purport—that is, “a fissure” for us to creep into—our students still need guidance in finding ways to read texts that seem, at first glance, to be invoking a homophobic attitude.⁹ On the margins of the hegemonic discourse of rabbinic texts, Boyarin argues, something else is occurring, something that demands our attention, if only we can lead students to notice.¹⁰

The stakes are high. Much is lost when students fail to see the full range of interpretive possibilities that rabbinic texts offer. Therefore, I am advocating for us to ensure that these texts achieve what is possible, not to mention needed, in society today, because they can. Reading texts with presuppositions that have been considered normative according to Jewish tradition prevents the prospect of attitudinal and cultural change— not only in the way we understand the rabbinic project as one about generating continuous oral discourse, but also in ourselves.¹¹ Cultivated

⁸ Daniel Boyarin, “Rabbinic Resistance to Male Domination: A Case Study in Talmudic Cultural Poetics,” in *Interpreting Judaism in a Postmodern Age*, ed. Steven Kepnes (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 119; Boyarin, *Carnal Israel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 227-228; Boyarin, “Reading Androcentrism against the Grain: Women, Sex, and Torah-Study,” *Poetics Today* 12, no. 1 (1991): 29-30. Also see Jana Sawicki, *Disciplining Foucault: Feminism, Power, and the Body: Thinking Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 14.

⁹ Boyarin, “Rabbinic Resistance to Male Domination,” 125-6.

¹⁰ Boyarin, “Rabbinic Resistance to Male Domination,” 136.

¹¹ Mieke Bal, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 1; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 1. Also see Stephen D. Fraade where he refers to the dialogical nature of rabbinic texts, especially midrash. He notes that while these texts address scriptural meaning, they draw their student auditors into the interpretive texts, yielding open-ended results. This, for him and others, is

ignorance maintains social structures privileging heterosexuality over other sexual identities.¹² Furthermore, as David Halperin argues, sexuality unlocks the deepest mysteries of human personalities; therefore, to study the rabbis as they grapple with sexual identity is to understand them more deeply.¹³ Moreover, if students don't connect with the content of the texts we choose to teach because they find no way to insert their own values into the learning process, they shut down.¹⁴ We mask the rabbis' internal struggle and hide the questions that they, like us, are asking. Better to expose our students to the blurred lines evident in rabbinic texts and problematize the rabbis, especially when we have texts that help us to do just that.¹⁵

Sarra Lev and Julia Watts Belser reinforce the point that we need to find the space or the fissure that Boyarin insists is there in rabbinic texts.

a way of defining the ways in which rabbinic texts are oral. Orality is continuous, and it is what enables texts to survive ("Rabbinic *Midrash* and Ancient Jewish Biblical Interpretation," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, eds. Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert and Martin S. Jaffee [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007], 117). Also see Martin S. Jaffee, "Rabbinic Authorship as a Collective Enterprise," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, eds. Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert and Martin S. Jaffee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 26, 32-35; Elizabeth Shanks Alexander, "The Orality of Rabbinic Writing," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, eds. Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert and Martin S. Jaffee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 51-55.

¹² Julia Watts Belser, "Privilege and Disaster: Toward a Jewish Feminist Ethics of Climate Silence and Environmental Unknowing," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 34, no. 1 (2014): 93 and n. 37. She refers to an important collection of essays entitled *Agnatology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance*, ed. Robert Proctor and Londa Schiebinger (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008). Agnatology is the study of culturally induced ignorance. For earlier work in this area see Kosofsky Sedgwick's introduction to her book, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 4-9.

¹³ Halperin, 26.

¹⁴ Daniel J. Burke, "Connecting Content and Motivation: Education's Missing Link," *Peabody Journal of Education* 70, vol. 2 (1995): 66-81.

¹⁵ Kosofsky Sedgwick, 10 refers us to Harold Beaver ("Homosexual Signs," *Critical Inquiry* [1981], 115) while not entirely agreeing with him. Beaver encourages us to see heterosexuality and homosexuality as unstable categories.

We need to find instances where rabbinic texts summon us¹⁶—that is, where the rabbis themselves confront moral complexity, where they complicate their own definitions of male and female sexuality, where they challenge halakhic prohibitions like homosexuality, where signs of struggle emerge within the maze of sources redacted one with one another. It is here that they invite us to speak with them such that we read rabbinic texts in more productive, powerful, and significant ways.¹⁷ In my mind, this is a pedagogy of confrontation where rabbinic texts do not instruct, but provoke us to confront the rabbis as they provoke one another, talking with them and back to them about the issues they raise.¹⁸

Reading Mishnah Sanhedrin alongside a Midrashic Reading of Joseph, Potiphar, and Potiphar's Wife

The case of Mishnah Sanhedrin 7:4 communicates an expected rabbinic legal perspective on male-male sexual relations, which quite disturbingly equates incest and homosexuality with bestiality.¹⁹ It reads:

These are those who are stoned: he who has sex with his mother, with the wife of his father [even if she is not his mother], with his daughter-in-law, **with [another] male**, or with

אלו הן הנסקלִין. הבא על האם, ועל אשת האב, ועל הכלה, ועל הזכור, ועל הבהמה, והאשה המביאה את הבהמה

¹⁶ Sarra Lev, "Talmud that Works Your Heart: New Approaches to Reading," in *Learning to Read Talmud: What it Looks Like and How It Happens*, eds. Jane L. Kanarek and Marjorie Lehman (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2016), 175–218. And see Martha C. Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classic Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

¹⁷ Watts Belser, 89; Lev, 175–218.

¹⁸ Bal, *Lethal Love*, 14.

¹⁹ No doubt there are other sources that mention male-male sex in rabbinic literature. My intention here, however, is to locate some unexpected source material and align it with this mishnah in Sanhedrin as a pedagogical model for provoking a more nuanced conversation about the rabbis and their views on homosexuality. For a more comprehensive look at rabbinic sources, see Satlow's chapter "Homoroticism" in his *Tasting the Dish: Rabbinic Rhetorics of Sexuality* (185–222).

an animal, a woman who has sex
with an animal.

This mishnah reinforces Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, reading these verses as a biblical prohibition against homosexuality. Additionally, by contextualizing this tannaitic source within the context of the rabbis' Greco-Roman surroundings (where, for example, a master wanting to penetrate his male slave would be considered normal behavior), this text can emerge as a critique by the rabbis of their neighboring culture, not to mention an attempt to differentiate themselves from a non-rabbinic other. While such historicization is important in this type of a teaching context, I also want my students to see more. I want them to see that, in fact, the issue of male-male sex is far more complicated for the rabbis; they too were struggling to understand sexuality. But what will lead my students to this? What will pull them into this conversation?

Essentially, my goal is to unsettle a text such as Mishnah Sanhedrin 7:4 so that I can disturb my students' presuppositions about the rabbis. That disruption will require introducing other texts. While we can argue what the scholarly "rules" are for studying texts from an intertextual perspective, and while we can debate what counts as legitimate instances of using one text to understand another, my goal is to generate a clash between sources, a fissure that will generate a more nuanced conversation about homosexuality. I recognize here that the sources I have chosen to teach—midrashic texts from *Beraishit Rabbah*, talmudic texts from *Bavli Sotah*, and of course the starting point, m. *Sanhedrin* 7:4—are not necessarily built one upon the other. Nor do they represent one generalizable rabbinic position. But if my pedagogy is to be focused on problematizing students' readings of the rabbis as homophobic men, I am willing to push the boundaries of my field somewhat to study texts with them that challenge this view. In fact, the rabbis are asking questions about whether there is such a thing as "perfect gender" or, as in the midrashic material I present below, "perfect manhood."

Many students enter our courses holding onto traditional readings of biblical sources, whether from school, home, or film. Familiar with the

seduction scene of Genesis 39, where Potiphar's wife entices Joseph and he resists, many see it as a way through which Joseph fends off Egyptian values. To be sure, many verses are dedicated to the interchange between Joseph and Potiphar's wife, eliciting drama and literary tension. What will Joseph do? Can he resist the sexual advances of the wife of Potiphar? Indeed, rabbinic tradition supports the narrative in which Joseph fails to succumb, marking him an exemplar of righteous behavior.

Not surprisingly, in his analysis of this narrative, Joshua Levinson exhorts us to push the element of sexual seduction into the background of this story so as to see Potiphar's wife as Joseph's "cultural other." Through Joseph, he argues, the rabbis bring the challenges of being a slave in "a foreign and hostile environment" to the fore in an attempt to denigrate foreign culture and to dramatize the transgression of cultural boundaries. For Levinson, this is an example of where gender discourse is "employed [by the rabbis] to produce and police discourses of identity in the social formation of rabbinic Judaism."²⁰ Moshe Lavee agrees with Levinson, also pointing to the fact that "the cultural threat is pictured in the uncontrolled influence of foreign women on the masculine body, which is an emblem or metonym of identity" (specifically Israelite identity).²¹ Unfortunately, arguments focused on bringing identity politics to the fore in the case of Joseph can overshadow midrashic readings of Genesis 39 that labor to expose the complexity of male and female sexuality, not to mention Joseph's maleness, and such arguments arrest the potential for further inquiry. Genesis 39:1 reads:

When Joseph was taken down to Egypt, a certain Egyptian, Potiphar, a *saris* of Pharaoh and his chief steward, bought him from the

יוסף הורד מצרימה ויקנהו פוטיפר סרים
פרעה שר הטבחים איש מצרי מיד
הישמעאלים אשר הורדהו שמה:

²⁰ Joshua Levinson, "An-Other Woman: Joseph and Potiphar's Wife: Staging the Body Politic," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 87, vols. 3/4 (1997): 274-275.

²¹ Moshe Lavee, "Birth, Seminal Emission and Conversion: Gender, Self-Control and Identity in *b. Bekhorot*," in *Introduction to Seder Qodashim: A Feminist Commentary on the Babylonian Talmud*, vol. 5, ed. Tal Ilan, Monika Brockhaus, and Tanja Hidde (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 299.

Ishmaelites who had brought him there.

In the hands of the rabbis, this verse becomes a way to elaborate on the male-male relationship between Joseph and Potiphar, generating additional creative details absent from the biblical text. In *Beraishit Rabbah* 86:3 and b. *Sotah* 13b, we find a midrashic incident driven presumably by the description of Potiphar as a *saris*, a biblical word which probably means courtier here but which can mean eunuch elsewhere in biblical literature. While it is unclear whether eunuchs were castrated or impotent, it seems that they were associated with royal courts in which kings wished to limit the sexual prowess of those who served in their harems (Esther 1:10, 1:12, 4:4). In rabbinic legal literature, the *saris* was considered a man who could not procreate and was deemed required for all legal requirements placed on men, such as, donning tefillin (t. *Yevamot* 10:6).²² This led some scholars, including Charlotte Fonrobert and Ishay Rosen-Zvi, to argue that gender fluidity was a foreign concept for the rabbis.²³ These sources prompt us to think otherwise.

Beraishit Rabbah 86:3

בראשית רבה (תאודור-אלבק) פרשת
וישב פרשה פו

[Potiphar] was a "*saris*" of Pharaoh and this intimates that his body was emasculated, thus teaching that he [Potiphar] purchased him [Joseph] for the purpose of [having] sexual relations [with him]. And God

סריס פרעה שנסתרס בגופו מלמד שלא לקחו אלא לתשמיש וסירסו הקדוש ברוך הוא בגופו, לדוב שהיתה משכלת בבני אדניה אמ' פכרון ניביה כך מלמד שלא

²² Saul Lieberman, ed., *Tosefta Nashim* [New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1995].

²³ See Charlotte Fonrobert, "The Semiotics of the Sexed Body in Early Halakhic Discourse," in *Closed and Open: Readings of Rabbinic Texts*, ed. Matthew Kraus (New York: Gorgias Press, 2006), 69-96. and Ishay Rosen-Zvi argues that sexual identity was for the rabbis "the product of a simple distinction between sexual organs. The whole project of defining levels of feminization based on a model of gender fluidity was foreign to the [the rabbinic] gender economy," ("The Rise and Fall of Rabbinic Masculinity," *Jewish Studies, an Internet Journal* 12 [2013]: 16-18).

castrated [Potiphar's] body. [This can be compared] to a bear that brought havoc upon its master's children such that [the master] ordered, "Break its fangs!" In the same way we are taught that [Potiphar] only bought Joseph to have sexual relations with him, but God emasculated him [that is, God took out Potiphar's "fangs" so that he could not have sexual relations with Joseph].

B. Sotah 13b

Potiphar, a *saris*, of Pharaoh bought him [from the Ishmaelites] (Gen. 39:1). Rav said: [This means] that [Potiphar] bought [Joseph] for himself. Gabriel came and emasculated him. [This explains why] initially [his name] is written as Potiphar and in the end it is written as Potiphra.

לקחו אלא לתשמיש וסירסו הקדוש ברוך
הוא.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת סוטה דף יג עמוד ב

ויקנהו פוטיפר סריס פרעה אמר רב:
שקנאו לעצמו. (בא גבריאל וסירסו) בא
גבריאל ופירעו, מעיקרא כתיב פוטיפר,
ולבסוף פוטיפרע.

These texts have a certain shock effect. Potiphar's purchase of Joseph and its lack of detail simply do not lead us to imagine anything about male-male sexual relations. Arguably, Beraishit Rabbah 86:3 and b. Sotah 13b emerge out of deep-seated, culturally-driven homophobia. Potiphar's purchase of Joseph is then an example of the rabbis' desire to attribute homosexual feelings to Potiphar in the name of discrediting him. In the version found in Beraishit Rabbah, God protects Joseph from a sinful act that is equated with a bear (Potiphar) who dangerously riles up his master's children, requiring an intervention to keep them safe. In this scenario, Potiphar is the bear who incites trouble, sexually enticing God's children (here Joseph). Just like the bear needs to be defanged to disempower and emasculate him, so too does something need to be done to Potiphar's body to protect Joseph. In the parallel source in Bavli Sotah, the angel Gabriel castrates Potiphar, robbing him of his masculinity and

his masculine name. He therefore takes on a feminized form of the name Potiphar: Potiphara. Additionally, paralleling the symbolism of his wife in the seduction scene with Joseph, Potiphar becomes the symbol of all that is foreign and dangerous about Egyptian culture, not to mention all that Joseph would have to fend off in the court of Pharaoh. Potiphar's midrashically imagined homosexual drive is the means by which the rabbis "other" him, making him all that Joseph is not. But there is something else here.

While this midrash uses homosexuality to discredit Potiphar, it is also true that Potiphar's attraction is to the one male figure in Genesis who exhibits characteristics that cross gender lines. Joseph is "destabilizing"; he mixes up male/female categories.²⁴ For example, Joseph dresses in the coat his father gives him, a *ketonet passim* (Genesis 37:3) that is worn only by women in biblical sources (in 2 Samuel 13:18).²⁵ He is the only biblical male character referred to as "*yefe toar*," a term used only to describe women, including his mother Rachel (Genesis 29:17).²⁶ And, he is ostracized for exhibiting "otherness" by his male brothers, eventuating their decision to force him into a pit in an act that feminizes, dominates, and debases him, like men do to women they want to control.²⁷ Joseph's sister Dina is also sexually compromised, and like Dina (rather than being like the other men in his family), Joseph is powerless, unable to defend himself against the ire of his brothers.²⁸ Additionally, in being the son of

²⁴ See Wendy Zierler discusses the gender ambiguity apparent in the Joseph figure ("Joseph(ine), the Singer: The Queer Joseph and Modern Jewish Writers," *Nashim* 24 [2013]: 98-101); see Lori Lefkowitz, "Coats and Tales: Joseph Stories and Jewish Masculinity," in *Scripture: The First Stories of Jewish Sexual Identities* (Lanham: Rowan and Littlefield, 2010), 87-95; and see Robert A. Harris, "Sexual Orientation in the Presentation of Joseph's Character in Biblical and Rabbinic Literature," *AJS Review*, Volume 43 [2019] (forthcoming).

²⁵ Tamar, King David's daughter, wears a *ketonet passim*, which is an "ornamented tunic, for maiden princesses were customarily dressed in such garments" (2 Samuel 13:18).

²⁶ In Deut. 21:11, a woman described as a *yefat toar* is a beautiful woman. Also see Esther 2:7, where she is described also as *yefat toar*.

²⁷ Zierler, 98-101.

²⁸ Lefkowitz, 95-96.

his mother Rachel and therefore beloved more than his older brothers by Jacob, he unsettles the rules of male primogeniture, eventually becoming a leader over them.²⁹ Finally, the question of why Joseph resists Potiphar's wife looms. We know from Genesis 38 and the story of Judah and Tamar that Judah engages in sexual relations with a prostitute and, despite his behavior, births children destined for leadership. Judah is righteous for having sex with a prostitute, but Joseph, on the other hand, is righteous for resisting sex with Potiphar's wife. Why is the Joseph story so different, appearing only one chapter later?

The entrance of the angel Gabriel in b. Sotah 13b to emasculate Potiphar reveals a desire to protect Joseph from his own sexual feelings, distinguishing him entirely from Judah of the earlier chapter. Joseph cannot, on his own, resist another man. While it is possible that Joseph, as a boy, is enslaved to Potiphar and may have found himself unable to resist the power of his master, arguably Joseph also represents the rabbinic desire to think about sexual enticement from a number of vantage points. In fact, it is not surprising for divine beings in rabbinic literature to intercede to protect the reputation of great rabbinic personae, naming the fact that sexual drive can be so powerful as to require supernatural intervention, or so powerful that it can be used to fend off one's enemies. In b. Kiddushin 81a, God intercedes to protect Rabbi Meir from Satan, who is dressed as a beautiful woman and has caught this prominent rabbi's eye. In b. Avodah Zara 18ab, Elijah masquerades as a prostitute in a brothel and pretends to have sex with Rabbi Meir in order to protect him from Roman guards who are chasing him. In the case of b. Sotah 13b, the rabbis turn Joseph into the character who, without assistance from God or God's angel, Gabriel, will act on his feelings of desire for another man. By castrating Potiphar, he becomes (possibly) a "non-man."³⁰ Joseph is safe; no sexual boundaries are crossed. Amidst homophobic overtones, which I

²⁹ Lefkowitz, 95.

³⁰ For a larger discussion about castration rooted in kabbalah, see Shaul Magid, "Constructing Women from Men: The Metaphysics of Male Homosexuality among Lurianic Kabbalists in Sixteenth-Century Safed," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 17, no. 1 (2010): 22.

do not deny are here, we find signs of rabbinic struggle and admission. Men, like Joseph—or men, like the rabbis—possess sexual desire, some for other men. As such, the rabbis reinterpret the Genesis narrative as a way to think with the Joseph character about male-male attraction. While their fears of homosexuality position them to dream up a disturbing intervention performed only by God, this also suggests that God alone has the power to change the natural course of things, including sexual desire.

Turning to Genesis 39:6, which refers to Joseph's beauty, *Beraishit Rabbah* takes another interpretive opportunity to, once again, turn Joseph into someone he is not:

Beraishit Rabbah 87:3

"His master's wife cast her eyes upon Joseph." (Gen. 39:7) What is written [in the preceding verse] before this point [is raised]? "Now Joseph was of beautiful form and beautiful to look at." (Gen. 39:6) [This is because Joseph is likened] to a strong man who stood in the market, while penciling his eyes, fixing his hair and lifting his heel, and [Joseph] said, "I look nice, I look nice, nice like a strong man." They said to him, "If you are a strong man, if you are nice-looking, here is a she-bear before you [Potiphar's wife], get up and attack/overpower her."

בראשית רבה (וילנא) פרשת וישב
פרשה פז סימן ג

ותשא אשת אדוניו את עיניה, מה כתיב
למעלה מן הענין ויהי יוסף יפה תואר ויפה
מראה, לגבור שהיה עומד בשוק
וממשמש בעיניו ומתקן בשערו ומתלה
בעקיבו אמר: לי נאה, לי יאי, נאה גבור,
אמרו ליה אי את גבור אי את יאי הא
דובא קמד קום קפחינה

The midrash above begins by describing what makes Joseph beautiful, as noted in Genesis 39:6.³¹ But we also find that the rabbis use his beauty to cast doubt on his masculinity. Are make-up, hairstyle, and gait determining factors? Is masculinity tied to heteronormative sexual

³¹ Also see *Beraishit Rabbah* 84:7.

relations? Why entice Joseph to “attack” Potiphar’s wife if his rejection of her is so clearly stated in the biblical text?³² And why use a reference to a bear as if to challenge Joseph to act as an aggressive male able to prove his masculinity by taming a ferocious animal who, in this instance is, Potiphar’s wife? Surely, the suggestion reverses the thread of the biblical story by turning Joseph into the man who needs masculine strength not to resist Potiphar’s wife, but to seduce her.

However, it is precisely this contrived literary turn that creates the space for us to wonder what the rabbis are playing out in their own minds when they command Joseph to have sexual relations with Potiphar’s wife in order to prove his masculinity, turning Joseph into the aggressor. If Joseph takes on the dare to attack Potiphar’s wife, he becomes a male perpetrator and she his female victim, rather than a man unreceptive to the sexual advances of a woman. And then, allowing Joseph to resist Potiphar’s wife seems like a far better reading, even if resisting her is because he is sexually attracted to men. As such, to say that the midrash is denigrating Joseph’s effeminacy and reflects the rabbis’ homophobia is to fail to see a two-sided picture, that is, that the rabbis are also anxious about insisting upon heteronormativity, fearing that both the impetus to prove one’s heteronormativity and the consequences of such heteronormative relationships can be disastrous.³³

Interestingly, a midrashic tradition that links Tamar (Genesis 38) and Potiphar’s wife summons us still further in an analysis of Joseph. In an attempt to explain away the reasons for why these stories appear one after the other in the biblical narrative, *Beraishit Rabbah* 85:2 adds a surprising literary detail: “Just as Tamar acted for the sake of heaven [ensuring the continuation of Judah’s line], so too [did the wife of Potiphar] act for the sake of heaven, for she saw through her astrological prediction that she

³² See footnote above regarding my translation of the midrashic text.

³³ I do not extrapolate from here to make claims about the relationship between sexual repression of any sort and rape. I am merely describing how the rabbis use the notion of Joseph attacking Potiphar’s wife in a literary way to highlight their discomfort with a forced heteronormativity.

was destined to have sons through Joseph.”³⁴ This turns Potiphar’s wife into a woman with a different motive. She not only acts in ways that parallel the mothers of the book of Genesis in her concern for the future of Joseph’s line and a desire to be written into Israelite history, but she also means to seduce Joseph for reasons beyond mere pleasure. Whether she is attracted to him or not is beside the point. The heteronormative sexual relationship that is imagined here is significant not only because male/female sexual relations produce progeny, but because her actions can connect her, like Tamar, to the Israelite nation, making her a player in the narrative of Israelite history. Taming Potiphar’s wife’s character, draining from her an image as a seductress, gives Joseph more reason to have a relationship with her, completely unrelated to his sexual identity. And when the biblical narrative finally marries him off to Asenat (Genesis 41:45), possibly Potiphar’s daughter, we find Joseph thanking God for his two children, naming one Ephraim because God made him fertile in “the land of his affliction” (Genesis 41:52). When read alongside these midrashim, I wonder whether “his affliction” is defined as a concern about having children with an Israelite lineage if he never engages in heteronormative sexual relations.³⁵

When studied together with Mishnah Sanhedrin 7:4, these sources from Beraishit Rabbah create a fissure as we ask why a redactor would preserve them at all. They engender questions about the possible motivations for their production and inclusion. Indeed, if ideas are

³⁴ Note that this midrashic comment (BR 85:2) continues stating that Potiphar’s wife was unsure whether she would have children through Joseph or that they would descend from her daughter, Asenat, despite the fact that it is unclear from Genesis 41:45 whether Potiphar’s wife was her mother, as it states: “Pharaoh then gave Joseph the name Zaphenat-paneah; and he gave him for a wife, Asenat daughter of Potiphara, priest of On.”

³⁵ Is Joseph’s presence in Egypt the cause of his affliction? His marriage occurs simultaneously with Pharaoh’s promotion of him to the man “in charge of the land of Egypt,” not to mention that the birth of his progeny comes prior to the years of famine. Might the rabbis be reading “affliction” as a reference to Joseph’s ability to have children despite his homosexuality? And if not, this becomes a textual moment that instigates a conversation about homosexuality. It also leads us to think about what presumptions we bring to our readings of biblical material and why we make the interpretive decisions that we do.

imposed on the verses from outside the biblical narratives, as Robert Cover argues, what is the narrative behind the narrative?³⁶ In truth, we can never be sure what those ideas are, but an attempt to grapple with the underlying motivations of a rabbinic text, rereading those motivations back into the biblical narrative, adds another layer that can speak to us. The rabbis appear to be struggling here not only with sexuality, but more specifically with men, like Joseph, who fail to fit into a particular masculine mold.³⁷ What is it that defines men as men, and is sexuality tied to that definition? These midrashim open the door for us to consider that Joseph's rejection of Potiphar's wife has more to do with his sexual confusion, or possibly an attraction to men, than anything else. He cannot be the sexually aggressive male, nor can he be the man who is chased and succumbs.

That leaves us with the Joseph of the biblical narrative, who rejects Potiphar's wife. And yet, according to b. Sotah 36b and Beraishit Rabbah 87:7, Joseph needed to see an image of the face of his father in order to resist her. Upon doing so, he ejaculates into his fingernails, the rabbis tell us, suggesting that Joseph is unable to fully control his sexual desire when faced with temptation. But this odd detail gives us further cause to question what is percolating in the minds of the rabbis who imagine it. To spill seed is no doubt transgressive behavior,³⁸ but Joseph does so without

³⁶ Robert Cover, "Nomos and Narrative," in *Narrative, Violence, and the Law: The Essays of Robert Cover*, eds. Martha Minow, Michael Ryan, and Austin Sarat (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 96.

³⁷ Michael Satlow stresses that in rabbinic culture masculinity had to be "achieved"; one had to conform to a definition of maleness. See Satlow's larger discussion in "'Try to Be a Man': The Rabbinic Construction of Masculinity," *Harvard Theological Review* 89, no. 1 (1996): 1920. See also Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Male* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) and Rosen-Zvi, 12-22 for a critique of Boyarin's argument.

³⁸ This emerges in Genesis 38 when Tamar's brother-in-law, Onan, spills his seed in an act that precipitates her decision to entice her father-in-law, Judah, into having sexual relations with her so that she will birth Israelite children. Onan is the one responsible for carrying on his deceased brother's line by impregnating his sister-in-law, Tamar. Commenting on Onan's actions, the biblical texts states, "What he [Onan] did was displeasing to the Lord, and [God] took his life also" (Genesis 38:10).

repercussion. Ejaculating semen in an unnatural way carries an aura of sinfulness, but it does not seem to make him culpable.

In the end, the rabbis preserve a tradition of interpretation that leaves us to integrate an image of Joseph's confused sexuality with his utter greatness as one of Israel's forefathers—the man who saves all of Egypt and his own family from famine. Here is another textual rupture that allows students to enter and engage with the rabbis' readings. In this way, rabbinic texts provoke them to think not only about their own sexuality, but also about the relationship between their sexuality and the people they ultimately want to be in the world. Reading rabbinic texts in conjunction with one another, while also doing the work of reading the details of those texts back into the Genesis narrative, creates a useful dialogue. Once the rabbis can leave us with a Joseph whose sexuality they themselves question alongside a biblical hero who ultimately "saves the day," students can see that the rabbis were not hiding everything they thought about sexuality. Indeed, there are anti-homophobic currents running through some of the texts the rabbis authored. Our goal is to lead our students to discover what they can read out of them so that they do not miss how the rabbis use Joseph to express their own confusion.

In fact, the Joseph narrative, and the midrashic tradition that arose in response, continued to play a role in the way that modern thinkers addressed homosexuality, making my desire to teach these texts part of a longer tradition of interest in them for this purpose. By eliding the texts of Bavli Sotah and Beraishit Rabbah, Jiri Mordechai Langer, a homosexual Jewish writer of the interwar "Prague circle" (1894-1943), found in them Joseph's heroism. He believed that in feeling trapped between Jewish law and one's sexual drives, a Jew suffers for the sake of Jewish culture. He writes in his study of sexuality and Judaism, *Die Erotik der Kabbala*:

The Bible reports that Potiphar's wife tried to compel Joseph to sleep with her. But the Talmudic sages alert us to reports (B.T. Sotah 13b) that Joseph was also solicited by Potiphar himself to have homosexual intercourse. But what really happened? Joseph can obey neither the wish of his loving master nor the wish of his mistress. The sages transmit an interesting addendum. Although Joseph succeeded in protecting his male sexual

organ from sin, he wasn't able to maintain total purity. Joseph, say the sages, spilled ten drops of semen from his ten fingers. If Eros is prevented from letting itself out in a normal way, it will find a less likely means of getting it out in order to free itself from prison. In ancient times it embodies itself in the Torah. In the Middle Ages, it dressed itself as Kabbala. The ten drops of semen that Joseph emitted became the ten sefirot of the Kabbala.³⁹

As such, in an attempt to explain the image of semen emerging from Joseph's fingernails, Langer states that sexual impulses cannot be controlled by a legal system. If one cannot have heteronormative or homosexual sex, then one will find another way to express pent-up desire, even if that means ejaculating through one's fingernails. And so, that is what Joseph did. He could not have sex with Potiphar's wife because he was not attracted to her, and he could not have sex with Potiphar because he could not act upon his homosexual desire. Where did that leave him? Spilling seed to release his pent-up desire. In this way, Langer helps us to understand that the rabbis used Joseph to bring their questions about sexuality to the fore, even to recognize that some could not adhere to a prohibition against homosexuality, as clear as it is in Leviticus or Sanhedrin, because of natural impulses that cannot be overcome.

And so, I end with Sarra Lev's charge. Is there a way to read rabbinic literature to create a kinder, more compassionate, empathetic and self-reflective modern-day society?⁴⁰ I think the answer is yes. But that depends on the texts we choose to teach and the way we choose to teach them. Resisting our scholarly inclination to always historicize the texts we

³⁹ See Jiri Mordechai Langer, *Die Erotik der Kabbala* (New Isenberg, 2006), 142-143 and Shaun Jacob Halper's comment on editions in his article, "Coming Out of the Hasidic Closet: Jiri Mordechai Langer (1894-1943) and the Fashioning of Homosexual Jewish Identity," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 101, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 190, n.3. Note that Langer "queers" the terms of the issue. Rather than seeking ways for homosexuality to be accepted in Jewish tradition, he recovers suppressed Jewish voices that present what he argues is the lived Jewish experience of the Jewish people. Halper, 226-228. See p. 214 for a reference to those relationships that Langer discusses were, indeed, part of the Jewish past. Also see Magid, "Constructing Women from Men," 15-28, who points out that homosexual behavior (*mishkav zakhor*) gave the metaphysical discussion taking place among kabbalists a concrete foundation.

⁴⁰ Lev, 176.

teach, and aligning texts alongside one another even if this texts do not necessarily build one upon the other, helps our students to find textual fissures so that they can creep in and enter a dialogue they might very well be having with and among themselves. As their teachers, we need to enable this dialogue to happen.