

**Finding Favor In the Eyes of Pharaoh:
A Gay Reading of Joseph**

A new take on Joseph informed by the study of homoeroticism in the Zohar and the culture of thirteenth century kabbalists.

Stefano Iacono

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for Cantorial Ordination

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
Debbie Friedman School of Sacred Music
New York, New York

January 2021

Written Project Advisor: Dr. Sharon Koren

*This work is dedicated to my husband,
whose love for midrash inspired me to find “our place” in the texts of our faith
in honor of the gay men before us who have not survived to see this day.*

To Alex, in anticipation of our future.

Table of Contents

Introduction: An Argument for Gay Exegesis	4
Chapter 1: A Gay Reading of Joseph	20
Chapter 2: How Zoharic Hermeneutics Enhance the Reading	42
Conclusion: Preliminary Thoughts on Gay Exegesis in Synagogue Life	63
Bibliography	66
Appendix: “Atah Tih’yeh Al Beiti” by Stefano Iacono	68

Introduction: An Argument for Gay Exegesis

“Apparent truth, truly apparent, is disclosed through the concealment of its disclosure.”¹

Identity and Interpretation

When my husband and I were asked to speak on Pride Shabbat in June of 2017, we excitedly accepted the honor. We were to reflect on our experiences as gay Jews by responding to the prompt, “what Pride Shabbat means to me.” We had not yet returned to the United States from my year of study in Jerusalem where we made a home and quickly formed a loving social network of LGBTQ+ friends. We shared similar struggles and celebrations and the warmth from this group of queer people from west and East Jerusalem radiated from the gay bar we frequented on our way back from walks in the Old City. It was the first time I allowed my identities to integrate. I was approaching thirty, newly married, and only now publicly my full self. Coming out of the closet means having to come out every time you meet somebody new, and moving to a foreign country, no matter how at-home one feels, means constantly meeting new people.

I practiced explaining in Hebrew that I was not married to a woman, but rather to a man. I prepared sentences about our wedding and our commitments to tradition for the inevitable follow-up questions about *chuppah*, blessings, and the hora. I learned how to conjugate my way out of a conversation that turned exegetical in a language that tied my tongue from being pithy when confronting homophobia. There is no satisfying way to explain how you and your husband love each other like Ruth and Naomi when the cultural understanding of biblical love is fundamentally heterosexual. Likewise, there is

¹ Elliot Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005): 10.

no way to rebuke children who laugh and curse at the sight of two men holding hands without betraying yourself with burning cheeks and the sudden onset of a stutter. Our gay friends by and large preferred the idea of civil marriage outside of Israel because the religious tie tainted, in some way, the thought of a “gay marriage.”² In advance of Pride Shabbat I found myself making notes in frustration, full of resentment about what I perceived as a forced splitting of gay Jewish souls. Other than the handful of friends whose families affiliated with egalitarian religious communities, every gay man I knew rejected the idea of marriage for its connection to a religion that rejected them.

Most affiliated American Jews belong to synagogues that are more liberal than those my Israeli friends remember, but our approach to text even as Reform Jews is still staunchly heterosexist. Feminist theologians have made incredible strides encouraging Jews of all stripes to reexamine their understandings of biblical women, and the popular *Torah: A Women’s Commentary* has rightfully earned a place in the pews. The argument for Torah study that incorporates a feminist perspective has been demonstrated through critical interpretation of text. *Torah: A Women’s Commentary* in particular features essays by women scholars who engage with the text and teach it from their point of view, repairing a lack of women’s voices in the tradition of textual interpretation. Feminist exegesis enhances our understanding of the text. This is the continuing work of liberation, ringing in each successive generation in hopes of continued tikkun. It is critical to social progress within any religious community, and given that Judaism places a particular value on the study of text and the layering of tradition, adding more diverse

² There is no civil marriage in Israel, only religious. None of the Jewish, Muslim, or Christian religious bodies recognize or perform same-sex marriages. Instead, gay Israelis either register as domestic partners and receive benefits from the state or they go abroad for a civil marriage that is recognized by the state after the fact.

voices to the chain ensures a richness that will maintain relevance for generations as Jews seek to understand a complicated, ever-evolving world while maintaining a connection to an ancient tradition.

The Cost of Homophobic Exegesis

Feminist and queer voices are responding to a common problem within Jewish tradition. The task of progressive religion is to progress with time and culture, and this requires confronting traditions of exclusion. In the words of Judith Plaskow, “the feminist as feminist, then, must insist with the liberal Jew that whatever the religious origins of halakhah, it is also rooted in and serves a human social Order.”³ Exclusion is fundamental to social stability when the powers that be seek total control. If men seek to stay in control, they must legislate the position of all those who are subservient to them. This is of course an overly-simplified explanation of how hierarchies are formed through social constructs that then rule over all “others,”⁴ but it bears mentioning because in this way our world still resembles the biblical world.

The need for a critique of a heterosexist culture is made clear in a Reform responsum from 1977 answering a question about a group of “homosexuals” who formed their own synagogue. Alexander Schindler, President-elect of the Union of American

³ Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 71.

⁴ See Emmanuel Levinas’s notion of the “One” and the “other.” The One establishes power by subjugating the “other” by defining the “other” in terms of how they are different from or unlike the One. For most of Western history, for example, white men have made up dominant society and tools of racism, misogyny, homophobia, and xenophobia have centered white men. Aristotle’s definition of woman as deficient in comparison to man is an early corollary to Levinas’s theory.

Hebrew Congregations⁵ at the time asked, “Is it in accordance with the spirit of Jewish tradition to encourage the establishment of a congregation of homosexuals?” Rabbi Solomon Freehof replied:

There is no question that Scripture considers homosexuality to be a grave sin. The rabbi who organized this congregation, justifying himself, said that being Reform, we are not bound by the *Halacha* of the Bible. It may well be that we do not consider ourselves bound by all the ritual and ceremonial laws of Scripture, but we certainly revere the ethical attitudes and judgments of the Bible. In Scripture (Lev. 18:22), homosexuality is considered to be “an abomination.” So, too, in Leviticus 20:13.

If Scripture calls it an abomination, it means that it is more than violation of a mere legal enactment: it reveals a deep-rooted ethical attitude. How deep-rooted this aversion is can be seen from the fact that, although Judaism developed in the Near East, which is notorious for the prevalence of homosexuality, Jews kept away from such acts, as is seen from the *Talmud* (Kiddushin 82a), which states that Jews are not “under the suspicion of homosexuality.” In other words, the opposition to homosexuality was more than a Biblical law; it was a deep-rooted way of life of the Jewish people, a way of life maintained in a world where homosexuality was a widespread practice.⁶

Rabbi Freehof does not base his opposition on halachah, but rather an understanding of biblical culture influenced by his interpretation of the Bible. The “way of life of the Jewish people” Rabbi Freehof mentions here is a myth. Never once has a consensus existed in Jewish tradition on how to be Jewish, but more importantly, he takes for granted that his response and worldview is built upon the assumption that he understands the text completely and correctly. Rabbi Freehof is committed to one interpretation that is not his own, but rather the leftover of a crueler world determined to punish all things feminine and most especially men whose behavior was viewed as an aberration into the feminine realm. The ancient root of this non-halachic responsum is

⁵ Now the Union for Reform Judaism.

⁶ An excerpt from ARR 49-52, a Reform Responsum on homosexuality.
<https://www.ccarnet.org/ccar-responsa/arr-49-52/>

nothing more than homophobia, the disdain, whether conscious or subconscious, for people whose unions defy heterosexual assumptions. In the case of homophobia toward gay men specifically, it is the idea of romantic and sexual intimacy between men that motivates hate crimes.⁷

In the last three decades, queer Jews have seen a radical shift of acceptance in congregational life. What remains to be seen, however, is if our communities can accept that our worldview is likewise holy and valid. While Rabbi Freehof eventually makes the point that gay Jews should be welcome not only in their own synagogues but in all synagogues, he does so only after affirming his own homophobia in a summary that goes further than the original question:

To sum up: Homosexuality is deemed in Jewish tradition to be a sin—not only in law, but in Jewish life practice. Nevertheless, it would be in direct contradiction to Jewish law to keep sinners out of the congregation. To isolate them into a separate congregation and thus increase their mutual availability is certainly wrong. It is hardly worth mentioning that to officiate at a so-called “marriage” of two homosexuals and to describe their mode of life as “*Kiddushin*” (i.e., sacred in Judaism) is a contravention of all that is respected in Jewish life.

Marriage was not part of the initial question. Schindler simply asked whether it was kosher to encourage gay Jews to congregate, but in order to support his position, Rabbi Freehof turns to tried-and-true delegitimization of homosexual unions. He notes above that his position is not based in a halachic interpretation but rather an interpretation of a biblical verse about sex between men. He fails to consider any potential context of the sinful sex⁸ opting instead for the face-value message of anti-queerness, though it is

⁷ For one fascinating exploration of the idea that homophobic hate crimes are almost exclusively motivated by the perpetrator’s revulsion to gay sexual intimacy, see “Assault on Gay America: The Life and Death of Billy Jack Gaither.” *Frontline*. PBS, February 15, 2000.

⁸ Though many interesting theories have come out of alternative readings of Leviticus including that the sin may have to do with male temple prostitution

doubtful he would read similar texts about heterosexual impropriety with the same “rules are rules” matter-of-factness that would require harsh treatment of any congregant who carried out an extra-marital affair. According to Rabbi Freehof, to call my marriage sacred is “a contravention of all that is respected in Jewish life,” but he makes this assertion without seeking to understand the people whom it affects.

Like all Jewish thinkers who divine meaning from our tradition, Rabbi Freehof forms his opinion through exegesis. Exegesis, the critical interpretation of text, allows us to engage with scripture to form truths and values. It is the means through which Jewish law is formulated, and our communal ethics are informed by the way we approach and enforce laws. But because these laws are made through the subjective process of making meaning from esoteric ancient documents, our understanding of Jewish life is forever at the mercy of our interpretation of Jewish texts. The prevailing culture of the day is only as progressive as its exegesis.

Exegesis is a broadening of the scriptural body that encodes wisdom and divine secrets. Kosher unions are defined through exegesis as well. The way a passage alluding to sex between men is interpreted is the difference between life and death in the eyes of a biblical literalist. Rabbi Freehof, like countless others, chose to read with an emphasis on the criminality of gay sex itself without considering its potential to exist within a holy union. The paradox, of course, is that without a belief in the potential for a loving relationship worthy of kiddushin between men, sexual intercourse between two men can likewise never be regarded as more than a *to'evah*.⁹

alluded to later in the New Testament, this project is not about whether or not gay sex is a sin, but rather how thoughtless reading of texts about intimacy between men can have lasting implications for gay men.

⁹ A reference to the word from Leviticus 18:22 **וְאֶת-זָכָר לֹא תִשְׁכַּב מִשְׁכָּבִי אִשָּׁה תוֹעֵבָה** translated by JPS as “abhorrence,” and most often quoted, “abomination.”

Forming New Truths from Ancient Texts

אַתָּה תִּהְיֶה עַל־בֵּיתִי וְעַל־פִּיךָ יִשָּׁק כָּל־עַמִּי רַק הַכֶּסֶּא אֶגְדֹּל מִמֶּךָ

You shall be a part of my household and all my people shall kiss your lips; only with regard to the throne shall I be above you.¹⁰

This entire project was inspired by a note I scribbled late one night two years ago. When I read Genesis 41:40 and imagined it in my head, I could not help but recognize the posture and positioning of two men dressing one another and exchanging rings. It was familiar to me because I remember dressing before my own wedding, putting on a family gold chain, and helping my husband tie his tie. It is a form of intimacy that one can only see in the text if they have seen it with their own eyes. Not to engage with the text and consider the possibility of how the idea of Joseph and Pharaoh can enhance the morality we glean from Torah is to limit our faith.

Over the course of time, our notion of marriage has changed dramatically. Marriage, in a period of just a few hundred years, has gone from paternal agreements and dowries to today's committed partnerships of equals in love. Legal rulings for marriage equality all over the world have expanded cultural understandings of what constitutes a union. This is, however, simply the written law catching up at long last to nature. Gay men and other queer people have existed since the dawn of time. It is only the way heterosexual society views homosexuals that has allowed gay people to begin to integrate into society with the most of the benefits as our straight peers. As the world continues to expand for queer people, so too must our traditions and the way we read our scriptures.

¹⁰ Genesis 41:40, my translation.

The way we regard marriage as a manifestation of “love” is an anachronism when applied to the Bible. According to John Boswell, the modern, Western understanding of “romantic love and coupling patterns” is influenced by three specific features: modern industrial culture’s fascination with love, the fact that marriage is an institution rooted in property ownership rather than love, and homophobia, a hatred or suspicion of men who fail to act like men. Given that most English speakers today understand marriage as “a permanent and exclusive union between two people,” and that our foundational text includes accounts of betrothal hardly appropriate for our modern sensibilities, we can rightfully dictate when time has changed the meaning of a word. Over time, marriage evolved into a “permanent, exclusive union of social equals, freely chosen by them to fulfill both their emotional needs and imposing equal obligations of fidelity on both partners.”¹¹ When analyzing the bible as literature about relationships, we must therefore read marriage where we see evidence of love between equal partners, and perhaps even where we have historically not considered it, such as between men.

This definition of marriage is clearly at odds with the biblical ideal enshrined in the stories of our matriarchs and patriarchs, and yet our tradition translates their love into modern terms of affection in commentaries and sermons alike. While the Talmud says that women become wives through money, contract, or sexual intercourse, rabbinic literature expounds on the love of husbands for wives in order to communicate that love was indeed part of Jewish marriage. There is a certain amount of benefit of the doubt given to any relationship between opposite-sex partners, so in order for gay people to be included in this ideal-making,¹² we must also be part of the interpreting process because

¹¹ John Boswell, *Same Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995): 38.

¹² Which is necessary to confront homophobia.

we are the only ones likely to pick up on queer romance in the text. According to Boswell, I am more likely to consider the romance in Joseph and Pharaoh's relationship because heterosexual readers are "more inclined to assume" a heterosexual relationship "while gay people will only consider it as one of two distinct possibilities," the other being that there is indeed potential to read Genesis 41 queerly.¹³ What a straight man reads as friendship between men is no different in the language of the Bible than the way my husband and I spend every evening. A straight man may have no frame of reference for the way a man shows affection for another man whom he regards as his equal--I can only speculate because I have one lens--but I know that when the love of David and Jonathan exceeds that of the love of women, they are not merely "buddies."

In *Language, Eros, Being*, Elliot Wolfson says such interpretation "thus may be construed as (re)writing."¹⁴ In the process of truth-formation in which a reader draws meaning from text, the information they lift from the page passes through a filter of values and experiences that influences the reader's understanding of the text. In a testament to the power of hermeneutics, Wolfson warns that a reader must take care when bringing their experiences to the process of interpretation "without negating or obfuscating the alterity of either text or reader."¹⁵ A reader must be willing to engage with the text and understand that eliciting meaning from esoteric texts in particular requires reciprocity, but they must not get lost in the process. This hints at the intimate nature of study in general and the sexually-charged nature of the metaphor of "uncovering" secrets in the process of revealing truth. "The mutual openness of text and reader fosters an erotic bond predicated on the yearning of the one to be contained in and

¹³ Boswell, xxvii.

¹⁴ Wolfson, 113.

¹⁵ Ibid., 112.

thereby encompass the other,”¹⁶ Wolfson says, opening the conversation for how reader and text are a metaphor for the relationship between mystic and G-d.

Homoerotic Precedent

In the second chapter of this work I will look at passages of Zohar that support a gay reading of Joseph. Of particular interest are the writings and culture of the kabbalists of the circle of the Zohar, believed to have been most active between 1280 and 1305, though modern scholarship suggests their literary activity extended through the sixteenth century when the Zohar was printed.¹⁷ This group of men wrote about imagining themselves uniting spiritually with G-d employed the language of sexual metaphor. In their conceptualizing of this union, they undergo spiritual gender transpositions, serving as passive partners for G-d who is imagined to have a divine body endowed with a phallus. The metaphor is explicit, drawing parallels between the way one unites with G-d in terms of how he makes union with his wife. In order to understand the culture of the men who wrote the *Zohar*, whose tradition of exegesis I will use to enhance my reading of Joseph as a gay man, I must explore the meaning of masculinity and male love. This cultural context is critical to understanding the homoerotic concepts mentioned throughout kabbalistic literature because it suggests that our modern understandings of ourselves as gay men could have precedents in homoerotic discussions.

Other precedents for homosexual love can be found in existing Jewish literature. Medieval Hebrew poetry, for example, is an excellent source of culturally-specific homoerotic language. Heavily influenced by homoerotic Arabic poetry, the Jews of Spain

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Daniel Abrams, “The Invention of the Zohar as a Book” *Kabbalah* 19 (2009) 7-142.

carried a similar sexual language and energy into Hebrew poetry. In the tradition of ancient Greece, there seems to be some social acceptance of male-male sexual relationships, though in the form of pederasty. While the model of “men” and “boys” who seduce and court one another does not fit with my reading of Joseph or the type of unions I am discussing, it was at least acceptable enough in its time to survive in literature for hundreds of years. According to Norman Roth, such behavior was common in multiple societies. Boys and men did indeed seduce one another according to poetic accounts and, as Roth says plainly, “it is certain that even the earliest period of Islamic Arabic poetry had examples of real homosexual poetry.”¹⁸ The men who wrote poems of love between men and boys employed traditional biblical love language in their work, calling their beloved by the name of “gazelle” and “fawn” in allusions from Song of Songs.

Gazelle desired in Spain,
wondrously formed,
Given rule and dominion
over every living thing;
Lovely of form like the moon
with beautiful stature:
Curls of purple
upon shining temple,
Like Joseph in his form,
like Adoniah his hair.
Lovely of eyes like David,
he has slain me like Uriah.
He has enflamed my passions
and consumed my heart with fire.
Because of him I have been left
without understanding and wisdom.
Weep with me every ostrich
and every hawk and falcon!
The beloved of my soul has slain me--
is this a just sentence?

¹⁸ Norman Roth, “‘Deal Gently with the Young Man’: Love of Boys in Medieval Hebrew Poetry of Spain” *Speculum* 57, no. 1 (Jan 1982): 27.

[...]

Because of him my soul is sick,
perplexed and yearning.
His speech upon my heart
is like dew upon parched land.
Draw me from the pit of destruction
that I go not down to hell!¹⁹

Who we are and what we experience informs the way we read text. This highly erotic poetry is proof of the cultural understanding of homosexual romance and the audience of men who chase gazelles understands the allusions within the poetry. Unique experiences give rise to unique worldviews, guaranteeing that no two sets of eyes can regard a text in precisely the same way. But even with the overwhelming evidence of Jewish society confronting homosexuality and having the vocabulary to explore it, the fact remains that biblical exegesis is largely heterosexual in its perspective. This may have been an attempt to stabilize society in an ancient patriarchal culture “in which men dominated women to ensure that male corporeal needs for sex and progeny would be met efficiently.”²⁰ It would not be too out of the question to presume this, given the state of patriarchal control over our world even today. Jewish teachings encouraged channeling natural sexual urges into kosher relations. A kosher relationship in Judaism, since the days of desert dwelling, is one that produces male offspring in order to continue generations of Jewish existence. Jewish tradition prioritizes the commandment to “be fruitful and multiply” to the point that a discussion of men who love men is entirely moot to the way a family is built. However, this in no way precludes gay unions in biblical

¹⁹ Ibid., 31.

²⁰ Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993): 245.

texts in which the male partners have satisfied their obligation to have male children as Joseph does.

The fact that Jewish exegesis has historically made no time for questioning gay unions makes sense when we consider how vital reproduction was for the security of the community. Perhaps with this motivation, relationships in Jewish text are by default read “straight” because they were deliberately interpreted that way? In James Kugel’s words,

If [biblical texts] have come down to us, it is because they were, almost from the time of their composition, copied and recopied in every century... not by mindless scribes bent only on preserving them, but by people who had some use for these texts... Such figures doubtless did more than preserve the texts: they read and referred to them, explained them to others, sought to apply them to new situations or to extend their meaning--in short, they *interpreted* them.²¹

We cannot underestimate the power of interpretation in forming truths that we take for granted, including how and why Jews form unions. Roth turns to Hebrew Medieval poetry as a reflection of society, concluding with “real confidence” that “this poetry does provide us ‘a mirror held up to nature,’ one that reflects the emotions and lives of the “Golden Age” of Spanish Jewry.²²

There is no denying that this culture of men romancing men was known beyond those who participated in it, and similar homoerotic currents are found in 13th century kabbalistic literature as well. On the prevalence of cultural understanding (or awareness of) homosexuality, Shaul Magid notes that legal authorities in the Ottoman Empire in the 16th century did not consider male-male intercourse a violation of Muslim law, providing a lenient culture in the land of Israel which was under Ottoman rule at that time.²³

²¹ James Kugel, *In Potiphar’s House: The Interpretive Life of Biblical Texts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994): 4.

²² Roth, 51.

²³ Magid, 10.

Naturally the Hebrew literature that sprang up alongside its Arabic counterpart “aligned with Muslim attitudes toward male homosexuality” in those days.²⁴ Perhaps we may again affect change in Hebrew literary culture by embracing a new era of sexual liberation. Whereas the poets of medieval Jewish and Muslim Spain used the language of biblical text to describe homoerotic beauty in their world, I will use the language of my homoerotic world to read biblical text.

Any change to the frame of reference in any field of knowledge is uncomfortable for some. Rethinking sacred truths is a heavy task, but the argument for a literal translation over one that draws on experience and identity for further exploration deprives the reader of potential truth. According to Boswell, “If the result of a ‘literal translation’ is that readers misunderstand what happened, it is a mistranslation, no matter how ‘accurately’ one might claim the words correspond to the original.”²⁵ Given the presence of homoerotic literature throughout Jewish history, gay exegesis may be the best way to translate culturally-coded clues about someone like Joseph’s biblical behavior which would restore a medieval queerness. In the chapter entitled “(Re)producing Men: Constructing the Rabbinic Male Body,” Boyarin analyzes multiple passages of talmudic discussions on male bodies in order to understand how these men regarded the male body and how their fascination with the grotesque points to veiled homoerotic interest. This homoeroticism was part of their life and therefore it makes several appearances (in a semi-concealed state) in their writings. Talmudic men are torn between their obligations as Torah scholar and husband. Boyarin provides an interesting perspective into tensions on sexuality in rabbinic Judaism in which scholars “lust after” Torah instead of their

²⁴ Ibid., 8.

²⁵ Boswell, 19.

wives. They are so consumed with the desire to commune with the Divine that their earthly obligations become onerous and they leave their wives to spend months and years at a time with other men engaged in passionate study and devotion.

To the mystic, interpreting the Torah is an act of “removing her garments to reveal her secrets” in order to awaken the consciousness of humanity to truth. Humanity is prone to slumber, according to tradition, and the soul must be awakened “to its hidden potential, to the work it must perform, and to the pleasure that lies in store upon fulfilling its purpose.” In this metaphor, the heart and soul of the Torah scholar are aroused in order to serve G-d. “In the relationship between the Zohar and its readers,” Hellner-Eshed writes, “this language of arousal serves a performative function; it seeks to bring about an experiential change of the readers’ consciousness.”²⁶ These “open-eyed ones” respond to awakening with “ecstatic overtones” in order to hear the “cosmic voice” that those who slumber cannot experience. The Torah is described as a flirtatious partner whose secrets tease the aroused scholar, “calling out” to him “in love,” and the kabbalist’s fascination with uncovering her secrets is one way in which the arousal/awakening transcends the metaphor of sleep and equates to erotic arousal. This erotic arousal “characterizes the spirit of the entire zoharic corpus,” Hellner-Eshed explains, flowing from an understanding of the intimate language of Song of Songs in which awakening and arousal are conflated in the repeated admonition, “Do not wake or rouse love until it pleases!”²⁷

As Hellner-Eshed says, “the entirety of reality is erotic,” and the eroticism of the text is made apparent through study. When the kabbalists of the circle of the Zohar

²⁶ Melila Hellner-Eshed, *A River Flows from Eden: The Language of Mystical Experience in the Zohar* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011): chapter 10, Kindle.

²⁷ Ibid.

engage with text, seeking union with G-d, yearning passionately for their souls to mingle in the sexual metaphors they explore, their circle turns homoerotic. By definition, such an experience of sexual arousal in the presence of other men is homoerotic, and the text of the Zohar reflects an awareness of this sexual energy in the expression “the Companions have been aroused,” referring to the all-consuming nature of interpretation in a tradition that encourages the stimulation of earthly and heavenly realms alike. The aroused, “having awakened from sleep,” seeks “the objects of his love--the Torah and G-d.” Given the existence of homoeroticism in this period of literature and proof of at least some cultural awareness of men loving men, it is appropriate to turn to the circle of the Zohar to illuminate the reading of Joseph that follows. Their unique way of engaging with text and the esoteric nature of the Zohar inspired my literary analysis. Likewise, the well-established homoerotic currents in Hebrew literature before this period and the male kabbalist’s erotic yearning for G-d and knowledge (from other men) provide the sexually-charged energy necessary to glean homoerotic undertones from the text.

Chapter 1: A Gay Reading of Joseph

I preface this literary analysis of the longest continuous narrative in the Torah with the disclaimer that it is an exegetical work with a clear and deliberate agenda. My goal is to understand Joseph as I understand myself because as I read his life on the page, I feel as though we have missed the opportunity to flesh out a story that is familiar to me as a gay man.

Joseph suffers at the hands of his brothers who deny him agency. He is sold as a slave and cut off from his father who loves him and believes Joseph has died. He is imprisoned after being falsely accused of sexual violence. And though he suffers remarkably for much of his life, the book of Genesis ends by recounting Joseph's peaceful death before a new Pharaoh arises and the Hebrew people are enslaved. But in the days before The Exodus, Joseph's family in the land of Egypt flourishes, and we bless our own children in the name of Ephraim and Menashe as a recognition of a life well lived.²⁸ Joseph's life after leaving the loving embrace of his father is scene after scene of mistreatment and abuse until he enters Pharaoh's court and attains status at Pharaoh's side in Egypt. Reading Joseph as a gay man--whose masculinity is questioned, whose agency is denied, whose sexuality is turned against himself, whose charm and gifts endear him to a king--makes sense of the stunning trajectory from the pit to the palace.

In order to support this reading of Genesis 37 through chapter 50, I will include in my literary analysis wisdom from midrash and commentary. In particular I will analyze Joseph as a youth, Joseph's differentiation from figures of masculinity when he encounters the angel in the field and is sold by his brothers, and his time in Potiphar's

²⁸ See Gen 48:20 and Gen 49:26.

House in Parashat Vayeshev as well as Joseph's relationship with Pharaoh in Mikket. These episodes of Joseph's life and their supplemental lore offer a glimpse into who Joseph is that rings familiar. Grappling with ambiguous Hebrew phrases, incorporating midrashic details, reflecting on Zoharic wisdom, and employing a fair amount of armchair psychology helps me read the text grounded in a sense of understanding Joseph's life as a gay man.

What we read as love and hate depends entirely on from whose viewpoint we read the text and how we understand the motivations of all actors. I bring into this reading of Joseph my own experiences as a gay man, which, as Boswell so rightly asserts, is precisely why I "recognize" these episodes of Joseph's life, and as Wolfson theorizes, is part of the formation of oneself in the interpretation of text. A gay exegesis is therefore a self-forming and self-affirming act.

Through a series of twists of fate that lands him face-to-face with Pharaoh, Joseph changes the course of history. Through Joseph's deliverance, his family and all the people of Egypt survive a time of great famine. This stability precedes darker days that follow his death. The death of a monarch whose gifts perform wonders sets the stage for future miracles of redemption and revelation. Joseph's life takes us from the pit to the start of our struggle for freedom, and reading him as a gay man answers questions about the text we may never have otherwise asked. A hero who overcomes adversity, finds love, and provides security and sustenance can meaningfully be read as gay, as many gay men emerge from our own depths and suffer at the mercy of masculinity in hopes of finding love and building family, both of which are so often denied to us. Reading Joseph

this way repairs millions of small tears in the fabric of our society while taking our tradition to new depths.

V'hu na'ar: Joseph and performance of gender

Joseph helped out with the family work in Genesis 37:2 and critical interpretation suggests he did so in a subordinate role, but the nature of this subordinate role is unclear. The text notes his age, seventeen years, and that הוא נער, “he is a *na'ar*”²⁹ emphasizing his youthfulness in contrast to the men with whom he works. The two phrases of youth correspond to the two references to his masculine counterparts whom the text calls “brothers” and “sons,” collective nouns from which Joseph is excluded. Given that the text has yet to inform the reader of Joseph’s beauty, the reminder of Joseph’s age and subordination introduces the “otherness” of the young protagonist.

Perhaps Joseph is not “cut out for” this work the way that many of us are. As Daniel Boyarin aptly explains the feeling of otherness in terms of masculine idealization that we recognize today, a boy like Joseph is more likely to go out for ballet than to play sports.³⁰ The author of the Joseph narrative is starting the longest story of the Bible by letting us in on a secret about how others perceived the masculinity of its protagonist. Whereas his brothers are shepherds, presumably with the bodies of men who spend their days walking the fields and laboring, Joseph is a dandy with the iconic wardrobe to prove it. Thus Genesis 37:2 introduces Joseph at seventeen years of age, gives his occupation, and then adds, “he was a youth” in the middle of a line traditionally translated out of

²⁹ Literally “youth,” but Robert Alter notes that “*na'ar* has a secondary meaning, clearly salient here, of assistant or subaltern. The adolescent Joseph is working as a kind of apprentice shepherd with his older brothers.”

³⁰ Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), xii.

order. The JPS translation reads, “At seventeen years of age, Joseph tended the flocks with his brothers, as a helper to the sons of his father’s wives Bilhah and Zilpah.” This translation considers the emphasis on Joseph’s youth a sign of his occupational subordinacy. But in reading the text with a careful attention to Joseph as the subject, as I believe the text is primarily drawing our attention to how Joseph differs from his brothers, I parse it as such:

יוֹסֵף בֶּן־שִׁבְעֵ-עָשָׂר שָׁנָה	Joseph was seventeen years old
הָיָה רֹעֶה אֶת־אֶחָיו בְּצֹאן	when he was working as a shepherd with his brothers,
וְהוּא נָעַר	but he was a <i>na’ar</i>
אֶת־בְּנֵי בִלְהָה וְאֶת־בְּנֵי זִלְפָּה נְשֵׁי אָבִיו	compared to the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, the wives of his father.

Here the speaker is not so much saying what Joseph *is* as what he *is not*. Joseph is not like his brothers. He is a *na’ar*. The interjection of the phrase “*v’hu na’ar*” disrupts the discussion of his occupation as a shepherd. Why does this verse include so many nouns to refer to so few distinct groups? After opening, “This is the line of Jacob,” the verse mentions יוסף (Joseph), אחיו (his brothers), הוא (him, Joseph again), בני בלהה (the sons of Bilhah), בני זלפה (the sons of Zilpah), and נשי אביו (the wives of his father, referring to Zilpah and Bilhah). The entire (living) family is listed in one verse and yet it revolves around Joseph’s age, occupation, and an ambiguous trait, “*na’ar*” as if to define him in comparison to the rest of his world. Reading the text in this way divorces Joseph from his brothers, and perhaps also from their personal lives, which would make sense given the final phrase of this verse: “and Joseph brought bad words (reports) to their father.” Whether Joseph had no regard for his brothers and felt a sense of authority over

them, or whether Joseph was simply doing as he was ordered by his father when “telling on” them, it is clear that Joseph is at odds with his brothers. The key to understanding the difference is the word *na’ar*.

Bereshit Rabbah 84:7 offers an explanation: He was a *na’ar*, which is to say that he did things a *na’ar* does. מְחַלְלָה בְּעֵקֶבּוֹ, מְמַשְׁמֵשׁ בְּעֵינָיו, מַעֲשֶׂה נַעֲרוֹת, אֵלֶּא שְׂהִיָּה עוֹשֶׂה מַעֲשֶׂה נַעֲרוֹת, אֵלֶּא שְׂהִיָּה עוֹשֶׂה מַעֲשֶׂה נַעֲרוֹת, אֵלֶּא שְׂהִיָּה עוֹשֶׂה מַעֲשֶׂה נַעֲרוֹת. ³¹ The meaning of each thing on the list of *ma’aseh na’arut*, or “doings of a *na’ar*” is unclear. Joseph does something with his eyes (בְּעֵינָיו), something with his heel (בְּעֵקֶבּוֹ), and something with his hair (בְּשַׁעֲרוֹ). When these three behaviors, deemed necessary to understand Joseph according to the midrashist, are bound up in one term, they become a sort of cultural shorthand for a trait that was noted in Joseph. In naming this trait, Joseph is officially made “other” as his brothers ostensibly do *not* exhibit this trait. Thus, by the time this midrash was being compiled, between the years 300 and 500 CE, there was precedent enough in the cultural understanding of constructed masculinity that the author and audience are keenly aware of the precise difference between Joseph and his brothers: Joseph looks at his world differently, walks differently, and primps himself differently.³²

³¹ See also Rashi’s explanation, a gloss of Bereshit Rabbah 84:7: “His actions were childish: he dressed his hair, he touched up his eyes so that he should appear good-looking.”

³² See “Representing “Other” Men: Muslims, Jews, and Masculine Ideals in Medieval Castilian Epic and Ballad” by Louise Mirrer for an exploration of how masculinity is communicated through notions of aggression and warrior language and “On Being a Male in the Middle Ages” by Vern L. Bullough in which virility and one’s ability to please a female partner defines his masculinity. My assertion is that Joseph, unlike men of the Bible who are praised for these qualities, is unique for the “*ma’aseh na’arut*” apparent to commentators.

“He’s not like the other boys at all”

Joseph is raised in a toxic household with extremes of emotion. We know that Joseph is loved by his father more than his brothers and subsequently he is hated by each of Jacob’s other sons.³³ From youth Joseph is the center of conflict within his own clan. Joseph “brought bad reports” of his brothers to his father who put him in a position of authority over them, presumably affecting their relationship.³⁴ But while the text makes it clear that Joseph is hated “so that [his brothers] could not speak a friendly word to him,” it is not until Joseph receives the כתרונת פסים, a symbol of special praise and affection, that his brothers “saw that their father loved him more” for which the text suggests they hate him.³⁵ The feelings of love and hate directed toward Joseph come from multiple possible motivations from within his own family.

From just the first three verses of Parashat Vayeshev, Joseph is caught in a complicated tangle of emotions beyond his control for which it seems he is not to blame. And yet, “This, then, is the line of Jacob: Joseph,” and perhaps just as well, the beloved, hated son is both the hero and villain of his entire generation’s story.³⁶ The text is not going to tell us, explicitly, which traits of Joseph earn his brothers’ ire, but all of this peculiar attention from the narrator serves to underscore what is to come, that Joseph is really not like other boys and the hatred his brothers feel for him is their reaction to--and perhaps fear of--his difference.

Typically, readers and translators have read this midrash as referring *ma’aseh na’arut*, “childish” or “boyish behavior.” As Ruchama Weiss notes, however, it might also be read as *ma’aseh na’arot*, “girlish behavior.” Even without that

³³ Genesis 37:4.

³⁴ Genesis 37:2.

³⁵ Genesis 37:4.

³⁶ n. 52. Zohar 1:180a.

reading, though, this midrash provides ample grist for the queer interpretive mill.³⁷

I would take this even one step further: Joseph's effeminacy (or at least the questioning of his masculinity) is a key part of a gay man's experience. No matter how any gay man reconciles his gender performance, each of us wrestles with the notion of masculinity in our culture. Any gay man who has tried to "pass" as straight, whether successful or not, as an adult or a youth, whether for safety or privacy, has taken part in the universal play, and even those who find their way to queer liberation live in a world shaped by these expectations of performance.

As a teenager I winced at displays of effeminacy for fear that I would somehow be outed. As if the presence of femininity would shine a light on my own! I remember loving my parents' gay friends while wondering why they had to draw so much attention to themselves. In fact it is precisely because society ordains one sort of performance of masculinity as "proper" that any man who carries himself differently stands out. Thus, living one's truth as a gay man for anyone who expresses sensitivity, communicates uniquely, or who shows attention to detail (particularly of one's appearance) means living under a spotlight. Some of us shine and are blessed to contribute our gifts. Others, like Joseph, are hated for being the kind of different that attracts special treatment.

Self-realization in Revelation: The "Man" in the Field, Genesis 37:14

*"To be sure, [being gay] meant being marginal, and it has left me with a persistent sense of being on the outside of something, with my nose pressed to the glass looking in..."*³⁸

³⁷ Wendy Zierler, "Joseph(ine), the Singer: The Queer Joseph and Modern Jewish Writers," *Nashim* 24 (Spring 2013): 100.

³⁸ Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct*, xiii.

When Jacob sends Joseph to check on his brothers, Joseph sets out alone for the first time in his story. Lost to his thoughts in the field, apparently without a sense of where he is going, a “man” (אִישׁ) appears to him as a guide. Joseph--the hated dreamer, the beloved son, the object of triangulation--is on his own but not yet a free agent. His father, Israel, drawing from the tradition that set his ancestor Abraham on his own journey, says to him לֵךְ-נָא, hearkening to the לֵךְ-לֵךְ with a pleading, paternal twist. Indeed, it is not “Jacob” who gives Joseph this command, but rather “Israel,” the father whose name is changed after a struggle with an angel, a code-switch the Biblical author slides in to reinforce the ancestral command. This journey is as transformative for Joseph as the sojourn of Abraham and the binding of Isaac and the wrestling of Israel. Joseph must confront his separateness from his family in the wilderness, and the mysterious “man” he encounters in the field (though the text makes it clear that the *man* encounters *Joseph* in the Hebrew וַיִּמְצְאוּהוּ with הוּא signifying Joseph) serves as a starting point in his personal differentiation from his clan. Until now, Joseph has been *made* “other” through the behavior and attention of his family members. In Genesis 37:16, the man who finds Joseph helps him find his brothers, or to think of it more broadly, the man in the field helps Joseph *see* and *understand* his brothers, and in confronting who they are, Joseph learns who he is himself.

A man finds Joseph תוע בשדה, “wandering” in the field. But surely Joseph was not simply aimlessly walking about. Other meanings of this verb include erring (in terms of sin), being intoxicated, and wandering of the mind. Indeed, the root of the verb most often means “to err,” but with the locative preposition ב the text makes clear that תעה

takes place in the field, hence the traditional reading of “wandering in/about the field.”³⁹ But what if the words of the man or angel(s) could themselves be a clue? The man’s question, “מֶה־תִּבְקֹשׁ” is usually rendered “What are you looking for?” but he could just as likely be asking, “What do you desire?” or “What are you trying to find out?”⁴⁰ Perhaps the angel (the very angel who, according to Rashi, visits Daniel at a similar moment in his life) encounters Joseph so lost in thought that he is literally wandering in a pasture rather than traveling from grazing land to grazing land in search of what is probably a very conspicuous group of sheep of ten or more shepherds. Surely he would see his brothers from afar as they do in the next verse and Joseph would have picked up the pace? Or perhaps the dreamer--as he will soon be named by his brothers--was wandering about the field wrestling, like his father did, with a piece of his identity.

Joseph’s suffering takes a prophetic leap in the narrative at this point at the hands of a different “man.” When Joseph’s brothers see him “from afar,” approaching as they tend their flocks in Dothan, the verse says they conspire to kill him.

Objectification and Rejection of Joseph

Parashat Vayeshev (Genesis 37:1 - 41:23) begins as a biographical look at Joseph as “the line of Jacob.” From the start of this portion until Joseph encounters the man in the field, Joseph is the subject of around half of the verses. That is, in the first 17 verses of Genesis 37, Joseph is an active character who shepherds, brings bad reports, dreams,

³⁹ BDB points out that the participle form of the root ת-ע-ה employed here is unique to Joseph while its many other forms are used elsewhere in Tanach, providing the basis for a creative reading.

⁴⁰ BDB suggests that ב-ק-ש with a direct object means “seek to find,” but as with the verb תוע above, its appearance in the participle form is unique to Joseph.

and travels. When Joseph is seen by his brothers in Dothan, however, this changes. In Genesis 37:18, the brothers conspire to kill Joseph and in the following 10 verses, Joseph is made the direct object of his brothers' actions no fewer than a dozen times. This rhetorical shift is a serious departure from the way the story of our hero began. Now the text renders him exclusively the passive partner of his own experience. Likewise, the particular verbs used in this part of the story suggest that Joseph's passivity is similar to that of a woman, for his brothers "take" him in the way a woman is "taken" for sexual intercourse or marriage in scripture; his brothers strip him of his clothing; and finally, his brothers sell him into slavery.

Joseph's brothers can sense that something is "wrong" with him. While a surface interpretation suggests that jealousy motivated his brothers to consider murder, I cannot fathom such a narrow view, especially when the text has gone so far at this point to demonstrate Joseph's difference. This episode with the brothers should be read as a very masculine family not accepting their gay son/brother. He is "kicked out" and objectified to the point that all but one brother are willing to kill him to be rid of him. They are removing Joseph who represents an existential threat from the family and ending his agency/life within it. The prodigal son is paying the price for the love and affection he received for being "soft." The attention given to his clothing and the ways in which he is degraded as he is sold into slavery suggests that this objectification is in line with the ways non-male subjects (women and gay men) are regarded throughout history.

A midrash on Genesis 37:15, the episode with the man/angel just a few verses earlier, lends itself to this rhetorical analysis:

אָמַר רַבִּי יַנַּאי שְׁלֹשָׁה מַלְאָכִים Rabbi Yannai says three angels came upon him:

נִזְדַּוְּגוּ לּוֹ:

“A man found him...” (Gen 37:15)

וַיִּמְצָאֵהוּ אִישׁ,

וַיִּשְׁאַלֵּהוּ הָאִישׁ,

וַיֹּאמֶר הָאִישׁ¹⁴

“The man asked him...” (Gen 37:15)

“The man said...” (Gen 37:17)

Rabbi Yannai asserts that the “man” in these verses is actually three angels, one for each of the three verbs of which Joseph is the direct object.⁴² One angel finds Joseph, one angel questions him, and the third angel speaks to him. What’s more, the verb נִזְדַּוְּגוּ which is usually translated “to encounter” comes from the root ג-ו-ז, implying a coupling or union of some kind. In modern Hebrew, the verb לְהִזְדַּוֵּג is a synonym for לְהִזְדַּוֵּג, a word for which there is no more accurate translation than “to be penetrated sexually.” Now of course the verb took on this explicitly sexual meaning well after its use in Talmudic era literature, but the connotation for modern readers is arguably clear enough that its use has evolved to include a more expansive meaning. Perhaps then it is indeed an allusion to a sort of sexual experience akin to an awakening of sorts, for if three angels--or men, as the Torah calls them--did in fact descend on Joseph to “know” him in this way⁴³ as he is “searching,” at the very least the spectre of sexuality was evident in this short passage to this particular Rabbi Yannai. And given the established pattern that אִישׁ (man) is used in comparison to Joseph the נַעַר (youth), the crowd of man-angels that leads Joseph to his

⁴¹ Bereshit Rabbah 84:14

⁴² In rabbinic tradition there is an idea that an angel must have a specific function, hence the three separate angels for three verbs seen as “functions.”

⁴³ In fact, the “Talmudic use,” according to non-scholarly sources including the modern Hebrew language collective forum known as Milog.co.il was “to know,” in the same vein as ג-ו-ז implies both awareness of something (knowing) and coupling sexually (“to know”).

brothers (also called אֵיִשׁ in the text) at the very least, the author makes the demasculinization of Joseph explicit.

Potiphar's Purchase: Joseph the House Boy

Once Joseph is stripped of his status (the fabled coat that signifies Jacob's love) and his masculinity, he is cast into a pit and then sold into bondage, again with clear undertones of agency and sexuality as seen in this revelation in Sotah 13b:

ויקנהו פוטיפר סריס פרעה אמר רב שקנאו לעצמו (בא גבריאלי וסירסו)

בא גבריאלי ופירעו מעיקרא כתיב פוטיפר ולבסוף פוטיפרע

The continuation of that verse states: **“And Potiphar, an officer [seris] of Pharaoh's, the captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him** from the hand of the Ishmaelites, who had brought him down there” (Genesis 39:1). **Rav says: He purchased** the handsome Joseph **for himself**, for the intended purpose of homosexual intercourse, but was unable to fulfill his desires, as the angel **Gabriel came and castrated** Potiphar [*seireso*]. Then **Gabriel came** again **and** further **mutilated** him [*fero*] in the same part of his body. This is alluded to in the verses that write Potiphar's name differently: **Initially, it is written “Potiphar”** (Genesis 39:1) **and in the end it is written “Poti-phera”** (Genesis 41:45). The change in his name indicates that a part of himself was mutilated.⁴⁴

The sexual pressures of the outside world for a young gay man can be exhilarating and crushing. Coming into sexual maturity (and desirability) means facing uncertain and at times uncomfortable visibility. Within a broader conversation about the meaning of being “brought down” to Egypt, Rabbi Elazar looks at Potiphar's motivation in Genesis 37:36. Seemingly out of nowhere, the Gemara claims that Potiphar purchased Joseph לעצמו, that is, “for himself,” which the Rabbi understands as “in order to use sexually.” This is particularly interesting given the interjection of Judah and Tamar's affair in the

⁴⁴ BT Sotah 13b, trans. *The William Davidson Talmud*.

previous chapter,⁴⁵ almost as if to say, “here is an example of objectifying love to prepare the reader for what is to come for Joseph.”⁴⁶ Rabbi Elazar suggests that Potiphar is castrated by Gabriel--the very Gabriel who, according to midrash as discussed above visits Joseph in the field. These two pieces of information, that Potiphar is castrated as a punishment for sexual impropriety and that it is Joseph’s angel-cum-fairy-godmother who rendered Potiphar a *saris*, build the case for stealing Joseph’s agency. Joseph is officially reduced to a sexual plaything, having been taken from his home, stripped of status and clothing, and made to be a courtesan for Pharaoh’s *saris*, a term already imbued with a sense of queerness, traditionally translated as “eunuch,” though in this case, a eunuch who is still sexually viable.⁴⁷

Joseph rises through the ranks in Potiphar’s house after Potiphar “takes a liking” to Joseph. The textual reminders of Joseph’s beauty when he’s living in Potiphar’s house⁴⁸ come at the end of this news, suggesting that such success came not just as a result of G-d’s being “with him” but perhaps also because Potiphar likewise had an interest. Genesis 39 begins with 7 quick statements: G-d is with Joseph; Joseph lives in his master Potiphar’s house; Potiphar becomes aware that G-d is with Joseph; Potiphar takes a liking to him and puts him in charge of his household; G-d blesses Potiphar’s house “because of Joseph”; Potiphar doesn’t bother Joseph and trusts him implicitly;

⁴⁵ See Genesis 38.

⁴⁶ Genesis 37 ends with Joseph being sold to Midianites who sell him to Potiphar. Genesis 38 is the story of Judah and Tamar. Genesis 39 picks up again with Joseph in Potiphar’s house. I believe the juxtaposition of these chapters is an intentional framing of the tale of sexual impropriety/propriety about to unfold and that it serves to underscore Joseph’s objectivity and subjectivity.

⁴⁷ Gemara plays with chronology here. Potiphar is introduced as סריס פרעה in Gen 37:36 long before Poti-phera (father of Joseph’s wife, Asenath) is introduced in Gen 41:45. Whether or not Potiphar and Poti-phera, Priest of On, are the same person is a subject of debate.

⁴⁸ Genesis 39:6.

Joseph is beautiful.⁴⁹ The story takes a strangely positive tone. Joseph rises through the ranks to run the household of his master, essentially as his second-in-command; a role somewhere between courtier and courtesan. For now, from the pit to the palace, Joseph has found stability and status.

“And so it was after these things,” that an ambiguous amount of time passes until Joseph finds grace in the eyes of Potiphar’s wife as well. Or, to phrase it the way Torah does, Potiphar’s wife sees what she wants, “sets her eyes” upon him, and tries to coax Joseph into having sex with her.⁵⁰ In Joseph’s refusal, we get a glimpse into Joseph’s code of ethics and learn a bit about what he thinks of his living situation:

וַיִּמְאֹן אֶל־אִשְׁתּוֹ אֲדֹנָיו הֵן אֲדֹנִי לֹא־יָדַע אֶתִּי מִה־בֵּית וְכָל אֲשֶׁר־יֵשְׁלוֹ נָתַן בְּיָדִי
אֵינְנִי גָדוֹל בְּבֵית הַזֶּה מִמֶּנִּי וְלֹא־חָשׂוֹךְ מִמֶּנִּי מִאֲמָהָ כִּי אִם־אוֹתָךְ בְּאִשֶּׁר אֶת־אִשְׁתּוֹ וְאִיךְ אֶעֱשֶׂה הָרָעָה הַגְּדוֹלָה
הַזֹּאת וְחָטָאתִי לֵאלֹהִים

Joseph refused, pleading with the wife of his master, “Look, [because of my service] my master is not aware of anything in house and has instead placed everything he owns in my hands. He is no more in charge of this house than I, and has not kept anything from me other than you, his wife. How could I do this awful thing and sin before G-d?”⁵¹ Clearly Joseph respects his master (or at least he takes the job very seriously) and knows that such an overstep is both “bad” in sense that it disrespects his master, transgressing the rules of the man who has apparently treated him better than his brothers ever did, and that it is also a sin before G-d to do so. Potiphar’s wife goes on to proposition him every day to “lie down with” her but Joseph never gives in. What the text never makes clear is whether or not Joseph *would* have relented. At this point in the

⁴⁹ Genesis 39:2-6.

⁵⁰ Genesis 39:7.

⁵¹ My translation.

beautiful, hunky Joseph's story, we know nothing about his love life. His nature, however, is a moot point in the discussion of his righteousness, because Joseph turns Potiphar's wife down simply because sleeping with her would be a sinful thing to do in the eyes of his employer and his G-d.

Looking back to Genesis 38 and the story of Judah and Tamar, we see what happens when one *does* relent. Tamar, the righteous protagonist of this sub-plot, is rightfully seeking security and stability by demanding sons from her brothers-in-law after the death of her husband, but it is not until she tricks a lecherous Judah into having sex with her that she conceives. Judah's "failing" in this tale (sex outside of marriage) is precisely what Joseph avoids. What makes Joseph righteous in saying "no" and what sexual ethic is the text lauding? At no point has the text painted Joseph as a manly man given to urges or impulse. What does his refusal of Potiphar's wife's sexual advances mean if it does not appear to be in his nature to do what his brother Judah does? Joseph is not praised for repressing his urges (for the text makes no note of such urges) but rather for standing up to an aggressive pursuer! The text therefore makes the case for reading Joseph as Tamar and Potiphar's wife as Judah--the victims versus the sexual aggressors.⁵²

A midrash from Sefer HaYashar shows this even more clearly:

And when [Potiphar's wife] saw that it was impossible to persuade Joseph, her heart was full of desire, for her soul was fixed upon Joseph, and she fell into a hard sickness. And all the women of Egypt came to visit her and they said unto her: Why art thou so pale and emaciated? Surely thou lackest nothing, for is not

⁵² Bereshit Rabbah 87:6: "A Roman noblewoman asked R. Yose: Is it possible that Joseph, at seventeen, with all the hot blood of youth could act with such self-restraint? R. Yose brought out the book of Genesis and began reading to her the story of Reuben and Bilhah, and the story of Judah and Tamar and said: If Scripture does not cover up for these, who were adult and still under their father's authority, how much less likely is it that Scripture would cover up for one who was a minor and on his own!"

thy husband an honored officer and very great in the eyes of the king, and can it be that thou lackest the least thing that thy heart may desire?

And Zulycah answered unto them: This day shall it be known unto you what hath reduced me to this sad condition, in which you see me now. And Zulycah ordered her maidens to set meat before all the women and to prepare a great feast for them, and all the women ate in Zulycah's house, and she gave them knives to peel their oranges and to eat them.

And she commanded that Joseph be put into costly garments and that he should appear before them. And Joseph came before them, and behold, when the women saw him they could not turn their eyes from him, and all of them cut their hands with the knives and the oranges were full of blood. And they noticed not what they had done, being so deeply absorbed in admiring Joseph's beauty, and they could not turn their eyelids from Joseph's face.

And Zulycah saw what they had done and she said unto them: What is it that you are doing? Behold, I have given you oranges that ye might eat and now you have cut your hands all of you. And they looked at their hands and behold they were bleeding and blood was flowing down upon their garments. And they said unto her: It is because of this servant which thou hast in thy house, who hath charmed us and we could not turn our eyelids from him through his beauty.⁵³

Zulycah, as the midrash names Potiphar's wife, frustrated by a man who rebuffs her time and again, orders Joseph to dress up and parade for her and her friends to "explain" the cause of her suffering. Joseph is so beautiful and alluring that his refusal to acquiesce has literally made Zulycah ill from untempered lust. This objectification puts Joseph in the same shoes as Queen Vashti of the Book of Esther, but unlike Vashti who leaves the king in refusal to participate with the banquet and dance, Joseph (a man with a penchant for nice clothes, bodily fitness, jewelry, and hair styling, according to midrashic sources) appears before the women who, as expected, cannot look away from his beauty. The image of bloody fruit and bloody hands is a visceral stand-in for sexual gratification. Joseph is so beautiful that not coupling with him is bad for one's health. And yet at no point is *Joseph's* sexuality even hinted at.⁵⁴ Rather, he is a man who, unlike virtually all

⁵³ *Sefer HaYashar*, Vayeshev 15.

⁵⁴ BT Sotah 36b in a minority opinion does suggest that Joseph was in fact enticed by Potiphar's wife, but at the moment of his weakness he sees his father's face in a vision in the window and remembers his commitment.

other biblical examples, turns down women again and again.⁵⁵ We know that Joseph rebuffs Potiphar's wife for two reasons: he does not want to betray his master and he does not want to sin against G-d by lying with her (though exactly how Joseph understands this sin is unclear--perhaps he wishes not to lead Zulycah into adultery since having sex with an unmarried virgin would have constituted a proper marriage consummation in those days⁵⁶). What we do not yet understand is why he would have turned down an apparent banquet of eligible bachelorettes who clearly wish to enjoy the fruits of Jacob.⁵⁷

Joseph and Pharaoh

Our Sages have said, "What did they [the people of the land of Egypt] do? A man would marry a man, or a woman a woman, or a woman would marry two men." ⁵⁸

R. Hiyya bar Abba stated in the name of R. Yohanan: When Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Without thee shall no man lift up his hand or his foot" (Gen. 41:44), his astrologers said to him, "Will you set over us a slave whose master bought him for twenty pieces of silver?" He replied, "I see traits of royalty in him." ⁵⁹

When Potiphar's wife finally acknowledges that Joseph will never relent, she accuses him of attempted rape which lands Joseph once again in the "pit." Once again, Joseph rises through the ranks through a combination of charm and G-d's will such that he

⁵⁵ This effectively renders him female in biblical tradition as the object of lust. The notion of the righteousness of those who are "pursued" will be explored later.

⁵⁶ See Boswell's chapter "Vocabulary of Love and Marriage" for a discussion of pre-modern marriage in *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe*.

⁵⁷ Bereshit Rabbah 98:18: "Royal princesses used to peer at [Joseph] through lattices and throw bracelets, necklaces, earrings, and finger rings, hoping that he might lift up his eyes and look at them. Nevertheless, he did not do so."

⁵⁸ *Code of Maimonides, Book of Holiness*, 1:21:8, trans. Louis Rabinowitz and Philip Grossman (New Haven, 1965), 135.

⁵⁹ BT Sotah 36b.

develops a good rapport with his jailers and is put in charge of the prison.⁶⁰ When word travels that Joseph is gifted with the ability to interpret dreams, Pharaoh asks to consult with the נער עברי (Hebrew youth) whom his chief cupbearer knows of from his time in prison.⁶¹ The dreamer is thus saved from prison by sharing the gift his brothers despised at home in Paddan-Aram. What's more, Joseph is again regarded as a *na'ar*, setting the stage for a new episode of queerness.

Pharaoh sends for Joseph who is “rushed” from prison and beautified before meeting the King. Joseph’s royal makeover consists of having been summoned, rushed from the dungeon, shaved, and dressed, all of which is done to him in preparation to “appear before Pharaoh.”⁶² Like Vashti and Esther, Joseph is made fit for the King through a change of his physical appearance, suggesting the *na'ar* should appear again in a state of beauty. When Joseph interprets Pharaoh’s dream, he devises a plan to save the nation from the coming famine that Pharaoh’s dream foretells. This plan is “good in the eyes of Pharaoh” (an allusion to the phrase “finding grace in one’s eyes,” that is, “taking a liking to” as Potiphar did before).⁶³ In divulging his dream anxiety to Joseph who guides him through its meaning with Divine wisdom, something changes in Pharaoh. “Could we find another man like him, a man in whom is the spirit of G-d?” he asks his courtiers. “There is none so wise as you,” he says, turning to this Hebrew *na'ar*, standing before him. Suddenly, from the depths of the pit, Joseph is about to rise to the throne because of the intimacy he shares with a king for whom he primped and beautified himself as one does in anticipation of meeting a suitor.

⁶⁰ Genesis 39:22.

⁶¹ Genesis 41:12.

⁶² Genesis 41:14, JPS translation.

⁶³ Genesis 41:37.

Pharaoh, like the princesses of Egypt, is smitten, and their relationship blossoms in the following verses which read as a betrothal and commitment ceremony with the promise of a joint ruling of the land:

<p>וַיֹּאמֶר פַּרְעֹה אֶל-יֹסֵף אֲחֵרֵי הוֹדִיעַ אֱלֹהִים אוֹתְךָ אֶת-כָּל-זֹאת אֵין-נִבּוֹן וְחָכָם כָּמוֹךָ אִתָּהּ תִּהְיֶה עַל-בֵּיתִי וְעַל-פִּיךָ יִשָּׁק כָּל-עַמִּי רַק הַכִּסֵּא אֲנִי אֶגְדֹּל מִמֶּךָ: וַיֹּאמֶר פַּרְעֹה אֶל-יֹסֵף רְאֵה נָתַתִּי אוֹתְךָ עַל כָּל-אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם: וְיֹסֵר פַּרְעֹה אֶת-טַבַּעְתּוֹ מֵעַל יָדוֹ וַיִּתֵּן אוֹתָהּ עַל-יַד יֹסֵף וַיִּלְבָּשׁ אוֹתוֹ בִּגְדֵי-שָׁשׁ וַיַּשֶּׂם רֶבֶד הַזָּהָב עַל-צוּנָאָרָו: וַיַּרְבֵּב אוֹתוֹ בְּמִרְכָּבַת הַמִּשְׁנָה אֲשֶׁר-לוֹ וַיִּקְרָאוּ לִפְנָיו אֲבָרָךְ וַנִּתֵּן אוֹתוֹ עַל כָּל-אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם</p>	<p>Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Since G-d made all of this known to you, nobody is as thoughtful and wise as you. You shall be a part of my house and my people shall kiss you upon the lips. Only in terms of the throne shall I be above you.”</p> <p>Pharaoh continued, saying to Joseph, “Behold, I have given you [charge of] all the land of Egypt.”</p> <p>And Pharaoh removed his ring from his finger and put it on Joseph’s finger, dressed him in linen clothing, and placed a gold chain around his neck.</p> <p>Pharaoh paraded Joseph in his chariot⁶⁴ to whom all the people called out, “<i>Abrek!</i>” and Pharaoh gave him all of the land of Egypt.⁶⁵</p>
--	--

⁶⁴ Joseph is in the “second chariot” that is, מרכבת המשנה, presumably following Pharaoh in the first chariot, an image that could certainly communicate royalty riding behind his husband, the king.

⁶⁵ My translation.

I imagine the two men looking each other in the eyes as Pharaoh expresses his awe of Joseph's abilities. "Only with respect to the throne shall I be above you," he says, making Joseph his queen. Pharaoh removes his ring and places it on Joseph's hand and then dresses him in linen, restoring the special garment and status that Joseph's brothers stole from him and destroyed to cover in blood as proof of his death. This ritual consecrates Joseph's status as number two in the land of Egypt but unlike other examples of biblical anointing for positions of power,⁶⁶ Pharaoh himself dresses Joseph in fine garments the way Jonathan dresses David after their souls become "bound up in" one another.⁶⁷ Therefore this ritual is the start of something more than just a ruler deputizing a new vizier--this ritual marks a special bond between two men whose lives are now inextricably bound together.

From the words of affirmation to the exchange of a ring and the appointment of Joseph over the land, this is perhaps the most egalitarian example of coupling that can be found in the Torah. Joseph is not "taken" as a wife by Pharaoh, but rather they agree to live in a mutually-beneficial partnership and do so for the rest of their recorded days in Egypt as far as the reader knows. In the verses that follow the ceremony and chariot reception⁶⁸ at which the people bow to their new queen⁶⁹, Pharaoh re-names Joseph, establishing both Joseph's new identity and a special way for Pharaoh to call his husband.

⁶⁶ Samuel anoints the handsome Saul in I Samuel 10:1; the handsome David in I Samuel 16:12-13.

⁶⁷ I Samuel 18:1.

⁶⁸ This may have a modern equivalent in Egyptian wedding celebrations with automobile processions following the ceremony.

⁶⁹ The meaning of "*abrek*" in Gen 41:43 is unclear but Robert Alter suggests it may have been an exclamation meaning "make way!" Perhaps as one would yield to royalty.

The name by which Pharaoh calls Joseph, צַפְנַת פַּעֲנָח (*Tzafnat-Paneach*)⁷⁰ is a reference to Joseph's gifts from G-d and perhaps also a sign of Pharaoh's desire to build a household with Joseph. In the same verse in which Pharaoh gives this special name to Joseph, Pharaoh also provides a surrogate "wife" with whom Joseph may bear children, for, like his mother Rachel who sought the aid of her sister-wives, Joseph cannot bear a line for Pharaoh himself.⁷¹ Every verse in this passage can be read as a marriage proceeding when we consider these ancient words of Demosthenes:

This is what it means to be married: to have sons one can introduce to the family and the neighbors, and to have daughters of one's own to give to husbands. For we have courtesans for pleasure, concubines to attend to our daily bodily needs, and wives to bear children legitimately and to be faithful wards of our homes.⁷²

Indeed, given that the nature of marriage in ancient societies hardly resembles the sort of romantic, emotional, and sexual commitments we have come to expect from such coupling today, it is striking to see Pharaoh treat Joseph as his equal and express what I recognize as the sort of awestruck recognition of someone's greatness that we know as "love." Joseph is given a wife not to serve as his partner, but in order to procreate. Joseph is not purchased by Pharaoh as a courtesan (like Potiphar) or as a concubine (for the tradition regards Joseph as sexually pure, an antithesis to Tamar and Judah). So great is this love that Joseph is able to secure a life for his entire clan in the land of Egypt when the famine worsens⁷³--something previously unheard of given Hebrew-Egyptian

⁷⁰ believed to mean "G-d speaks; he lives" or "creator of life" in Egyptian. See footnote on Genesis 41:45 in *JPS Hebrew-English Tanach*.

⁷¹ Gen 46:19-20 lists Rachel and Joseph's children back to back after the other generations are listed, a biblical juxtaposition that suggests to me they are linked through similar trials with infertility.

⁷² Boswell, 28.

⁷³ Gen 45:16-20.

relations.⁷⁴ Joseph's happily ever after has begun. With the birth of his two sons, Manasseh (meaning, "G-d has made me forget completely my hardship and my parental home") and Ephraim (meaning, "G-d has made me fertile in the land of my affliction")⁷⁵ Joseph closes the chapter as the man to whom "all the world" comes for sustenance in famine.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Gen 43:32 "They served him by himself, and them by themselves, and the Egyptians who ate with him by themselves; for the Egyptians could not dine with the Hebrews, since that would be abhorrent to the Egyptians."

⁷⁵ Gen 42:51-52.

⁷⁶ Gen 42:57.

Chapter 2: How Zoharic Hermeneutics Enhance the Reading

“The entire world and all its activity depend solely upon the desire of the heart as it arises in the will of a human being.” Zohar 1:195b

Exploring the Gay Self through Thirteenth-Century Kabbalistic Imagery

This primal forming of language, still silent within the mind, carries the self-revealing process of creation a step further in the emergence of cosmos, Torah, and the mystic’s own mind. That this should be the case is taken for granted by the Kabbalist, since his mind is a microcosm of that which exists “above” and has been created in such a way as to permit it to both reflect and affect happenings on the cosmic plane.⁷⁷

To support this gay exegesis, I turn to the kabbalists whose worldview and writings are rife with sexual energy and homoeroticism. The unique theological foundation of the Zohar leaves room for the exploration of sexuality through spiritual metaphors. Likewise, the text of the Zohar is clever, complicated, and sexually charged. Whether or not this resulted in the culture of homoeroticism that permeated the study hall, the kabbalists discussed intensely sexual content with people for whom they had intense fondness. The way in which the kabbalists engaged with scripture influenced their cultural perspective, which in turn impacted the way in which the literature itself was understood.

Hermeneutics, the branch of knowledge that deals with literary interpretation, is therefore a natural way to explore this exegesis, as it can shed light on both the text that needs explaining and the people and culture who interpret it. I will base my reading on Wolfson’s theory of Zoharic hermeneutics in particular which is critically important in a gay exegesis because the language the kabbalists of the Circle of the Zohar is rife with

⁷⁷ Arthur Green, *A Guide to the Zohar* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004): 41.

examples of mystical gender transfiguration and cultural subversion in the name of seeking union with G-d's many potencies. Again, Wolfson is one scholar in the field who does not represent a consensus on kabbalistic interpretation, but his work in the field is the most salient starting point for the exploration of Joseph as a gay man. Wolfson's approach is the basis of my interpretation of Joseph and Pharaoh's union.⁷⁸

Thus the social context of the men who wrote the Zohar must have informed their readings of Joseph, influencing the spiritual world built around their own text. Their writings and what we know of their lives suggest a cultural understanding of men who love men, even in highly figurative language. But it is the safety of couching one's desire in mysticism that makes such a disclosure possible. Likewise, it is the careful disclosure of something so transgressive that protects it. While it is true that modern acceptance of LGBTQ+ people (and the gradual acceptance of queer theory in academia) has made such explicit interpretive work possible, perhaps the Zohar's queer content enjoyed safety in the closet until the closet was no longer needed. That is, perhaps its implicit queer themes manage to stay off the radar, allowing the *appropriate* audience in each generation to revel in its esoteric wisdom until a day when its transgressive meanings can be brought to light for all in a less widely homophobic society.

In order to understand the ways in which the kabbalistic literature subverts a strictly heterosexual understanding of gender and romantic coupling, I will introduce the relevant concepts and then the hermeneutics at play. The fundamental building blocks of the literature and the culture of the kabbalists are the *sefirot*, the revelation of G-d likened to a tree, rungs of a ladder, a Divine body, and levels of light emanating from "the starting

⁷⁸ Note: Wolfson's exploration of gender in Zoharic hermeneutics lends itself to many queer theory approaches to text. In the context of this project, however, I focus exclusively on male-male romantic union.

point of the cosmic process,” its *keter* or “crown.”⁷⁹ In an attempt to understand the size and scope of *Ein Sof*, a potentiality without knowable end or origin, the kabbalists organize G-d’s “energies” into what we recognize today as the sefirotic tree with its ten linked elements arranged from top to bottom. Each revealed step from the first *sefirah* through the last is a clue to the nature of G-d and the self.

The metaphors the kabbalists use to explain their experiences reveal their depth of emotional engagement with the text. In this case, what the Zohar has to say on parshiyot Vayeshev, Mikeitz, and Vayigash and the character of Joseph show a deep empathy for the protagonist that supports my reading of his life as an ancient man who loved men. Taking from the tradition of Zoharic hermeneutics as understood by Wolfson, I will show how the text of the Zohar constructs a universe in which Joseph as a tzaddik can be read as a man whose righteousness is the product of his nature as a gay man.

What are the sefirot?

[The image of G-d to the Kabbalists] is a G-d of multiple mythical potencies, obscure entities eluding precise definition but described through a remarkable web of images, parables, and scriptural allusions. Together these entities constitute the divine realm; “G-d” is the collective aggregate of these potencies and their inner relationship.⁸⁰

The first *sefirah* is called כתר (*keter*, “crown”) which sits atop the sefirotic body and contains all the potential energy of existence. כתר, which is also a circle, symbolizes the infinite and endless nature of that which makes up G-d. Keter “represents the primal stirrings of intent within *Ein Sof*, the arousal of desire to come forth into the varied life of

⁷⁹ Green, 38.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 28-9.

being.”⁸¹ This sefirah represents the creative potential of Divine energy; it is a piece of creation that creates itself, that makes itself known through our desire for revelation. This energy spills forth and travels through the successive rungs or “gradations,” working its way down the *sefirotic* tree to the first “pair” of *sefirot* that focus and mirror this emanating light. *Hokhmah*, or “wisdom,” the second *sefirah*, is what Green calls “the first flash of intellect.” This step is the first point of true existence. While *Keter* represents potentiality, *Hokhmah* is the realization of that potentiality in a spark of light that kicks off the continued refracting and reflecting through the lower sefirot. In *Hokhmah* are wisdom, being, and truth. Likewise, it is in our internalized wisdom that we realize our own immutable, primordial truths. If *Keter* is a womb of sorts, with universal secrets intact, *Hokhmah* is the step of formation at which we can begin to differentiate ourselves and others.

Binah, the third *sefirah*, called “contemplation,” takes *Hokhmah*’s first flash of intellect and kindles it into a light that reveals even more. *Binah* is the “mate” of *Hokhmah*, brought forth from *Hokhmah* in order to take its spark of light and see it reflected in a “grand mirrored palace.”⁸² The idea is that *Binah* shapes this formless light into something brilliant and full. For this reason, *Binah* is the site of our contemplation of our own masculine and feminine qualities that mix to form our queer selves just as they populate the lower *sefirot*; *Binah* is the mirrored hallway in which we see our reflection and begin to know ourselves. These first three sefirot “constitute the G-d who is the object of worship and the One whose image is reflected in each human soul,” making the case for an experiment in self-actualization based on a Divine paradigm, which, as we

⁸¹ Ibid., 38.

⁸² Ibid., 40.

will soon see, is a site of gender and sexuality anxieties for ancient and modern Jews alike, for “so too is each human personality... G-d’s image in the world.”⁸³

The fourth sefirah is that of *Hesed*, G-d’s grace and love. It is easiest to understand this sefirah through its exemplar, Abraham, who acts out of devotion (love) of G-d. In following G-d’s command and leaving the only life he had ever known, Abraham embodies what in G-d is an “endless showering of blessing and life on all beings.” This is especially fitting given that Abraham is the first to be told his family will increase and receive such blessings. To the mystical mind, *Hesed* is a divine love that courses through all being. In that regard, *Hesed* is the piece of the Divine spark that feels empathy and fondness toward its creation. In my mind, it is the ability to grace toward those who have harmed us, and just as this tendency toward forgiveness can imperil our own sense of balance, so too can an imbalance of *Hesed* with its counterpart, *Gevurah*, stifle the Divine process.

Gevurah, the fifth *sefirah*, is the might of G-d perhaps more familiar to anyone who has been told of an “Old Testament G-d” who deals in wrath and judgement. But the kabbalists understood that this aspect of G-d works in conjunction with *Hesed*. That is, while “*Gevurah* represents the G-d we humans fear, the One before whose power we stand in trembling,” it is also the strength that tempers love, that fiercely protects and empowers those who fight injustice with a holy purpose.⁸⁴ So while *Hesed* is the ability to “continue this divine flow, passing on to others the gift of divine love,” *Gevurah* counters with a “trembling obedience.” *Gevurah* is the power of G-d that vanquishes demons and monsters while *Hesed* blesses Israel with peace. This pair of *sefirot* expresses a tension in

⁸³ Ibid., 42.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 43.

the powers of G-d when *Gevurah* “becomes impatient” with *Hesed*, “unwilling to see judgment set aside in the name of love.” This is the space from which rage and fury are born, energies that the kabbalists believed were potential for evil, as “power obsessed with itself turns demonic.” It is the balance of these two *sefirot* that speaks to the human experience: just as our own desires for love and power need balancing, we are the projection of a cosmic balancing act, reflecting it back to the heavenly abode.

This leads us to *Tif'eret*, the “splendor,” “truth,” and “balanced judgement” of G-d achieved through the proper balance of *Hesed* and *Gevurah*. *Tif'eret*, a great joist spanning the width of the sefirotic structure. *Tif'eret* is regarded as the “center of the sefirotic universe,” for which reason it is a central “beam” in the construction of the universe--balancing love and fear result in an incredibly tempered soul and therefore also achieve their cosmic equivalent in the successful balance of *Hesed* and *Gevurah*. Thus the kabbalists link *Tif'eret* with Jacob, a man who wrestles with angels, reconciles his father's fear and grandfather's devotion, and emerges to tell the tale as *Israel*. Balancing the incredible powers of *Hesed* and *Gevurah* is what gives *Tif'eret* its strength as the backbone of the sefirotic body. “The struggle to integrate love and judgment is not only the great human task but a reflection of the cosmic struggle,”⁸⁵ Green says, explaining one way the *sefirot* function as systems as they emerge, opening the sefirot to theoretical applications in the form of literary metaphor.

The next triad working in such a system is made of *Netzach* (*Victory, Eternity*), *Hod* (*Secret*), and *Yesod*. *Netzach* and *Hod*, the legs and feet of the sefirotic body, have no unique function, rhetorical or otherwise, but work with *Yesod* in a similar way as the triad of *Hesed-Gevurah-Tif'eret*. *Netzach* and *Hod* are the sefirot from which prophets

⁸⁵ Ibid., 47.

receive their visions, “making prophecy a matter of participation in the inner sefirotic life of G-d.”⁸⁶ Higher energies pass through these sefirot on their way to Shekhinah/Malchut and that flow is a key part of *Yesod*. Yesod, the ninth sefirah, extends from between the legs of the sefirotic body. *Yesod* represents three things: male potency, sexual purity, and righteousness. This sefirah is often called “tzaddik” and is “the place where G-d is represented as the embodiment of moral righteousness.”⁸⁷

Yesod becomes the phallus of the sefirotic tree, delivering the flow of potency downward. The world of the *sefirot* is a holy one without sin, and as such this male energy flow is “only fruitfulness and blessing,” the idealized version of the process it mirrors on a human body. *Yesod* is associated with Joseph, who according to kabbalist tradition honored the covenant of circumcision with his sexual purity. Yesod flows into *Shekhinah*, which is envisioned as a receptive container--a womb of sorts--for this divine energy. *Shekhinah* is also called *Malchut*, and as such represents the kingdom over which Tiferet rules. I give all of this context in order to understand the sexual metaphors the kabbalists use to explain the motivation of their spiritual body mapping: “The primary function of the religious life, with all its duties and obligations, is to rouse the Shekhinah into a state of love.”⁸⁸ Thus, the sefirot and the Divine body created when the kabbalists imagine the *sefirot*/body parts acting together is a way to involve oneself in the kabbalist’s desire for union with the Oneness of G-d. By imagining the sefirotic tree as a body, the kabbalists find a way to engage in intercourse with an incorporeal being through worship, giving G-d the body He needs while imbuing the human body with divine traits necessary to metaphorically cross worlds.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 48.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 53.

The sefirot represent a world that is influenced by our actions because it mirrors ours; likewise, we are mirroring heaven, embodiments of the divine that meet at the site of Shekhinah touching the world. Union with G-d means achieving a standard of attunement with the sefirotic process in order to balance oneself for such a vision. The kabbalists described this in sexual metaphors of G-d uniting with Israel as husband and wife, but this was more than a literary device to attain a goal of spiritual enlightenment. For the kabbalists, this union meant mirroring the infinite universal forces they believed existed in a realm we cannot access. According to Elliot Wolfson, the “mystical experience involves a type of sexual union between the initiate and the divine. Beholding the face of the Shekhinah becomes in the Zohar an actual embrace or penetration of the mystic into the divine feminine.”⁸⁹

For some medieval kabbalists, the sefirot are imbued with gender and interact with one another in accordance with a cisgender, heterosexual standard of logic. Wolfson’s interpretation facilitates queer reading by exploring the implications of metaphysically imagining oneself as a feminized, receptive partner of the Divine. From the upper sefirot through Yesod flows the essence of life, cosmic seed. The *Shekhinah* yearns to connect upward to Yesod in order to receive the divine seed through *Yesod*/phallus, and this process is mirrored in the biological process below heaven. To go further with the reading of Joseph and Pharaoh’s coupling as an example of the idealized kabbalistic union in the heterosexual example, Pharaoh becomes a symbol of *Malchut/Shekhinah*, a king who acts as a vessel for Joseph’s gift of dream interpretation.

⁸⁹ While the tradition makes limbs and body parts from other *sefirot*, for the purpose of my reading, I am most interested in the gender and sexuality implications of the Divine body.

Gender and the Body

As Wolfson understands it, kabbalists of the thirteenth century developed a literary practice of metaphorical gender transfiguration that lends itself to a queer reading. By subverting normative understandings of feminine and masculine energies in mystical communion with the Divine, they provide the foundation for the argument that a male-male union contains within its partners all the cosmic ingredients that make up male-female couplings. With some gentle prodding and further subversion of their arguments, I make the case that Joseph and Pharaoh's coupling--and the underlying desires that mirror the yearning for union between Yesod and Shekhinah--supplies both male and female energies, thus satisfying the cosmic desire for union of these halves.

The Divine Body and Homoerotic Confrontation

When the kabbalists tie elements of the sefirotic tree to body parts of G-d, they manifest a body for G-d. Judaism has struggled throughout its history with the notion of a corporeal deity, with some medieval philosophers embracing the idea while others reject it. While our modern sensibilities shy away from the notion of a corporeal understanding G-d, tradition is less clear in its rejection. In a sense, the way medieval kabbalists embrace a symbolic divine body and the eroticism of the Zohar is a "conscious rejection of the philosophical worldview." According to Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, author of *G-d's Phallus*, Jewish men throughout our history have themselves wrestled with the notion of G-d's body, or more specifically, G-d's phallus (the site of G-d's sexuality on His body) and what that means about men who form relationships with a masculine

G-d.⁹⁰ The notion of a divine body necessitates discussion of divine sexuality, which is a key component of the queer Zoharic hermeneutics I see in Eilberg-Schwartz's and Wolfson's work.

While the idea of a masculine-described (much less embodied) G-d brings with it a new, modern baggage for liberal Jews and liberal theology, if the idea of G-d having a penis was a source of anxiety and fascination for the men who authored and interpreted the religious texts of Judaism we must explore the impacts such a worldview has had on our understanding of ourselves, our faith, and these texts. This worldview is an especially important starting point when we consider that the kabbalists, unlike generations of Jewish men before and after them, were unafraid to engage with bodily imagery in their quest to unite with G-d. When we consider also that these men saw themselves as *partners* with G-d, their union with G-d looks more like my own natural coupling than the strict image of heterosexuality that has accompanied both the written and oral traditions of Judaism. This undeniably homoerotic energy has opened the field of Zoharic hermeneutics to application in literary analyses like this one.

Elliot Wolfson's androcentric reading of Zohar weaves these strands of homoeroticism into a singular approach to text. By carefully examining the issues about which ancient voices most often spoke, how they spoke about them, and how they lived their lives, Wolfson and others have reconstructed their anxieties and learned about the culture from which these issues arose. While Eilberg-Schwartz discusses the implications of a Divine Phallus on the male psyche, Wolfson explores the sign of circumcision of the human penis in terms of its physical implications. Circumcision, in which the foreskin is

⁹⁰ Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *G-d's Phallus and Other Problems for Men and Monotheism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994): 2.

removed from the tip of the penis, exposing the head or *corona* of the phallus, is an inscription of fidelity to G-d in accordance with biblical law. In kabbalistic tradition, circumcision rids the human penis of demonic foreskin in order to rid it of evil that it may mirror the divine realm. Likewise, the removal of the skin is an inscription upon the penis of G-d's name, a play on the 'yod' of the tetragrammaton on the 'yod' of the human body that evokes symbolic transformation.⁹¹ Thus, after Abraham nearly sacrifices his son out of devotion to G-d, he is redirected to an act of self-sacrifice in which he "signs" G-d's name on his body and the body of his son.

The semiotics of circumcision lead into three kabbalistic discussions that influence a reading of Joseph as gay. The first of the two is the notion of the *tzaddik*. The second is how the *sefirot* engender change in the male kabbalist's perception of self as he unites with the divine. Within these discussions, the terms "*tzaddik*," "*Yesod*" and "phallus," and "*Shekhinah*," "*Malchut*," and "crown" are triads of words that have unique and collective meanings. Every time one is mentioned, each of the others is alluded to. This literary convention, employed by the kabbalists, is one way that mystical connections between these ideas and the people they represent are worked out. Now that these pieces have been explained, the next concept is the *tzaddik*.

⁹¹ Elliot Wolfson, "Circumcision, Vision of G-d, and Textual Interpretation: From Midrashic Trope to Mystical Symbol" *History of Religions* 27, no. 2 (Nov. 1987): 205.

The Gay Tzaddik: Vision, Body, Majesty

*Bless YHVH, O His angels--such as Joseph, who was called Righteous and who guarded the holy covenant engraved in him*⁹²

According to Arthur Green, *tzaddik* refers to “one who is ‘innocent,’ or righteous as opposed to sinful.”⁹³ A *tzaddik* is a potent phallus, “bearer of righteous souls into this world,” whose “love-driven prayers arouse the Shekhinah.” A *tzaddik* is both fruitful and erotic, but his ultimate achievement is control over his potency. That is, a *tzaddik* is ultimately sexually pure, achieving power by “conquering temptation” and “living in accord with the strictest interpretation of Judaism’s sexual taboos.”⁹⁴ A *tzaddik* is expected to marry and have children⁹⁵ and yet the kabbalists crown Joseph with the title of *tzaddik* for his refusal of sex. If he has the potential to be a *tzaddik* in his youth, then I argue Joseph’s *tzaddik* status is not an honorific, but rather a trait, that is, something both present in him when he was born, and also influenced throughout his life by wisdom and contemplation, judgment and love, splendor, and vision. Joseph, whose entire kabbalistic embodiment is that of male sexual energy, is a *tzaddik* because of the sexual ethic and lifestyle he lives. He demonstrates power by staying in control of his sexuality and doing no sexual harm to others. He is *Yesod* because he is the male sexual ideal in every understanding of the term. Thus, *Malkhut* yearns for union with Joseph.

⁹² Zohar 1:189b.

⁹³ Green, 146.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 149. NB: These sexual taboos, according to Green, include wasting semen, “physical contact” with a wife before “postmenstrual ablution,” and sex with a Gentile woman. “The sin of sexual relations between men receives little mention in the Zohar and does not seem to have been a special concern.”

⁹⁵ A notable exception is given to impotent men who are compared to eunuchs in Zohar 1:187b.

The kabbalists seek a return to the mythic first human in the Garden of Eden, an ideal of harmonic perfection in which two halves, called Adam and Chava, were separated from one body named HaAdam. If the “goal” of sex is to “restore the feminine to the masculine,”⁹⁶ as Elliot Wolfson puts it, is this also the motivation of the tzaddik in respecting the covenant of circumcision? Is *Yesod* an arbiter of kosher coupling, perhaps one who would need to be embodied in a human with ambiguous traits, who provided “an opening for accusal by curling his hair, dressing up, and adorning himself?”⁹⁷ If Joseph, *na’ar*, is the righteous innocent, and the symbol of circumcision that crowns a flowing *Yesod* with a feminine, receptive energy known as *Shekhina/Malchut*, then his body, as a gay man, contains both feminine and masculine energies.

If the “goal” of sex is to “restore the feminine to the masculine,” as Elliot Wolfson puts it, is this also the motivation of the tzaddik in protecting the covenant of circumcision? The act of circumcision is itself a metaphor for the transformation of phallus into its own site of Yesod meeting Shekhinah through the removal of foreskin which is kabbalistically a “crowning” of the *Shekhinah* by exposing the *corona* of the penis. The *corona* (crown or head of the penis) corresponds to the *atarah* (“crown”) that symbolizes *Shekhinah*.⁹⁸ The metaphor of inscribing G-d on the penis is a way of rendering the penis both male and female. The phallus is “opened up” as a receptive site when it receives the inscription of the Divine name. The act of cutting the skin at the symbolic site of masculinity makes Joseph a symbolic receptive partner. Thus the image of G-d and mystic connected in union as husband and wife, complementary halves, is imaginable on the metaphysical level in sexual intercourse between men. *Shekhinah*

⁹⁶ Wolfson, *Eros, Language Being*, 324.

⁹⁷ Zohar 1:189b.

⁹⁸ *Atara* refers to the head of the penis and means “crown.”

seeks *Yesod* and Joseph breathes life into Egypt through Pharaoh, providing sustenance during seven years of famine, a Nile River of love that delights Pharaoh, mirrored image of the sefirotic body ideal, connected at the site of the sexual organ.⁹⁹ Thus the gay *tzaddik* fulfills the requirement of balanced, complementary union as *Yesod* with *Shekhinah* within him.

Finally, the *tzaddik* gains the gift of vision through respecting the covenant of circumcision.¹⁰⁰ Wolfson describes circumcision as “an act of opening that not only ushers the circumcised into the covenantal community of G-d but also places the individual into immediate--visual--relationship to the divine.” This act of “opening” is an uncovering, both physical/literal and figurative/mystical. It is an exposure of one’s vulnerability to stand naked and inscribed upon the body before their G-d and likewise it is for their partner. That is why *Shekhinah* is described as both the receptive sexual partner (a womb in kabbalistic imagery) and the manifestation of G-d known to dwell with humanity on Earth; *Shekhinah* receives that intimacy flowing from *Yesod*.

We can apply this to Joseph as well, for Joseph’s dream interpretation (vision) reaches profound heights when it gains him favor in the king’s eyes. Joseph is vulnerable before the king, having long since been stripped of his agency when he was sold into servitude by his brothers. Nevertheless, he opens himself to Pharaoh and lets divine wisdom flow through him to interpret Pharaoh’s dreams. This act of spiritual union if Pharaoh is read as *Malkhut*, is the spark of their relationship and precisely the moment that life for Egypt is secured in their partnership under Joseph’s careful governance as Pharaoh’s second-in-command.

⁹⁹ For an example of a similar sefirotic gender transposition see Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 358-9

¹⁰⁰ Wolfson, “Circumcision,” 193.

It is easy to dismiss the reading of this relationship because it fails to meet many key signals along that way that we expect in stories about heterosexual coupling. But the nature of queer coupling has always been more elusive and ceremonial, celebrated in secret, in hushed tones that recall faith practiced in secret in hostile lands. Zoharic hermeneutics allow the reader to make connections that reveal truths in new understandings by moving pieces of an image around for a new view while keeping its original intact. Implicit in this is one's own way of making meaning of text and what connotations and experiences are elicited from close reading. Knowing how the kabbalists played with the text of the Zohar means tracing the process in reverse: writing new meaning through interpretation according to our own vantage point.

Yesod meets Malchut: Zohar 1:194b

Come and see: Joseph is supernal covenant. As long as covenant endured, Shekhinah endured with Israel in peace, fittingly. As soon as Joseph--supernal covenant--vanished from the world, then covenant, Shekhinah, and Israel all plunged into exile. This has been established, as is written: A new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.¹⁰¹ All issued from the blessed Holy One fittingly.¹⁰²

Yesod is the site of sexual potency. Gay men confront an apparent imbalance of male sexual energy. Yesod is also the site of the gender fluidity and transfiguration that is part of gay coupling; we balance one another with our unique blend of masculine and

¹⁰¹ Exodus 1:8.

¹⁰² Zohar 1:184a.

feminine energies. The fact that Joseph, like Esther, unites with a King (representing *Malchut*) in order to save his people and the people of his adopted land is perhaps the greatest literary example of a queen becoming number two in the land, whose reign is uncontested save for the man who is only above her in regard to the throne!

Pharaoh sent and called for Joseph, ויריצוהו, and they rushed him, from the pit...¹⁰³

Rabbi Abba opened, “*YHVH רוצה, delights, in those in awe of Him, those awaiting His faithful love.*”¹⁰⁴ How greatly the blessed Holy One delights in the righteous, for they conduct peace and make peace above and make peace below and conduct the bride to her husband. So the blessed Holy One delights in those who are in awe of Him and do His will.

“Those awaiting His faithful love. Who are those? You must say: those engaging in Torah at night and becoming partners with Shekhinah; when morning comes, they await His faithful love.

[...]

Similarly, Joseph was sunk in a sadness of spirit, imprisoned there in sadness of heart. As soon as Pharaoh sent for him, what is written? ויריצוהו, *And they rushed him*--they mollified him, approaching him with words of joy, words delighting the heart, because he was saddened by the pit.¹⁰⁵

The word ויריצוהו is a study in how the mystery of one verb can represent a larger concealed truth. The author of the Zohar questions the meaning of this word with a typical midrashic play, identifying its root (adding a letter) and linking it to another biblical verse using the identified root. Once the verb meanings are made synonymous in the midrashic pun, the meaning of the second verse (in this case from Psalm 147) is substituted for the meaning of the verse in question. Thus, the verb ר-צ, the two-letter root meaning “run,” and in the case of this passive conjugation, “was hurried” as if to “be

¹⁰³ Genesis 41:14.

¹⁰⁴ Psalms 147:11.

¹⁰⁵ Zohar 1:194b.

rushed to Pharaoh,” is transformed into the root ה-צ-ג, to “find favor” or “delight in.” This transformation or “reading” is conventional throughout midrashic literature, and these extended puns are an important shorthand that lay entire ideas (and potential interpretations) over the face of a text, a paradoxical concealment and revelation that Wolfson explores in *Language, Eros, Being*. This is the game of the kabbalists: exploring deeper meanings of scripture by obscuring and equating concepts and people, thereby giving layers of texture to Jewish tradition through hermeneutics.

When Rabbi Abba reads “delight” into the passage, he introduces a loving sentiment into what is otherwise read as an innocuous order of sending for a prisoner to interpret the king’s dreams. But this prisoner is no ordinary prisoner--he is a *tzaddik*, in kabbalistic tradition, so-called in the Zohar numerous times, linked in his actions to *Yesod*. *Yesod* yearns for *Shekhinah*, its loving counterpart, here symbolized by Torah study, so we can read Joseph on one level (he is the one being called) and a mystical level (any mention of partnering with *Shekhinah* alludes to *Yesod*, her natural mate). But Rabbi Abba also employs the metaphor of a bride and husband who “make peace below” (through conjugal union) that is reflected above (through spiritual union), a reference to the kabbalist’s yearning for union reflected across realms. But looking at the text again, a curious parallelism requires at least some gender ambiguity. Who awaits “His” faithful love? Those who yearn to unite with *Shekhinah*. Then who is the bride and who is the husband in this metaphor? If the husband is the one who “delights in” “those awaiting His faithful love,” that makes the kabbalists the bride of G-d who is *Shekhinah*. *Shekhinah* likewise yearns to unite with *Yesod*, making Joseph/Yesod the parallel equivalent of the bride in this extended metaphor.

Once we notice how the kabbalists have set the scene, we can interpret the play that unfolds. Joseph, saddened in the pit (a reminder of the pit into which his brothers cast him earlier in his life) is summoned by the King, Pharaoh. And, “as soon as Pharaoh sent for him, what is written? ויריצוהו, *And they rushed him*--they mollified him, approaching him with words of joy, words delighting the heart, because he was saddened by the pit.”¹⁰⁶ But holding on to the interpretation offered by Rabbi Abba, we have: “As soon as Pharaoh sent for him, what is written? ויריצוהו, *And he (Pharaoh) was made to delight in him (Joseph)*.” Pharaoh is moved to feel favorably toward Joseph in that moment because in my interpretation, Pharaoh is a stand-in for *Shekhinah* who is also called *Malchut*. Pharaoh, the *Melech/Malchut*, thus yearns for Joseph/*Yesod* without whose input (without whose seed of wisdom) Pharaoh is empty and unable to understand the visions of his dreams. In *Zohar* 1:193b, just pages earlier, Rabbi Shim’on explains Joseph’s state of mind in captivity before ויריצוהו as a “place of forgetting, namely, end of the side of darkness.”¹⁰⁷ Joseph begged the cupbearer to remember him and to report well of him to Pharaoh for his skilled dream interpretation. But, “the chief cupbearer did not think of Joseph; he forgot him,”¹⁰⁸ וְלֹא־זָכַר שָׂר־הַמִּשְׁקִים אֶת־יוֹסֵף וַיִּשְׁכַּחְהוּ, which the kabbalists see as a coded reference to Joseph in זָכַר, “masculine,” an allusion to *Yesod* and its male potency. As such, Joseph/*Yesod*, yearned for *Shekhinah*/Pharaoh, who “dreamed, and behold, he was standing by the Nile.” Rabbi Shim’on finishes, in *Zohar* 1:193b, saying, “this was a dream of Joseph, since every river pertains to Joseph the Righteous. This is the mystery

¹⁰⁶ *Zohar* 1:194b.

¹⁰⁷ Rabbi Shim’on asks the question, “What is at the end?” in reference to Genesis 41:1, “It happened at the end of two years of days that Pharaoh dreamed...”

¹⁰⁸ Genesis 40:23.

of ‘One who sees a river in a dream, sees peace, as is written: Behold, I will extend peace to her like a river.’”¹⁰⁹

Joseph as a *tzaddik*, Righteous One, a river who brings forth life, hangs between *Hod* and *Netzach*, prophetic energies that are perhaps the means through which G-d imbues him with his gift of dream interpretation, a visionary ability of its own, obtained through the covenant of circumcision. “When the time is ripe, the exegete, the Tzaddik in the world, discloses what has been concealed.”¹¹⁰ Joseph’s gift of revelation is borne of his righteousness and his commitment to the covenant of circumcision that grants the gift of vision to the circumcised. His gift is the object of Pharaoh’s awe, and because it is intrinsic to Joseph, Pharaoh is in awe of Joseph. Joseph’s plans please Pharaoh because Joseph pleases Pharaoh. Pharaoh and Joseph’s relationship is one of reciprocal ר-צ-ה.

Concealment and Revelation: Zohar 1:196a

Therefore [Pharaoh] appointed [Joseph] over the entire land of Egypt, because the blessed Holy One gave Joseph what was already his.

A mouth that did not kiss sin: *Upon your mouth all my people shall kiss*¹¹¹.

A hand that did not approach sin: *He put [the ring] on Joseph’s hand*¹¹².

A neck that did not approach sin: *He placed the gold chain around his neck*.¹¹³

A body that did not approach sin: *They called out before him, Avrekh, and similarly: He had him ride in the chariot of viceroy*.¹¹⁴
Everything he received was already his own.

¹⁰⁹ Isaiah 66:12.

¹¹⁰ Wolfson, “Circumcision,” 208.

¹¹¹ Genesis 41:40.

¹¹² Genesis 41:42.

¹¹³ Genesis 41:42.

¹¹⁴ Genesis 41:43.

Everything that merits Joseph divine attention and reward is part of his nature. That which “was already his” in the words of the Zohar is a body free from sin. This passage focuses on Joseph’s body, repeating the body parts mentioned in the verses on which it expands. Genesis 41, which I read as the tale of Joseph and Pharaoh meeting, falling in love, and getting married, mentions Joseph’s mouth, hands, neck, and entire body. The body is referred to frequently in times of vulnerability or expressing emotion, such as when Esau greets his brother Jacob, overcome with emotion, “falling on his neck,” and weeping.¹¹⁵ The kabbalists are aware of the peculiarity in Pharaoh and Joseph’s bodily closeness. The king dresses and interacts with Joseph directly, touching his body, knowing that he is a Hebrew *na’ar* brought from the dungeon.

Going beyond the body, Joseph unites also with Pharaoh mentally, fashioning himself a vessel in which to contain *Yesod* within Pharaoh. In their intimate sharing of dreams, Joseph “reveals depths”¹¹⁶ by making meaning from Pharaoh’s night vision. This “depth” that Joseph taps into is the receptacle from whence he “draws out” understanding and the void left behind (once occupied by “deep waters”) is a receptive site (*Malchut*) for *Yesod* to enter.¹¹⁷ Pharaoh responds to this action by clothing and thereby concealing the exposed Joseph (the prisoner raised from the depths of the pit) with royal garb. This corresponds to the “glorious garments” that conceal the sparks of light known as “arrayments of the king” and “crowns of the king.” When Pharaoh, the king, crowns Joseph with authority, he takes part in the arrayment of the “sparks” flowing between Joseph and Pharaoh. These divine “gradations,” the essence of G-d and of all life, are “concealed” as they are joined to one another until they are inseparable. This singular

¹¹⁵ Genesis 33:4.

¹¹⁶ Zohar 1:201b.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

revealed light is the “garment of the king” also called “the innermost light,” and its singularity represents the whole of all the parts it represents. So too are Joseph and Pharaoh individual lights, connected to, concealed by, and revealed by one another in their interactions. As humans on Earth they reflect a cosmic process of lights in union, concealing, and revealing.

Come and see! *In the house of פרעה, Pharaoh*--your mnemonic above: the house from which all lights and sparks אהפרעו, have been exposed, and revealed. All that was concealed, from there was revealed...¹¹⁸

This pun on “Pharaoh” is another way to see the revelation/concealment metaphor in the love of Joseph and Pharaoh who complement one another in accordance with their *sefirotic* attraction. פ-ר-ע, taken here to mean “to expose,” “suggests that the house of Pharaoh alludes to *Binah*, from whom the upper lights are revealed and radiated to *Shekhinah*.”¹¹⁹ If Pharaoh’s house is the mirrored hallway in which the Divine emanating light is reflected (*Binah*), the love between Pharaoh and Joseph is the spark of divine life that the house has illuminated. The following passage illustrates the joy of Joseph before the Kings he serves (G-d and husband)--joy and delight above and below. Taking the metaphor further down the sefirotic body, Yesod/*Joseph* is the force that directs this divine flow toward *Shekhinah*, representing the sustenance of the people during a time of famine that comes from the King and Queen’s peaceful home. So the King delights in his Queen, a union that produces a great richness against the backdrop of famine.

¹¹⁸ Zohar 1:210a.

¹¹⁹ Daniel C. Matt, *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*. Vol. 3. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006): 290, n.173

Conclusion: Preliminary Thoughts on Gay Exegesis in Synagogue Life

*Finally, same-sex couples come to us personally motivated to sanctify their relationship in a Jewish context; they rarely come because of external pressures imposed by family. When we welcome them, acknowledge the kedushah in their relationships and affirm it in ceremony, we can counter some of their negative preconceptions of or personal experiences with the established Jewish community.*¹²⁰

Gay exegesis can play a vital role in synagogue life. As a theoretical approach, gay exegesis enriches the field of Jewish text study by providing new insights from fresh eyes. Our body of cultural knowledge grows when we conquer the presumption of heterosexuality in biblical literature. Reading Joseph as a gay man, for example, challenges the association of Pharaoh and Egypt with evil and enslavement, allowing us to remember that Joseph was happy in Egypt and that Exodus 1 begins with a regime change. Reading Joseph with a new intention not only encourages us to grasp at new truths just beyond the fringe of tradition, but it also gives a sense of lived human existence to the longest biblical narrative.

On the practical level, gay exegesis is a repairative act for those who have been excluded from their faith tradition on the basis of sexual orientation. Empathizing with Joseph as a gay man brings humanity to a group of queer people who have experienced the power of religion through anti-gay legislation, and it benefits gay and straight people alike. For gay people, this gained sense of humanity affects positive change through normalization. By embracing the idea of a sacred text affirming a same-sex relationship, religious communities can unequivocally say that gay people are as holy as their straight

¹²⁰ Nancy Weiner, "Pre-marital Counseling for Same-Sex Couples: Highlights for Rabbis and Cantors," *New Menorah* (Spring 2000): 5-8.

counterparts and worthy of blessing. Given that reading Joseph as a gay man provides an enriching experience of text study regardless of whether or not one accepts the read, I argue that it is for the sake of Torah study alone that we must push ourselves to read between and outside of the lines we drew for ourselves. Gay exegesis is as important for its inclusion and celebration of gay people as it is for its potential to combat homophobia and encourage straight Jews to participate directly in the expansion of our tradition.

After reading Joseph entering Pharaoh's court as a wedding, I turn back to the verse that inspired this project, Genesis 41:40: אֶתְּהָא עַל־בֵּיתִי וְעַל־פִּיךָ יִשָּׁק כָּל־עַמִּי רַק הַכֶּסֶּא "You shall be a part of my household and my people shall kiss you upon the lips. Only in terms of the throne shall I be above you."¹²¹ What piqued my interest was the way this line read to me as a marriage proposal. When we allow ourselves to consider love in this unlikeliest of places, we dream up new ways to illuminate our lives with words of Torah. Incorporating the text of Genesis 41 into a same-sex wedding ceremony would carry this new perspective into a similarly intimate commitment ritual. The text continues, "and Pharaoh removed his ring from his finger and put it on Joseph's finger, dressed him in linen clothing, and placed a gold chain around his neck," suggesting new ritual items--rings, linen garments, gold chains--for a gay wedding with biblical roots. Genesis 41:43 describes what could be a royal send off for the married couple, similar to a carriage that takes away newlyweds, but gayer: "Pharaoh paraded Joseph in his chariot¹²² to whom all the people called out, "*Abrek!*" Perhaps the dream biblical same-sex wedding is a giant pagaent in which one re-enacts the tale of Joseph from "pit

¹²¹ My own translation.

¹²² Joseph is in the "second chariot" that is, מרכבת המשנה, presumably following Pharaoh in the first chariot, an image that could certainly communicate royalty riding behind his husband, the king.

to palace,” a gay play on the classic “rags to riches” tale. The opportunity for creating new ritual is endless because gay exegesis by definition forces us to understand the text differently and therefore elicit new information.

Finally, we may illuminate the text of Torah itself by creating art from it with its new queer context. In the process of this project, I was moved by the love story I read and it inspired me to compose a piece of musical midrash. I set the Hebrew text of Genesis 41:40-42 to music and added original English lyrics based on my understanding of the literature that I have read in the course of this work. It is my wish that this creative endeavor become the work of other queer and straight Jews who wish to beautify the tradition and divine new wisdom by bringing their own experiences and insights to the text when they read. May we see ourselves reflected in the text and continue the work of interpreting its hidden truths, and in the process better ourselves and our world.

Bibliography

- Abrams, Daniel. "The Invention of the Zohar as a Book" *Kabbalah* 19 (2009): 7-142.
- "Assault on Gay America: The Life and Death of Billy Jack Gaither." *Frontline*. PBS, February 15, 2000.
- Boswell, John. *Same Sex Unions in Premodern Europe*. New York: Vintage Books, 1995.
- Boyarin, Daniel. *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.
- Boyarin, Daniel. *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.
- Bullough, Vern L. "On Being a Male in the Middle Ages." In *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*, edited by Clare A. Lees, 31-46. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994.
- Green, Arthur. *A Guide to the Zohar*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004.
- Hellner-Eshed, Melila. *A River Flows from Eden: The Language of Mystical Experience in the Zohar*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011. Kindle.
- Kugel, James. *In Potiphar's House: The Interpretive Life of Biblical Texts*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994.
- Matt, Daniel Chanan. *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*. Vol. 3. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006.
- Michaelson, Jay. "Kabbalah and Queer Theology: Resources and Reservations." *Theology & Sexuality* 18, no. 1 (2013).
- Mirrer, Louise. "Representing 'Other' Men: Muslims, Jews, and Masculine Ideals in Medieval Castilian Epic and Ballad." In *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*, edited by Clare A. Lees, 169-186. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994.
- Plaskow, Judith. *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective*. New York: HarperCollins, 1991.
- Roth, Norman. "'Deal Gently with the Young Man': Love of Boys in Medieval Hebrew Poetry of Spain" *Speculum* 57, no. 1 (Jan 1982): 20-51.
- Wolfson, Elliot. *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic*

Imagination. New York: Fordham University Press, 2005.

Wolfson, Elliot. "Circumcision, Vision of G-d, and Textual Interpretation: From Midrashic Trope to Mystical Symbol." *History of Religions* 27, no. 2 (2008): 189-215.

Zierler, Wendy. "Joseph(ine), the Singer: The Queer Joseph and Modern Jewish Writers," *Nashim* 24 (Spring 2013): 97-119.

ARR 49-52, a Reform Responsum on homosexuality.

Atah Tih'yeh Al Beiti

Genesis 40:41-42; English lyrics by Stefano Iacono

Stefano Iacono

♩ = 120

Voice

Piano

5

Vo.

Pno.


9


Vo.

Pno.


Will They hat - ed me for the love that I re - ceived
they ev - er learn of what you said to me


11

Vo. 
 — so I yearned — for a wor - ld more kind to youths like me
 pri-vate-ly when we are noth - ing but bones ina car - a - van

Pno. 

14

Vo. 
 who are too queer for the herd
 of love with us at the throne?


Pno. 

17


Vo. 
 They cut me down, had no re-gard for me, who I could
 They car - ried us in - to the pro-mised land

Pno. 


20

Vo. 

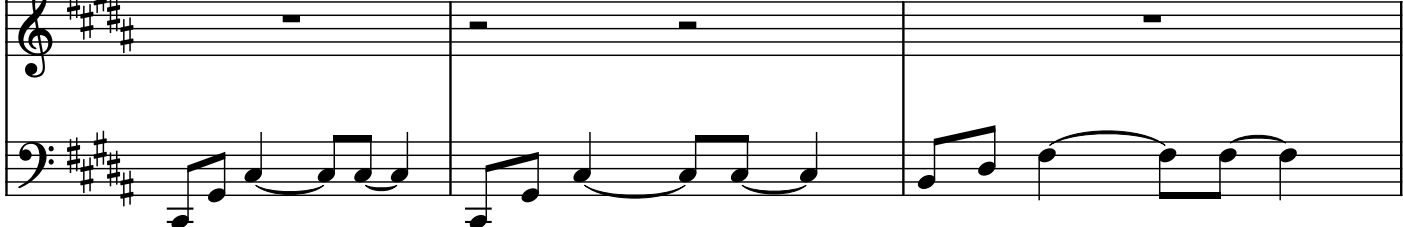
be, and they cast me a - way Because I dared to dream -
and I gave you your ring: A pro - mise for eter - ni-ty

Pno. 

23

Vo. 

and I be - lieved That I could be loved
that you will be For - ev - er in love,

Pno. 

26 Fine

Vo. 

and you'd be my king. You saw me star -
for - e - ver with me.

Pno. 

30

Vo.  - ing down in - to the pit I don't re-mem-ber who I was be -

Pno. 

33

Vo.  fore be-fore your love, your ring, and char-i - ots You caught me

Pno. 

36

Vo.  cry-ing like I was dream - img and se - ven-teen

Pno. 

40

Vo. *3* *3*

and you re-mind - ed me: at-ah tih-yeh al bei-ti

Pno.

43

Vo. *slower and freely, almost chanting, building emotion*

A-tah tih-yeh al bei-ti v'-al pi-

Pno.

47

Vo.

cha yi-shak kol am-i rak ha - ki-seh eg-dal mi - mecha

Pno.

53

Vo.

re-eh na-ta - ti ot-cha al kol e-retz mitz-ra - yim va-ya-sar Pa -

Pno.

57 **accelerando**

Vo.

roah et ta-ba - to me-al ya - do v'-yi-tein o - tah al yad Yo - sef v'-yal-besh -

Pno.

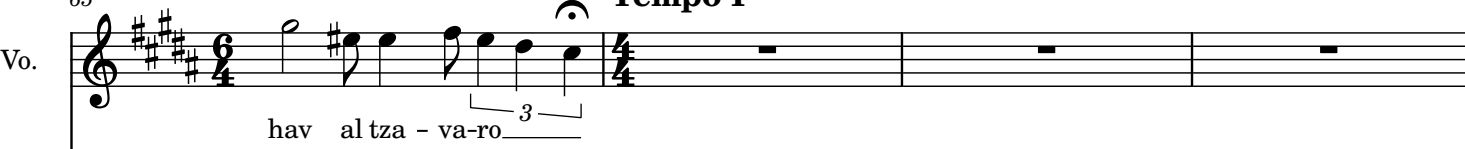
62

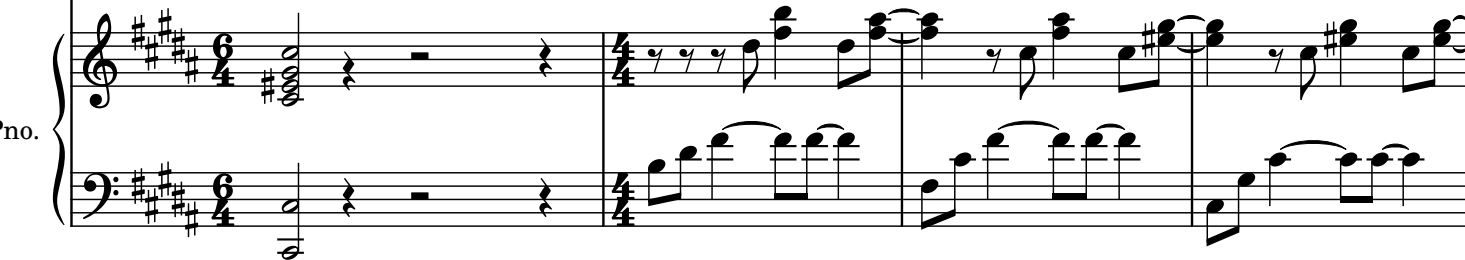
Vo.

o - to big-dei shesh v' - ya - sem r' - vid ha - za -

Pno.

65 **Tempo I**

Vo. 

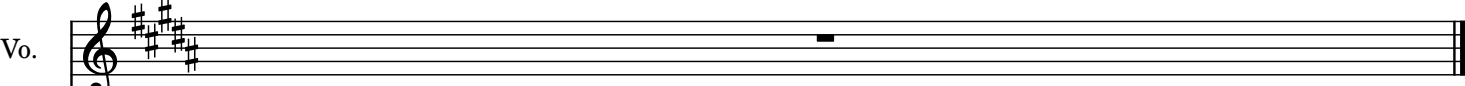
hav al tza - va-ro 

69

Vo. 

Pno. 

73 **D.S. al Fine**

Vo. 

Pno. 