

This week's parashah, MiKeitz, almost always coincides with Hanukkah, so when I checked to see what I had discussed during for this parashah in previous years, I found all of my remarks had focused on Hanukkah. Since the holiday concludes with the entrance of Shabbat, I get to dive into MiKeitz this evening.

MiKeitz both begins and ends on a cliffhanger. At the beginning of the parashah, Yosef is languishing in an Egyptian prison, forgotten by the cupbearer to Pharaoh who promised to remember the young dream interpreter. By the end of the parashah, Yosef is has become viceroy of all Egypt, having interpreted Pharaoh's dreams, and successfully administered the collection of food during 7 years of plenty for redistribution during the seven years of famine. His brothers have bowed before him without recognizing him, and he tests them accusing them of being spies, and then by framing his youngest brother, and only full brother, Benjamin, for theft, claiming the right to keep him as a slave. The brothers face the prospect of returning to their father without the youngest, beloved son, whom they had vowed to protect.

And so ends the parashah.

In Torah study yesterday, we debated the quality of Yosef's character. Was he a traumatized young man, seeking to transcend his trauma and offer his brothers an opportunity for *teshuvah*? Was he a complete narcissist, caring nothing for his father and delighting in making his brothers squirm?

We discussed this question based on his and his brother's behavior before and throughout this parashah, but this evening, I want to tackle it through another lens: that of Yosef's clothing.

From the beginning of Yosef's narrative, clothing plays an important role. In last week's parashah, Yosef's favored status is indicated by the gift of the iconic "coat of many colors," – which is then stripped from him and smeared with blood when his brothers cast him into the pit. He rises to prominence in Potiphar's house, only

to have Potiphar's wife try to seduce him, tear his shirt, and accuse him of sexual assault. As my sister pointedly said to me last night, "It's like he was sexy and scantily clad, so he was asking for it."

In this week's parashah, Yosef undergoes two significant clothing transformations. First, in Chapter 41, after the cupbearer hears Pharaoh's dreams and tells Pharaoh about the dream interpreting Hebrew that he met in prison, in verse 14

"Thereupon Pharaoh sent for Joseph, and he was rushed from the dungeon. He had his hair cut and changed his clothes, and he appeared before Pharaoh."

It's a funny thing that Yosef was rushed from the dungeon to Pharaoh – but there was time for a haircut and change of clothes. Now, on a literal, logistical level, this would not have been something Yosef could have had the right to demand. So it must be, as Sforno says, "It is forbidden to appear in the Royal palace clad in sackcloth, prisoner's garb - we learn the lesson that one cannot come before a king in sackcloth from the Megillat Esther, in which Mordechai almost does so, and Esther is horrified," As Radak also puts it: "admission to the presence of the king is conditional on both body and attire being in first class condition."

Yosef's clothing and clothing changes are largely imposed on him by others – his father gives him the colored coat, his brothers take it from him, Potiphar's wife snatches his shirt, and the Pharaoh's servants dress him up. The final change of clothing is bestowed by Pharaoh himself, right after he approves the plan Yosef has suggested for preparing for the famine. In verse 42: "Removing his signet ring from his hand, Pharaoh put it on Joseph's hand; and he had him dressed in robes of fine linen, and put a gold chain about his neck." The parallel with Purim continues: Ramban points out that when Pharaoh gives the ring to Yosef, it has the same significance as in the megilla when Achashverosh gives his signet ring, first to Haman, then to Mordechai.

I find the parallels to Purim very suggestive. On Purim, we use clothing to perform the identity of something, or someone that we are usually not. Clothing can reveal what we want to show to the world – or what others demand that we show to the world. Clothing can be used to disguise, or to experiment with portraying ourselves in different ways, or disguising who we are. Once Pharaoh gives Yosef his own clothes and jewelry, Yosef's appearance is so transformed that his own brothers are unable to recognize him.

As Moshe Kempinski has written: "This phenomenon is clearly revealed in the Hebrew language. The word for clothing in Hebrew is "*Beget*" and its root seems to be connected to the Hebrew word for betrayal and deception, "*Bagad*", for after all the role of clothing is to hide and conceal. Clothes very often are used to hide the weakness or the negative traits of a man."

But Kempinski also writes: Joseph represented the concept of revealing G-d in the midst of the physical. He represented the power to change and enhance the physical surroundings around us and connecting it to its spiritual roots."

When we equate the clothes with the person, we deceive ourselves, and we deceive each other. But when we recognize that our unique selves are not *defined* by our physical trappings, but that our physical trappings are tools that we can wield for self-expression, then we can approach this idea of revealing God in the midst of the physical.

When my partner, Jacob, participated in Adamah, the Jewish organic farming fellowship, they always did an advocacy day, and studied these verses before going to the capitol. As their fellowship leader put it, this text reminded them "Even idealistic dreamers need to dress appropriately when approaching the seat of power."

Or as I told myself when trading out my environmental educator uniform of quick-dry pants, tie-dye t-shirts and hiking boots for the suits I wore to interview for

rabbinical school – “it’s important to wear the clothes that do the job.” – and to not assume that my identity can or should only be expressed through one fixed style.

But I got to choose to make those clothing shifts, and identity shifts.

Yosef, wore the clothes that did the job – and they revealed certain things about his identity – first as favored son, then as slave, then as second in command to Pharaoh. But I also wonder if for Yosef, the clothing of Pharaoh, like the many-colored coat were a burden, no less a burden than his slave shirt. HE was constantly expressing identities imposed by others. I imagine it might have been heartbreaking that his brothers didn’t recognize him, even as it was vindicating to see them bowing down to him.

So I want to withhold judgment on the question of whether Yosef was a prophetic idealist or cruel narcissist. I feel for Joseph, as person who always had to play a role, in costume, and maybe was so constrained by the assigned roles that he never really had the space to explore who he was under all of the different sets of clothing.

May we remember to withhold that judgment and remain curious about the person behind the costume – with Yosef, with ourselves, and with each other.

Shabbat shalom.