TORAH, TESTOSTERONE AND TEARS: MASCULINITY AND EMOTION IN THE BIBLE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

Since the 1970's and following the success of the feminist movement in opening the door to discussion of gender in all parts of society, considerable thought has been devoted to understanding American norms around male expression of emotion and other aspects of masculinity. Marvin Allen comments on what it is like to grow up as a boy in American society:

> Boys learn to be men by absorbing the thousands of messages about manliness that filter down to them through their parents, siblings, peers, ministers, teachers, scout leaders, comic books, cartoons, TV shows, action movies, and commercials. Taken as a whole, these messages encourage boys to be competitive, focus on external success, rely on their intellect, withstand physical pain, and repress their vulnerable emotions. When boys violate the code, it is not uncommon for them to be teased, shamed or ridiculed. Society's goal is not to cause emotional injury to the boys but to harden them to face the difficulties men have always had to face.[1]

These ideas about male behavior and emotion, as Allen suggests, must be reflected not only in our daily interactions and popular culture, but also in all areas of the American literary canon. In their book, *Boys Don't Cry? Rethinking Narratives of Masculinity and Emotion in the U.S.*, Milette Shamir and Jennifer Travis elaborate further:

> As the American male is increasingly on display and under analysis, particularly he to whom Erving Goffman has referred as "the complete unblushing male" – white, heterosexual, middle-class, Protestant, northern, urban – we tend to cling hard to some of the most well-entrenched truisms about masculinity: that it connotes total control of emotions, that it mandates emotional inexpressivity, that it entraps in emotional isolation, that boys, in short, don't cry."[2]

Milette, Travis, and Allen believe that the conceptions described above are to an extent particularly American, or at least particularly Caucasian. However, in most cultures, to varying extents, there are different norms for men and for women regarding expression of emotion as well as other behaviors. What is the nature of Jewish conceptions of masculinity? Are the norms identified above reflected in the Bible and

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[1] Marvin Allen, *Angry Men, Passive Men: Understanding the Roots of Men's Anger and How to Move Beyond It* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1993) 7.
[2] Milette Shamir and Jennifer Travis, Introduction to *Boys Don't Cry? Rethinking Narratives of Masculinity and Emotion in the U.S.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) 1.

rabbinic commentaries, our central texts? Are our biblical heroes expected to be strong and emotionally unflappable? What are the expectations of biblical men with regard to sexuality?

In this thesis, I delve into these questions with regard to the following biblical characters: Jacob, Esau, and Joseph in the Book of Genesis and King David in the Books of Samuel and Kings. In the first chapter, I explore passages in Genesis in which the first three characters are said to cry, examining the text and the commentaries of the Rabbis. In the next two chapters, I study these three characters more generally with respect to gender. Finally, Chapter 4 is devoted to David, including discussion of his crying within my examination of his character as a whole. I do this because crying is so integral to David's character and in order to keep the discussion of Genesis separate from discussion of the books of Samuel and Kings.

Chapter 1: Crying in the Bible

Genesis is the only book in the Pentateuch in which the verb *bachah*, or cry, refers to an individual character in the narrative. The single exception to this is at Ex. 2:6, when Pharaoh's daughter hears the baby Moses crying. All instances of the word in the other four books refer either to the entire people of Israel (e.g. "and the people *wept* that night" (Num. 14:1)) or to rules regarding mourning. A look at the occurrences of *bachah* in Genesis reveals that our patriarchs are said to cry numerous times. Jacob, Joseph and even Esau – perhaps the quintessential "man's man" according to Western cultural standards – all weep on at least one occasion. In this chapter I will address these instances, examining the biblical text as well as Rabbinic and modern commentaries.

In approaching the biblical text, it must be recognized that biblical as well as early rabbinic writings occurred within cultural contexts vastly different from our own, and the statements quoted in the introduction from Allen, Travis and Davis may not apply in the same way to the biblical context as they do to the Western culture of our time. American Jewish scholar Nahum Sarna sums this up in his commentary to Genesis. In response to Jacob's tears upon meeting Rachel in Gen. 29, he states, "Men of the East are less inhibited than Westerners in giving expression to their emotions."[3]

The early rabbis, for their part, were influenced in their attitudes by the Greco-Roman cultural backdrop. We can gather enough information about how crying by men is seen in Greek culture to see that Greek attitudes differed from our own as well. In examining Achilles' weeping in book XVIII of the *Iliad,* Gail Holst-Warhaft observes,

[3] Nahum M Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 203.

"Giving way to loud and uncontrolled weeping is not only normal, it seems, in the world of the knightly heroes, but gives a certain pleasure.[4] In addition, Katherine Derderian, who examines Greek mourning customs, states that for both men and women, Greek mourning "involves the shedding of tears."[5]

We see, therefore, that when we read the Bible, we may expect to encounter a greater readiness by male characters to cry than we would in American literature or popular culture, and in the commentaries, we may find a greater openness to crying by male characters. In this chapter, I will begin to examine whether this is true.

We begin with Jacob in Haran. After a long journey from his parents' home in Beer-sheba, fleeing his brother's wrath for stealing their father's blessing, Jacob comes upon a well. He speaks with several shepherds, who are waiting for an appointed time at which the heavy stone cover will be removed from the well so that they can water their livestock.

> [9]While he was still speaking to them, Rachel came with her father's flock; for she was a shepherdess. [10]And when Jacob saw Rachel, the daughter of his uncle Laban, and the flock of his uncle Laban, Jacob went up and rolled the stone off the mouth of the well, and watered the flock of his uncle Laban. [11]Then Jacob kissed Rachel, and broke into tears. [12]Jacob told Rachel that he was her father's kinsman, that he was Rebecca's son; and she ran and told her father. [13]On hearing the news of his sister's son Jacob, Laban ran to greet him; he embraced him and kissed him, and took him into his house. He told Laban all that had happened[14] and Laban said to him, "You are truly my bone and flesh." (Gen. 29:9-14)[6]

From our modern, Western perspective, as we have discussed, verse 11 comes as a surprise. Imagine any of the great American heroes – from Superman to the Lone Ranger – moving a gigantic stone off of a well, kissing the beautiful maiden, and then

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[4] Gail Holst-Warhaft, *Dangerous Voices: Women's Laments and Greek Literature* (London: Routledge, 1992) 108.
[5] Katherine Derderian, *Leaving Words to Remember: Greek Mourners and the Advent of Literacy* (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2001) 29.
[6] Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are adapted from *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh: The Traditional Hebrew Text and the New JPS Translation – Second Edition* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1999). Hereafter referred to as JPS.

bursting into tears. Why does the Bible provide this display of unbridled emotion, this picture of one of our people's manly heroes sobbing for no readily apparent reason? From our modern perspective, at least, this episode begs for explanation.

Rashi, the foremost medieval rabbinic commentator on the Bible, is interested in exploring Jacob's outburst, but he does not seem troubled by it for the same reason we are. Apparently bothered by the fact that Jacob cries at a moment when one would think he would be happy rather than sad, he explains the reason for what he assumes is Jacob's sadness. Rashi offers two alternative explanations. First, he posits that Jacob loves Rachel at first sight, but he is sad because he foresees that she will not be buried next to him when both are dead. Alternatively, Rashi guesses, Jacob cries because he does not have a suitable gift for the family, which would show his honorable intentions towards Rachel as well as his wealth. Likewise, the Italian Renaissance commentator Obadia Sforno suggests that Jacob's tears are due to his fear that he may not deserve to marry a woman like Rachel. Other commentators, such as the Radak, assert that Jacob simply is overcome with love for Rachel. The Midrash offers similar explanations for Jacob's crying.

The traditional commentators often seek to defend the patriarchs for their questionable actions. When Jacob deceives his blind father into granting him his elder brother's blessing, he lies to his father, saying, "It is I, Esau, your firstborn" (Gen. 27:19). Rashi offers an incredible interpretation of Jacob's words, saying that the intended meaning is, "I am the one who brings you food, and Esau is your firstborn." Rashi is willing to sacrifice all sense of plausibility to avoid attributing to Jacob such an act as lying to his father's face.

However, the rabbis' explanations of Jacob's crying in Gen. 29 are qualitatively different from the explanation Rashi offers for Jacob's lie in Gen. 27. They seek to provide a suitable reason for Jacob's crying, but they do not attempt to deny that he cries. If Rashi had seen Jacob's crying as a threat to his reputation, he could have asserted, for example, that sand kicked up by Rachel's flock had irritated Jacob's eyes, and he was not really crying at all – his eyes just suddenly became teary. This kind of spin on the story would not be any less believable than Rashi's spin of Gen. 27:19. However, none of the traditional commentators offer such an interpretation. We learn from this that Jacob's crying, in and of itself, is not threatening to the rabbis. From this we can infer that either the rabbis lived in a context in which crying by a male hero was accepted, or at least they understood that the biblical characters lived in such a context.

We have established, then, that crying by male characters is more readily permitted by the biblical writers and by the rabbis than it is by the creators of the American literary or movie hero. Now, in order to understand more fully the extent and nature of this male permission to cry, we will look more closely at Jacob's actions and compare them to the only example we have in the Pentateuch of a female biblical character crying, Hagar.

We first need to analyze more deeply why Jacob cries in Gen. 29:11. Even though the rabbis' explanations of Jacob's crying are far more realistic than Rashi's interpretation of Jacob's lie in Gen. 27, they still fall short of offering a truly plausible explanation. Their reasons, discussed above, are simply not enough. Would any character, male or female, break into tears upon falling in love at first sight? Or upon foreseeing somehow that this true love would not in the end be buried with the main

character? Or realizing that he or she did not have a suitable gift? In the context of a practical understanding of the story's plot, the explanations seem contrived. Perhaps he really is moved by affection for Rachel. Maybe he is, in fact, embarrassed or worried that he does not have suitable gifts for the family. But each of these reasons alone is not enough to explain his emotional reaction.

Where traditional commentators have failed, contemporary scholar Norman Cohen succeeds in providing an explanation that resonates with a modern reader wishing to relate to Jacob's outburst.

> Jacob could not control his emotions. He reached out for Rachel's hand, drew her toward him, and kissed her. Though a bit embarrassed, she returned his affection. It was all too much for Jacob. His tears began to flow as he raised his voice in gratitude to God for his good fortune. He had found his family and his future.[7]

Jacob does not cry out of love alone, or out of fear or sadness. He cries because his frightening journey is over. The woman he has met inspires a feeling of coming home. She is not only beautiful, she is family, and finding her means he is no longer alone; he is safe, and he has a place to stay. At least until recently, Jacob was "a mild man who stayed in camp" (Gen. 25:27). In the last few days, he has tricked his father, fled a brother who plans to kill him, slept alone in the desert and dreamt about wrestling with God. His mother, with whom he has a close relationship, has hastily sent him away. Jacob needs an accepting ear to listen to his experiences, and he knows he will get this from his uncle Laban and his cousin, and perhaps future wife, Rachel. It is with a sense of relief and comfort that he now lets his tears flow. His crying is a release of the emotions built up throughout his journey and not once expressed until now.

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[7] Norman J. Cohen, *Voices From Genesis: Guiding Us Through the Stages of Life* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1998) 115.

To help us compare the male emotional experience in the Bible to that of the female, let us examine the scene in which Hagar cries. In Genesis 21, Hagar and her son Ishmael are banished by Abraham from the camp, at the behest of Sarah.

> [14]Early the next morning, Abraham took some bread and a skin of water, and gave them to Hagar. He placed them over her shoulder, together with the child, and sent her away. And she wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba. [15]When the water was gone from the skin, she left the child under one of the bushes, [16]and went and sat down at a distance, a bowshot away; for she thought, "Let me not look on as the child dies." And sitting thus afar, she burst into tears.
> [17]God heard the voice of the boy, and an angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What troubles you Hagar? Fear not, for God has heeded the voice of the boy where he is. (Gen. 21:14-17)

We see here a classic example of a desperate woman. Hagar has run out of water and she and her child have been left to die in the wilderness. She cries at the lowest point of her journey. In the wilderness, with no one around to hear, she holds out no hope that her situation will improve – the text even uncharacteristically tells us her thoughts, "Let me not look on as the child dies." Her cry is passive and shows her weakness. And, although the angel of God says it is actually the child's voice that God has heard, the story's thrust is that the mother's cry is answered with a helping, masculine hand. Not a single one of the rabbis whose comments are canonized in the rabbinic Bible has anything to say about the fact that Hagar cries here. Her crying flows easily with the plot of the story and does not draw attention.

Two remarkable features make Jacob's crying in the Gen. 29 story starkly different from that of Hagar in Gen. 21. The first difference is that while Hagar is a passive victim, bewailing her powerlessness, Jacob cries only after he demonstrates his physical power (even he, the "mild man") by single-handedly moving the stone, supposedly a job for several men working together.

The second difference between Jacob and Hagar's emotional expressions is their timing. As we discussed earlier, Hagar cries at her moment of greatest desperation, when

she is frightened for her life and the life of her son. She leaves the boy, walks away, sits down and begins to cry. Jacob, in contrast, does not cry during his difficult and dangerous ordeal. There is no discussion of his emotions at all. Like the typical American male hero, he trudges along on the journey uncomplaining. He finally cries only when it is clear that he has overcome his hardship and made it out of danger.

If we examine the second time Jacob cries, we gain still further insight into his emotional behavior. This occurs when, years later, he meets his brother Esau, and they weep together.[8]

> [1]Looking up, Jacob saw Esau coming, accompanied by 400 men. He divided the children among Leah, Rachel and the two maids, [2]putting the maids and their children first, Leah and her children second, and Rachel and Joseph last. [3]He himself went on ahead and bowed low to the ground seven times until he was near his brother. [4]Esau ran to greet him. He embraced him and, falling on his neck, he kissed him; and they wept. (Gen. 33.1-4)

In this instance, as with Hagar, none of the commentators of the rabbinic Bible make a single comment about the fact that Jacob and Esau cry. Not only do they find it unnecessary to deny the outburst; in this case they do not even feel the need to explain the reason for the crying.

For us, however, it is useful to explore the reason for Jacob and Esau's crying here, in order to glean what it says about the Bible's norms for men's emotion and for masculinity. Jacob has long anticipated and feared this meeting with his bother. We see a hint of that in his behavior as described above, arranging his children and wives carefully, apparently putting his more treasured family farther away from the perceived physical threat. He then bows repeatedly, in a sign of submission and respect. It had

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[8] Besides these two occurrences, the verb *bachah* is applied to Jacob one more time at Gen. 37:35, "Thus his father *bewailed* him." Because *bachah* specifically refers here to mourning, it cannot be concluded that Jacob actually cried.

actually stated earlier that meeting Esau was a source of fear for Jacob: "Jacob was greatly frightened" (Gen. 32:8). He sends gifts and divides his people and animals into two camps so that if Esau attacks, one camp may survive. In fact, it is during the night between this preparation and the dreaded meeting that Jacob wrestles with the *ish*, the angel of God. This is Jacob's most significant symbolic internal struggle, through which he gains his new identity as *Yisra'el*, the one who has "striven with beings divine and human," and prevailed (Gen. 32:29).

Yet, throughout this harrowing night, fearfully awaiting the meeting with his brother, Jacob again does not cry. He plays the stoic hero, doing what has to be done – and even, unnecessarily, doing it alone. It is no wonder he cries when his brother kisses him. Esau may be genuinely happy to see his estranged brother, and thus sheds tears of joy; Jacob, however, is surely crying, again, from relief. He has been spared the revenge his brother vowed against him. Thus, as we saw also with his outburst at the well, our male hero releases his emotion only after his horrifying ordeal is over, as contrasted with the female protagonist, Hagar, who cries during her darkest, weakest moment.

From a literary perspective, Jacob and Esau's crying here is strategically placed in the narrative to deliver maximum suspense and drama. Esau is traveling with 400 men, which leads the reader to wonder whether he plans to make war on Jacob (we are told of Jacob's feelings, but not Esau's, and we must guess). Then, when the twins meet, Jacob bows to Esau, and Esau runs towards Jacob. Is he running to him or at him? He embraces Jacob. When men embrace, especially when watching from a distance, it is not always readily apparent whether the embrace is friendly or whether they are fighting. Esau then "falls on his neck" and "kisses him," but here too, the meaning is unclear.

Dots over the word *vayishakeihu* in the Masoretic text indicate the questionable status of the word, since it is not found in the Septuagint. However, one midrashic interpretation of the dots is that the word is actually not *vayishakeihu*, "He kissed him," but *vayishakheihu*, "He bit him."[9] Thus the reader is kept in suspense as to whether the men are fighting or not until the last moment, when we read the word, *"vayivku,"* "And they cried." This effect, in addition to creating suspense, emphasizes the masculinity of both characters. The fact that they finally cry at the climax of the narrative does not detract from the potentially violent nature of the scene.

As we turn to our third story, featuring Esau as the main character, we see an interesting twist to the pattern so far established. We pick up just after Jacob receives his father Isaac's blessing, by deception, and leaves the tent. Esau then enters and greets his father.

> [32]His father Isaac said to him, "Who are you?" And he said, "I am your son Esau, your firstborn!" [33]Isaac was seized with a very violent trembling. "Who was it, then," he demanded, "who hunted game and brought it to me? Moreover, I ate of it before you came, and I blessed him; now he must remain blessed!" [34]When Esau heard his father's words, he let out an exceedingly mighty and bitter yell, and said to his father, "Bless me too, Father!" [35]But he answered, "Your brother came with guile and took away your blessing. [36][Esau] said, "Was he, then, named Jacob that he might supplant me these two times? First he took away my birthright and now he has taken away my blessing!" And he added, "Have you not reserved a blessing for me?" [37]Isaac answered, saying to Esau, "But I have made him master over you: I have given him all his brothers for servants, and sustained him with bread and wine. What, then, can I still do for you, my son?" [38]And Esau said to his father, have you but one blessing Father? Bless me too, Father!" And Esau wept aloud." (Gen. 27:32-38)[10]

Here we cannot say of Esau what we said of Jacob: that he cries only when his ordeal is over and he is ready to release his emotions. He is not the stoic Western hero, who silently absorbs adversity. Esau cries bitterly at his lowest point of weakness, when

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[9] Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, ed., *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) 68.

[10] At verse 34, I have adapted the translation substantially from the JPS, opting for a more literal translation.

he realizes he has no recourse for the wrong that has been done to him. In that his behavior is somewhat like Hagar's in Gen. 21, Esau's case challenges the observations we have made so far about men crying in the Bible. Here, perhaps, is our example of a man who lets his emotions flow, in the moment that things get tough.

However, three different observations can be made that put this episode in a different perspective. First, if any man in the Bible can afford to momentarily take on behaviors associated with women without placing his masculinity in question, it is surely Esau. His power and manliness are strikingly obvious. The first thing we learn about him after his birth is that he grows to become "a skillful hunter, a man of the outdoors," whereas Jacob is "a mild man who stayed in camp" (Gen. 26:27). This masculine portrait of Esau is strengthened further by the fact that he is hairy -- so hairy that Jacob must wear goat skins to fool his father's touch. Finally, to underscore Esau's manliness in the scene in which he cries, it happens that he has just hunted and prepared the game he has brought his father, whereas Jacob let his mother do the work.

Second, aside from the crying, Esau's reaction to his situation is starkly different from Hagar's. Before he actually cries, he lets out "out an exceedingly mighty and bitter yell" (verse 34), and beseeches his father to bless him, too. He then continues with a tirade against Jacob and again demands a blessing from his father two more times before he finally bursts into tears. Esau is certainly not taking this lying down. In fact, given the picture that has been painted in the scene of a strong, wildly angry and screaming man, *bachah* in verse 38 might be better translated as "wailed" than "wept."

This last fact brings us to the third observation about Esau. The Bible tells us that his descendents will be the Edomites, an enemy of the Israelites, and the very blessing he

finally receives here states that he will serve his brother Jacob and live "by the sword" (Gen. 27:40). It can be said that Esau is not necessarily the hero of the story that Jacob is, and perhaps we can even infer that part of what will in the end make him inferior to Jacob is his wildness, his lack of control. In the same way that he was unable to master his hunger enough to resist Jacob's cunning bid to buy his birthright for a bowl of red lentils (Gen. 25), he is unable to control his emotions in this episode and, after screaming, yelling and begging, he bursts out wailing. He is acting crazy. Similar male characterizations can be found in American movies and literature, such as Indians in Western films. These characters are often villains, not heroes, and the implication lurks under the surface that their lack of control over their actions and their emotions simultaneously makes them weaker and more dangerous than the Western male. Therefore, although Esau is certainly an example of a manly man who cries when times are tough, it is perhaps partly for this very reason that he is not considered a male hero.

The only other instance in which Jacob cries is after his sons sell Joseph, his favorite, into slavery, and Jacob thinks him dead:

> [31]Then they took Joseph's tunic, slaughtered a kid, and dipped the tunic in the blood. [32]They had the ornamented tunic taken to their father, and they said, "We found this. Please examine it; is it your son's tunic or not?" [33]He recognized it, and said, "My son's tunic! A savage beast devoured him! Joseph was torn by a beast!" [34]Jacob rent his clothes, put sackcloth on his loins, and observed mourning for his son many days. [35]All his sons and daughters sought to comfort him; bit he refused to be comforted, saying, "No, I will go down mourning to my son in Sheol." Thus his father bewailed him. (Gen. 37:31-35)

The word *bachah,* translated in verse 35 as "bewailed," often is used biblically to refer specifically to the process of mourning; thus, this verse could be translated, "Thus his father mourned him." Understood in this way, it would be impossible to assume that crying was involved. However, in this case, the text has already made clear in verse 34 that Jacob engaged in the custom of mourning, using the alternative word, *vayit'abeil."*

For this reason, and because of the care the writer has taken to describe Jacob's emotional reaction, it is in fact probable that *bachah* indicates crying. This is likely the reason JPS has chosen the translation "bewailed rather than "mourned."

On its face, the text makes no excuses for Jacob's emotional behavior – he not only cries; he cries inconsolably and declares his intention to cry forever. However, Jacob's crying is not placed entirely in a positive light. It is stated that "all his sons and daughters" tried to comfort him and, in refusing, he said, "I will go down to Sheol mourning my son." By refusing to heal from the loss of his one, favorite, son, he is implicitly rejecting all his other sons and daughters. The text, by highlighting the key words "son" and "daughter", places emphasis on this trait of Jacob's.

The Rabbis, too, take their cue from the text and offer their own veiled criticism of Jacob at this point in the story. In explaining Jacob's intent to go to Sheol mourning, Rashi cites a midrash which, understanding Sheol to mean hell, states that Jacob believes God has given him a sign that only if none of his children die in his own lifetime is he assured not to see Gehinom.[11] Thus, not only is Jacob playing favorites, blind to his other children, but his carrying on is not truly about the loss of his son, but rather the loss of his own place in the world to come.

Rashi also offers an interpretation of *"vayevk"* in verse 35 that understands it squarely as an emotional expression, rather than a reference to mourning ritual. This is because he uses the references of the ambiguous pronouns in the verse differently from JPS. Instead of Jacob bewailing his son Joseph, Rashi sees Isaac crying for his son Jacob's anguish *(tsarato).* The reason for Rashi's interpretation is his underlying

[11] Avrohom Davis, *The Metsudah Chumash/Rashi, a New Linear Translation, Vol. 1, Bereishis* (Lakewood, NJ: Israel Book Shop, 2002) 429.

understanding that Jacob is not mourning Joseph at all, because he really knows that Joseph is not dead. Rashi's motivation for such an understanding is his interest in avoiding the appearance that Jacob is violating Jewish law by mourning one who is not dead. However, even if he is guided by such an agenda, his interpretation shows that he is not bothered by the idea that Isaac would cry over his son's hardship.

We turn our attention now to the object of Jacob's false mourning – Joseph, the chosen son of the next generation. We pick up the story in Genesis 42, the first of eight times Joseph is said to cry. By this time, Joseph has undergone ordeals far more frightful than either Jacob or Esau: he has been thrown in pit and left while his brothers sit down to a meal to decide his fate, pulled out of the pit and sold to an Ishmaelite band of slave-traders, and purchased by an Egyptian minister as a slave. Then, after working his way up to the top of the minister's house staff, he has been falsely accused of attempted rape and sent to prison, only to earn his way back to a top position, this time unbelievably as the Pharaoh's viceroy.

After several years in which Joseph rules Egypt, his brothers walk through his door, begging for food because of the famine that has struck the whole region. He recognizes them, but they do not recognize him. Although he knows the truth of their insistence that they have come to ask for food, he accuses them repeatedly of being spies and holds them captive for three days. He tells them that he will keep one of them captive while the others bring food to their families and then carry Benjamin, the youngest, from where he is in Canaan back to Joseph, ostensibly to prove the verity of their claim that they have a younger brother. As he prepares to take Simeon hostage, he hears the following conversation, after which we hear of Joseph's first tears:

> They said to one another, "Alas, we are being punished on account of our brother, because we looked on at his anguish, yet paid no heed as he pleaded with us. That is why this distress has come upon us." Then Reuben spoke up and said to them, "Did I not tell you, 'Do no wrong to the boy?' But you paid no heed. Now comes the reckoning for his blood." They did not know that Joseph understood, for there was an interpreter between him and them. He turned away from them and wept. But he came back to them and spoke to them; and he took Simeon from among them and had him bound before their eyes... (Gen. 42:21-24)

As is typical of biblical narrative, we hear nothing about the characters' emotions directly. We can only infer their feelings from their actions. Among the traditional commentators, Rashi, Sforno and Radak all have suggestions as to why Joseph cries in verse 24. Rashi and Radak both surmise that what brings Joseph to tears is his revelation that his brothers regret what they did to him. For Rashi, Joseph cries because "he heard that they had regrets," and for Radak, "because he heard that they had repented over [what they did to] him." In these commentators' minds, then, Joseph's emotions reflect his perception of how his brothers feel in relation to him. Since Joseph sees that his brothers are remorseful, Rashi and Radak apparently see Joseph's heart going out to them. Sforno, in contrast, suggests that Joseph, perhaps already having overcome any feelings of anger towards his brothers, responds only with sympathy for them. Sforno states that Joseph cries "upon seeing their hardship."[12]

Nahum Sarna also comments on verse 24: "Joseph is deeply affected by the genuineness of the contrition behind the exchange of words, but for the present he must hide his emotions and suppress his deep natural sympathy for his brothers."[13] Sarna has apparently sought to fuse all three traditional commentators' approaches into his own, incorporating both the ideas of sympathy and contrition.

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[12] Mordechai Breuer et al., ed., *Torat Chayim: Hamishah Humshei Torah* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kuk, 1986) 202.
[13] Sarna, 295.

Robert Alter's comment on Joseph's crying in the verse reflects a different perspective. "This is the first of three times, in a clear crescendo pattern, that Joseph is moved to tears by his brothers."[14] Alter's approach to biblical commentary is literary, so it is not surprising that he focuses on the narrative effect of Joseph's crying, seen from the larger perspective along with the Joseph's next two bursts of crying – this one and one more in secret, and then the third as he reveals himself to his brothers. However, Alter's description of Joseph being "moved to tears by his brothers" suggests a more general emotional effect his brothers may have on him, perhaps beyond the specific factors previously mentioned (sympathy for their hardship and awareness of their contrition). Perhaps Joseph is simply overcome with emotion to be near his brothers again; maybe he is, in fact, moved by their contrition; perhaps he is sad to see their hardship, but at the same time overjoyed that he will have an opportunity to help them; maybe, at the same time, he is overwhelmed with the irony of his position of power to help or hurt them, after what they have done to him. Although many of the commentators seek one simple reason for Joseph's crying, he could, in fact, be responding to all of these factors and more. The text, by not revealing what feelings bring on Joseph's tears, allows the reader to relate to Joseph's situation in his or her own way.

The timing of the first instance of Joseph's crying is significant. We saw earlier that Jacob does not cry throughout his journey of running away from home and sleeping in the desert alone, until he knows he is out of danger and has found a safe place to release his emotions. In the same way, Joseph, too, is not said to cry throughout his own ordeal of enslavement, false accusation and imprisonment, until he is fully entrenched in

[14] Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996) 248.

his powerful, new position, and, years later, his brothers' appearance prompts him to reflect on what has happened to him. Contrast this, again, with the crying of Hagar, which comes at her moment of despair and seemingly brings help from God. In the case of both men, they, although implicitly with God's behind-the scenes assistance, manage on their own and cry out only later.

The second time Joseph cries, his brothers have returned to him, bringing Benjamin. He sees Benjamin, wishes him well, and finds his emotions overtaking him again. He rushes out of the room, momentarily, to cry:

> Looking about, he saw his bother Benjamin, his mother's son, and asked, "Is this your youngest brother of whom you spoke to me?" And he went on, "May God be gracious to you, my boy." With that, Joseph hurried out, for he was overcome with feeling toward his brother and was on the verge of tears; he went into a room and wept there. Then he washed his face, reappeared, and – now in control of himself – gave the order, "Serve the meal." (Gen. 43:29-31)

Alter points out the added drama of this second burst of crying – while in the first instance Joseph merely turns away for a moment to cry, this time his feelings are so strong that he is forced to flee the room and wash his face in order to keep his composure. In addition, in this case, the text offers us a rare description of Joseph's emotions: he is "overcome with feeling," or, in Hebrew, *"Nichm'ru rachamav,"* toward his brother. Alter translates these words as "his mercy burned hot."[15]

We are still left, however, wondering why Joseph's mercy "burned hot." Sforno repeats his explanation from Gen. 42:24, stating that he is thinking about the hardships of his brothers and his father. Rashi understands from context that Joseph's feelings are directed specifically at Benjamin, and thus he quotes a midrash in which Benjamin lists for Joseph his ten sons by name, each named for a different aspect of Joseph and of the two brothers' relationship. This, according to Rashi, is why Joseph becomes emotional

[15] Alter, 257.

towards his brother.[16] Sarna, who notes that the phrase *"Nichm'ru rachamav"* is used only one other time in the Bible (I Kings 3:26) and it refers to compassion, remarks that there is no reason to pity Benjamin in this case and interprets the words to mean that, "The sight of him arouses overwhelming feelings of tenderness and affection in Joseph. He can find relief only through tears."[17]

The third time Joseph cries represents the climax of Alter's dramatic crescendo, since this time Joseph reveals his true identity to his brothers. After seeing Benjamin, he again sends the brothers back towards Canaan, planting a stolen goblet in Benjamin's bag. Benjamin is caught, and Joseph declares his intention to keep him as a slave while sending the rest of the brothers home. This, of course, is strikingly parallel to what the brothers did to Joseph in his youth: the brothers are again in a position to choose whether to abandon the younger son, the father's favorite, into slavery. Judah, who had been the leader of the plan to sell Joseph into slavery years before, rises to the occasion. He pleads with the still-disguised Joseph for Benjamin's release, bravely offering himself in Benjamin's place rather than leaving him in captivity. This passage picks up after Judah's plea:

> Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, "Have everyone withdraw from me!" So there was no one else about when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. His sobs were so loud that the Egyptians could hear, and so the news reached Pharaoh's palace.
>
> Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still well?" But his brothers could not answer him, so dumbfounded were they on account of him. (Gen. 45:1-3)

This moment in the story is truly explosive. Joseph, who had previously kept his emotional reactions to himself, is now sobbing so loudly that those outside the room can hear him. He thrusts both the revelation of his identity and the potency of his emotions at

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[16] Breuer, 210.
[17] Sarna, 302.

his brothers all at once. Radak provides the following commentary on the fact that the Egyptians could hear Joseph crying: "The Egyptians who went out of the house heard Joseph's voice sobbing, and the information traveled from person to person, until the people of Pharaoh's house heard that Joseph had cried."[18] We see from this that, at least according to Radak's understanding, it was not common for someone in Joseph's position to cry, since the news seems important enough to travel the gossip train. (Radak is also providing a naturalistic explanation of how the sound of the crying traveled as far as the palace.) However, perhaps the interesting news is not merely that he cries but that something has happened important enough to make him cry. We see from Rashi's commentary that Rashi does not imagine Joseph to be embarrassed for crying. He does not envision Joseph clearing the room because he is about to cry. Rather, Rashi says, "He could not bear that the Egyptians standing by him would hear his brothers' humiliation when he would make himself known to them."[19]

Again, we have not been provided with the exact reasons for Joseph's crying. Is he concerned for his father, as his first question to his brothers suggests? Are his anger and hurt feelings for what his brothers did to him pouring forth? Is he happy to see his brothers? Any combination of these possibilities and more are possible.

Yoel Bin-Nun offers an interpretation of this section of the Joseph story that sheds a different light on Joseph's emotional state and, likewise, his reason for crying this third time.[20] Bin Nun poses questions that have also been asked by Ramban, Abravanel, and others: why does Joseph behave as he does towards his brothers, imprisoning them and

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[18] Breuer, 220.
[19] Davis, 503.
[20] Yitzchak Etshalom (1997), "Parashat Vayyigash: Yoseph and his Brothers (II)." http://www.torah.org/advanced/mikra/5757/br/dt.57.1.08.html (15 Dec. 04).

keeping them in the dark about his identity for so long, while his father remains hungry at home? And why, in all his years in Egypt, did he not send word to his father that he was alive?

Bin Nun answers his own questions: the reader may mistakenly assume that Joseph is aware, as we are, that his father believes him dead and that his brothers' lie remains undiscovered. However, Bin Nun asserts, Joseph has no way of knowing that Jacob ever thought Joseph dead. In fact, he may believe Jacob, who, after all, sent him to meet his brothers the day he was sold into captivity, knew what was going to happen and had disowned Joseph. So far, Bin Nun argues, the family tradition followed by Isaac and Abraham has been to choose one son to carry the covenantal blessing and send the other away. Perhaps, Joseph might think, his brothers succeeded in convincing Jacob to reject him. On this theory, Joseph's goal in his dealings with his brothers is to get his younger brother Benjamin alone, so that he can ask him whether his father has disowned him. This is why he sends his brothers back for Benjamin and then frames Benjamin for stealing his silver goblet, a pretense for keeping him behind. Then Judah, in offering himself in Benjamin's place, tells Joseph the story of his conversation with Jacob over whether to send Benjamin down to Egypt: "Your servant my father said to us, "As you know, my wife bore me two sons. But one is gone from me, and I said: Alas, he was torn by a beast! And I have not seen him since." (Gen. 45:27-29) " At this point, Bin Nun argues, Joseph has the information he needs. He knows that Jacob has not sent him away and that the covenant blessing must still belong to him. Therefore, Joseph's tears could be brought on by the realization that his father still loves him and that he is still the favorite son. This would explain his first words upon clearing the room and revealing

himself to his brothers: "I am Joseph. Is my father still well?" (Gen. 45:3) Clearly, other factors contribute to his emotional outburst as well, as evidenced by his weeping as he embraces Benjamin and even the other brothers, who had sold him as a slave.

Now that Joseph has finally released his hold on his emotions, they truly come pouring out. After never once crying during his years of struggle, he is said to cry eight times during this episode beginning when his brothers appear in Chapter 42 and ending with Joseph's forgiveness of his brothers in Chapter 50.

Joseph's crying seems more extreme when contrasted with the response to him of his brothers and even his father. While Joseph first speaks to his brothers and even embraces them, tears flowing, the only brother who responds alike is Benjamin: "And Benjamin wept on his neck." (Gen. 45:14) The other brothers, however, are far behind Joseph in their emotional expression. One can easily understand their reserve. The text, in another rare description of motivation, explains that they are "dumbfounded" by meeting Joseph again and are unable even to speak at first. Now, after Joseph's tearful embrace, "only then were his brothers able to talk to him." (Gen. 45:15) They are apparently shocked to see their brother still alive and are only now adjusting to this new reality. In addition, according to both Rashi and Radak, the brothers are "ashamed before him" and are comforted only when they see his affection towards them.[21] It is further understandable that they would be slow to show affection themselves, for any of several reasons: perhaps they themselves harbor anger towards Joseph as the favorite son who said he would rule over them, and they now find themselves reeling at the fact that, after all these years and presuming Joseph lost forever, they do in fact find themselves at his

[21] Breuer, 223.

mercy. Or perhaps they are wondering whether their father will be as kind as their brother when he learns the truth. It is easier to be forgiving and affectionate after a sibling dispute when you are the victor.

It is more shocking, however, when Jacob, who declared in Gen. 37:35, "I will go down mourning to my son in Sheol," is finally brought to see his lost son, and he does not respond with tears:

> Joseph ordered his chariot and went to Goshen to meet his father Israel; he presented himself to him and, embracing him around the neck, he wept on his neck a good while. Then Israel said to Joseph, "Now I can die, having seen for myself that you are still alive." (Gen. 46:29-30)

Jacob makes it clear that he is happy to see Joseph. But why do tears not accompany these words?

The rabbis ask this question as well. In fact, they are so deeply troubled by the idea that Jacob would not cry upon seeing Joseph that their interpretations become imaginative. Rashi cites a midrashic interpretation that Jacob does not cry or fall on Joseph's neck because he is at that moment engaged in reading the *Shema,* and Jewish law forbids him to stop what he is doing until he is finished. Of course, this interpretation is fantastical, since the *Shema* did not exist until many years later.

Other rabbis solve the problem by reading the text differently and insisting that Jacob did, in fact cry over his reunion with Joseph. Radak asserts, "Jacob really did cry, but he did not fall on Joseph's neck because Joseph prolonged his own crying on Jacob's neck until the two released their embrace."[22]

Ramban goes even further, arguing that it is actually Jacob who falls on Joseph's neck and cries, not the other way around. He does this through his reading of the phrase

[22] Ibid., 236.

in verse 29, "*Vayeira eilav,*" which JPS translates as, "He [Joseph] presented himself to him [Jacob]." Because of the ambiguous grammatical form of the Hebrew, the phrase can also be understood, "He was visible to him." Thus it is not clear whether the phrase refers to Joseph actively presenting himself to Jacob or whether it indicates that Jacob was able to recognize Joseph. Because pronouns are used throughout the rest of the sentence, it is not clear who is the subject and who the object. According to Ramban, Jacob, being old and with failing eyesight, does not recognize Joseph at first and, upon recognizing his son, he falls on his neck and cries. Ramban strengthens his argument by pointing out that the respectful way to greet one's father is not to fall on his neck, but rather either to bow down or kiss his hand. Falling on the neck, however, is appropriate for a father to do to his son.[23]

The remaining times that Joseph cries are upon the death of Jacob and upon the plea for forgiveness by his brothers. Neither occurrence is noted by the traditional commentators. They do, however, add to a total picture of Joseph as the crying patriarch. His eight instances of shedding tears are the most of any biblical character. Jacob, with three instances of crying, is a far second. It is clear from our examination that neither the biblical text nor the rabbis seem concerned with what a male character's crying might say about his masculinity. However, we noted in the cases of Jacob, Esau and Hagar that the frequency, timing and nature of a character's crying must be taken as part of a larger examination of that character's masculinity or femininity. Joseph's extreme propensity to tear up may, in fact, say something about the possibility of some gender ambiguity in his character.

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[23] Ibid., 236.

In the following two chapters, I will continue to explore Jacob, Esau and Joseph, this time with respect to other aspects of their stories that reflect on their gender identity.

Chapter 2: Jacob and Esau and Gender Dynamics

The story of Jacob and Esau is one of rival brothers competing for their father's affection as well as the right to carry on the patriarchy. On close examination, however, the traces can be found of another struggle: the establishment of the masculinity of the patriarchy through the development of the two brothers.

In presenting the two brothers in Genesis 25, the text immediately begins to contrast them as representing two extremes, masculine and feminine. First, it is pointed out that Esau, even in birth, is hairy, "like a hairy mantle." (Gen 25:25) Then, their personalities as young men are described in two verses. "When the boys grew up, Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the outdoors; but Jacob was a mild man who stayed in camp. Isaac favored Esau because he had a taste for game, but Rebecca favored Jacob." (Gen. 25:27-8) Esau is associated with the father, a hairy body, and hunting/the outdoors, and Jacob with the mother and the home. A Mari document from Syria in the 18th Century BCE suggests that this comparison is relevant to the masculinity of the two brothers. The *Correspondence of Shamshi-Addu* is a letter from a king in which he urges his son to "be a man." The king complains, "Your brother here gains victory but you over there lie around with the women. Now, it is time for you to go with the armies to the city of Katanim."[24] It is likely that the biblical description above carries the same connotations as those made explicit in the Mari letter. Jacob, like the Mari king's son, is less manly than his brother.

[24] Georges Dossin, *Correspondance de Samsi Addu, Letter 69* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1950) 130, trans. David Sperling.

Immediately following this description, the text relates the story of Esau's sale of the birthright to Jacob for a bowl of lentils, starting with the following sentence: "Once, when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the open, famished." Even though this is the beginning of a story central to the development of the patriarchal line, the juxtaposition of this first sentence with the previous comparative description of the two brothers almost makes it sound more like character description than narrative – so much so, in fact, that JPS chooses to add the word "once" to the sentence even though it is not in the Hebrew. This way, it sounds simultaneously like the beginning of a legendary story and like an illustrative anecdote, showing Jacob to be domestic and Esau to be worldly. Jacob, the feminine young man, stays at home while his manly brother is out roaming the fields.

Next, the differences between the two brothers and the struggle between them that has been predicted in Gen. 25:23 come to a climax with the story of Isaac's blessing of the firstborn. Lori Lefkovitz argues that the episode of Jacob tricking his father Isaac into giving him, instead of Esau, the blessing is a story of "Jewish gender ambiguity and performative masculinity. Jacob, the son who is allied with his mother, dresses in animal skins to pass as Esau, and so, to pass as the kind of man who can inherit the patriarchy."[25] Lefkovitz sees Jacob's strong connection to his mother as essential to this story's significance as a gender masquerade, and to Jacob's role as a feminine character passing as a masculine one. Rebecca is the source of the idea for the plot, the plan itself, and the strength of will necessary to carry it out. As Lefkovitz states, "she seems ambitious on Jacob's behalf and her response would, in later generations, sound stereotypical of the

[25] Lori Lefkovitz, "Passing as a Man: Narratives of Jewish Gender Performance," *Narrative* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2002) 1.

Jewish mother whose controlling behavior at once promotes her sons and compromises their masculinity."[26] Lefkovitz continues to point out the symbolic effect of Jacob's marrying Leah and Rachel. "Indeed, the whole of the myth may serve to explain Jacob's running away to marry not one but two of Rebecca's nieces. Jacob is so identified with the maternal that these marriages keep him as close to her as is legally possible without violating incest laws."[27] (See Leviticus 18:18)

Also important is Jacob's "metaphoric assumption of animality" during the charade,[28] symbolized by pretending to have hunted and killed game, while instead serving domesticated meat prepared by his mother, as well as by wearing animal skin on his arms and neck to resemble his hairy brother's skin. This aspect gives the story the air of a spoof, since the idea that even a blind old man would mistake animal hide for the human skin of his son is difficult to fathom. The parodic nature of the scene, however, allows the reader to adjust expectations and "read for the psychological insights characteristic of myth."[29]

The theme of the younger, more feminine brother superceding his more masculine older brothers to become a biblical patriarch will be examined further in subsequent chapters.

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[26] Ibid., 3
[27] Ibid., 4
[28] Ibid., 1
[29] Ibid., 4

Chapter 3: Joseph and Masculinity

Joseph may be the most intriguing character in the Bible for the study of masculinity. He begins his life as a favorite and spoiled child, tattling on his brothers and coddled by his father. After a harrowing and heroic adventure, his piety, wisdom and vision – not his physical strength or other more typically masculine traits – bring him virtually to the throne of Egypt. Joseph's bursts of emotion in the final stages of this story, as well as his general portrayal throughout, provide insight into Jewish models of both masculinity and emotion. Several aspects of the biblical story establish Joseph's masculinity as ambiguous, and those will be explored first. After that, I will analyze the approach of the rabbis to the story of Joseph, an approach that suggests different attitudes towards masculinity than are reflected in the story itself.

The first clue to Joseph's unique characterization is the *ketonet passim,* or ornamented tunic, that Jacob gives Joseph. The only other person in the Bible who wears a *ketonet passim* is King David's daughter Tamar (II Sam. 13:18). The garment signifies her status as a *betulah,* or royal virgin. Although not mentioned by the rabbis in their commentaries, this commonality can be seen as more than coincidental, suggesting that Joseph was a "prince" and connecting him to Tamar.

A second biblical cue for Joseph's gender ambiguity comes later, after Potiphar, a minister to Pharaoh, has purchased him as a slave. Joseph quickly becomes successful and is granted responsibility over nearly everything in Potiphar's house. The text adds that he is *"y'fei to'ar vifei mar'eh,"* well built and good-looking. These same words are used to describe his mother Rachel in Gen. 29:17, when it is stated in the text that Jacob loves her. Just as the young Jacob's strong connections to his mother Rebecca serve to

suggest a feminine aspect (see Chapter 1), Joseph's connection to Rachel, in addition to Jacob's favoring of both mother and son, do the same for Joseph.

The words *y'fei to'ar vifei mar'eh* immediately precede the starkest biblical example of Joseph being cast in a feminine role, now in relation to Potiphar's wife. In a reversal of the usual order of things, "his master's wife cast her eyes upon Joseph," instead of the other way around. She says to him, *"Shichvah imi,"* or, "lie with me." In hearing these words, Joseph is linked again with Tamar, daughter of King David (who also wore the *ketonet passim*): before raping her, Tamar's half brother Amnon first asks her to succumb willingly with the words, *"Bo'i, shichvi imi!"* or "come, lie with me!" Joseph resists the mistress's advance and, although as a man he is physically strong enough to flee the scene unharmed, she does overpower him by sending him to prison on false charges of attempted rape. Joseph, although blessed by God with the wisdom and skills to succeed, remains powerless in relation to a woman. Although it has been emphasized in the previous verses that Potiphar has given him authority over nearly everything in the house, he does not have the power to resist sexual domination with impunity.

In fact, this sexual powerlessness in contrast to near total control in Potiphar's house appears to be suggested euphemistically in the very granting of the control in Gen. 39:6. "He [Potiphar] left all that he had in Joseph's hands and, with him there, he paid attention to nothing save the food that he ate." According to both Rashi and Ramban, the food that he ate" is a veiled reference to sexual activity. The two commentators derive this from Joseph's later statement to Potiphar's wife in explanation for his refusal to lie with her: "He [Potiphar] wields no more authority in this house than I, and he has

withheld nothing from me except yourself, since you are his wife." Gen. 39:9.[30] Contemporary scholar Ronald Venker supports the rabbis' claim, pointing to other biblical references to eating as a metaphor for sex, including one in Proverbs 30:20 (an adulteress "eats, wipes her mouth, and says, 'I have done no wrong.'") as well as Jethro's order that his daughters summon Moses "that he might eat bread," by which Venker posits he means, "perhaps we can make a marriage."[31] [32]

The punctuation of Gen. 39:6 through cantillation markings, added by the Masoretes sometime before the mid-ninth century, C. E., is worth noting. After it is stated that Potiphar "paid attention to nothing save the food that he ate," the verse continues with the words we have discussed above, "Now Joseph was well built and good-looking." These two statements are joined together by an *etnachta*, the cantillation marking that functions grammatically as a comma. The next verse then immediately begins the narration of Potiphar's wife's pursuit of Joseph. Thus, as the Masoretes interpreted the text, not even a sentence break separates the statement of Joseph's sexual powerlessness over Potiphar's wife and the story of the wife actually exerting her power over him!

In considering the story of Joseph as a whole, the extent to which he is cast in a feminine role may be connected to the fact that he never actually reaches a position of

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[30] Davis, 441.
[31] Ronald A. Veenker, "Forbidden Fruit: Ancient Near Eastern Sexual Metaphors." *Hebrew Union College Annual, Vol. LXX-LXXI* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, 2001) 65.
[32] In Footnote 34 (ibid., 65), Verneer argues that eating as a sexual metaphor in the bible should not be understood as referring to oral sex, but rather to intercourse.

independent authority. Although he obtains political power unmatched by any of the other patriarchs or prophets, there is always a man – Potiphar and then Pharaoh – who, while making no decisions, truly holds the reigns. These two characters appear almost to be puppet rulers, present perhaps only because it would be impossible for the biblical writer to see Joseph ruling on his own. One wonders whether, if not for the ambiguity surrounding Joseph's masculinity, he would have escaped his captivity and either built up his own house, like his father Jacob, or actually been named ruler in his own right, like King David.

After examining the biblical story, we turn to the treatment of the story by the rabbis. With the first description of Joseph as a boy, we immediately begin to see the extent to which the rabbis read gender ambiguity into the scene, far and above what is suggested by the text itself. Genesis 37:2 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." The traditional commentators, as well as the rabbis quoted in the early midrash *Bereishit Rabbah,* are bothered by the word *"na'ar,"* which is translated by JPS as "helper." Literally, the word means boy or young man. Since it has already been stated that Joseph is seventeen years old, the rabbis are troubled by the additional appearance of this word. Although many of the traditional commentators see a problem here, it is not clear what the problem is. The translators of the Rashi and the midrash (Metsudah and Soncino, respectively) disagree in their footnotes about whether the issue is that *na'ar* is redundant since a seventeen-year-old is clearly still a child (Metsudah) or whether it is contradictory, because seventeen in biblical times is actually an adult age

(Soncino). Either way, however, the rabbis seek to explain what, besides age, the text refers to by describing Joseph as a *na'ar*.)

To solve this problem, Rashi quotes the comment found in *Bereishit Rabbah*. The Soncino translation of the midrash states: "He was seventeen years old, yet you say, 'being still a lad!' It means, however, that he behaved like a boy, pencilling his eyes, curling his hair, and lifting his heel."[33] (Metsudah's translation, instead of "behaved like a boy," uses the phrase "did things that were childish."[34]) This is a puzzling explanation. It is doubtful that these were stereotypical behaviors of young boys in biblical or rabbinic times. The rabbis picture a young Joseph dressing as a woman – and as an immodest one, which was strictly forbidden in rabbinic times.[35] Why would the rabbis claim that by *"na'ar"* the text means putting on makeup and curling one's hair?

The answer may lie in the original Hebrew of the midrash itself. The phrase the translations quoted above call "boyish" or "childish" behavior is read as *"ma'aseh na'arut,"* the behavior of childhood. If the Hebrew word is read as *"na'arut"*, its translation is unambiguous and both choices are reasonable. However, both Rashi and the *Midrash Rabbah* were written using unvocalized letters, and the word *nun, ayin, reish, vav, tav* may also be vocalized differently, yielding the word *"na'arot,"* meaning "girls" or "young women." If that was the meaning of the rabbis who composed the midrash, the phrase must be read, "the behavior of young women/girls." Given the examples the midrash provides of putting on makeup and curling one's hair, this reading

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[33] H. Freedman, translator, *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis, Vol. 2* (New York: The Soncino Press, 1983) 775.
[34] Davis, 416.
[35] In b. Avodah Zarah 18a, the gemara claims that the daughter of R. Hanina b. Teradyon was killed as a punishment for having taken special pains with her walk, presumably in front of Romans, which of course was immodest. There is also a story at b. Berakhot 20a about R. Ada b. Ahava, who saw a woman that he thought was a Jewish woman wearing a scarlet cloak. He tore it off her in public, but then had to pay damages when the woman turned out to be a Samaritan. Again, the concern was immodesty.

is more believable. In choosing the alternate vocalization/reading of "childhood", the contemporary translators of both the Rashi and the midrash may be interested in avoiding calling Joseph "girlish" outright. Perhaps they are afraid of making the patriarch sound *too* feminine. However the contemporary scholars choose to interpret it, though, the implication by the early rabbis that Joseph is exhibiting feminine behaviors is clear. The underlying negative value the Rabbis place on certain behaviors associated with women and girls is also clear. Judging from the context of this commentary in the story of Joseph, the Rabbis appear to be looking for a theological explanation for Joseph's enslavement: if you act like a girl, bad things will happen to you.

Rashi attributes similar behavior to Joseph later on, in his response to the text's calling of Joseph, just like Rachel, *"y'fei to'ar vifei mar'eh,"* or "well built and handsome." In the case of Rachel, Rashi's reason for noticing these words seems to be that the phrase may appear redundant to the reader without proper interpretation, a result that must be avoided by traditional commentators. JPS translates the phrase as "shapely and beautiful," in the case of Rachel and "well built and handsome," in the case of Joseph, and the words themselves do appear to have such connotations. Rashi makes a similar distinction in the case of Rachel, stating that *"To'ar"* refers to the form of her face, while *"mar-eh"* refers to the beauty of her features.

When the words are used to describe Joseph, however, Rashi takes a different approach. His comments on the verse are as follows: "Once he perceived himself as a ruler he began to eat, drink and curl his hair. God said: 'Your father is in mourning and you curl your hair! I will provoke the bear against you.'"[36] Rashi is silent on the issue of

[36] Davis, 441.

redundancy, although it is possible that he intends the above comment to refer only to the words *"y'fei mar'eh,"* while *"y'fei to'ar"* is understood to mean well built or shapely. However, the difference in his treatment of Rachel and Joseph is stark. With Rachel, Rashi is content to understand the text as merely describing her beauty very specifically. With Joseph, he finds it necessary to attribute a far-fetched significance to the description. In addition to possibly seeking to avoid redundancy, Rashi appears to be seeking a reason for the misfortune that befalls Joseph in the ensuing verses: the sexual advances of Potiphar's wife and Joseph's consequent imprisonment. If he can understand Joseph to have done something wrong, this will offer a theological explanation for what happens to him. However, even if Rashi is understood to be either resolving redundancy or rescuing God from being perceived as arbitrarily mistreating Joseph, it is still significant that he again portrays Joseph "curling his hair," a likely reference to womanly grooming. This comment simultaneously suggests that feminine grooming is a transgression of vanity that merits punishment by God and casts Joseph once more in a feminine role.

Beyond comments suggesting Joseph's vanity, the statement in the text of his good looks is taken up enthusiastically by the rabbis, even expanded from a simple statement of Joseph's attractiveness to a suggestion of the kind of beauty that causes all to look on, an image usually reserved for a female character. The midrash (Tanchuma *Vayeishev* §5) pictures a large group of Egyptian women gathered to watch Joseph in Potiphar's house, and Potiphar's wife gives them all citrons and knives. Peeling the citrons while distracted by the sight of Joseph, they all cut themselves. Potiphar's wife then laments to them, "You, who saw him only for one instant, are thus overcome, how

much more and more am I, who see him all the time."[37] Joseph, like Queen Vashti in the book of Esther, is the beauty to be feasted on with the eyes (a similarity made even more striking by the fact that Vashti, like Joseph, loses her high position and is sent away when she refuses to comply with the wishes of her master).

The *Midrash Rabbah* goes even further with this image of Joseph as sought after sexually by all, taking it into the homosexual realm. In Gen. 39:1, when Potiphar purchases Joseph as a slave, Potiphar is described in the biblical text as "a courtier of Pharaoh and his chief steward." The Hebrew word JPS translates as "courtier," however, is also found elsewhere in the Bible referring to a eunuch or one who is castrated. The midrash, picking up on this, adds a fascinating twist: "A EUNUCH OF PHARAOH. This intimates that he was castrated, thus teaching that he [Potiphar] purchased him for the purpose of sodomy, whereupon the Holy One, blessed by He, emasculated him."[38] (Other midrashic sources hold that it is the angel Gabriel who castrates Potiphar.[39]) This midrashic interpretation is less surprising when taken in historical context. According to George Henry, the rabbis are picking up on practices that did occur in Egypt at the time the story took place: "Among Egyptians pederasty was one of the forms of worship and the high officials in Pharaoh's court purchased good-looking boys for performing religious services, especially to the idol Baal Pe-or. The most outstanding case was Joseph..."[40]

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[37] Hayim Nahman Bialik et al., *The Book of Legends: Sefer Ha-Aggadah: Legends from the Talmud and Midrash* (New York: Shocken Books, 1992) 97.
[38] Freedman, 802.
[39] Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Bible* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1992) 213.
[40] George W. Henry, *All the Sexes: A Study of Masculinity and Femininity* (Toronto: Rinehart & Co., 1955) 497.

The idea that even the men who come into contact with Joseph desire him adds to the mystique of Joseph's beauty. His looks, and the love felt for him by those around him, become a liability: Jacob's excessive love for Joseph lands Joseph in the pit because of his brothers' jealousy, and although God intervenes to protect him from Potiphar, he is not ultimately safe from Potiphar's wife. This is similar to the role of feminine beauty played in the dual stories of Sarah and Rebecca, when their husbands each feel the need to protect themselves from their wives' sexual allure by pretending to be their brothers rather than their husbands. Unlike the case of Joseph, however, both Abraham's and Isaac's concerns turn out to be unfounded; both kings, who the patriarchs fear will kill them for their wives, abandon their sexual intentions once they become aware that the women are married. In Joseph's case, the sexual pursuit is more aggressive.

The Rabbis' comments painting Joseph so elaborately as a feminine character are mystifying. Although, as we have seen, there are biblical cues for some ambiguity regarding Joseph's masculinity, they fall far short of justifying these rabbinic interpretations. According to Lori Lefkovitz, the rabbis' difficulty with Joseph stems not directly from his beauty, but rather from his chastity in the face of his mistress's advances. While the Bible treats this behavior as evidence of Joseph's moral strength and wisdom, the rabbis appear threatened by the suggestion that Joseph's sexual desire loses the battle to his purity of heart. They feel this calls his manhood into question. Lefkovitz argues that the rabbis' approach reveals the presence of a different standard for male behavior in rabbinic times than in ancient times:

> "While the Joseph of Hebrew Scriptures is not without his character faults, his beauty and chastity have unambiguously positive connotations. In medieval midrashic literature, in the Koran, and in

> subsequent art and fiction, however, texts find it increasingly difficult to reconcile Joseph's heroism with his chastity.[41]

Accordingly, the midrashim dealing with Joseph's refusal of Potiphar's wife's advances are even more imaginative than those dealing with his beauty. To be sure, there are ample interpretations of Joseph's actions as a positive model of purity and restraint. The rabbis call him *Yosef Ha-Tzaddik,* Joseph the Righteous One. In addition, the Book of Maccabees (2:53) extols Joseph, along with Abraham and Phinehas, for remaining faithful when tested by God – Abraham for being willing to sacrifice Isaac, Phinehas for stopping the sexual sins of the Israelites in Numbers 25, and Joseph for "keeping a commandment," referring to resisting sex with Potiphar's wife.[42] Further, some midrashim in the *Midrash Rabbah,* Lefkovitz states, seek to "assure the reader that chastity is a great virtue." These stories expand Joseph's resistance to include not only Potiphar's wife but crowds of princesses begging for his attention, but he does not even as much as look at them.[43]

One midrash, which conveys the rabbis' surprise at Joseph's self-control, addresses what they apparently see as the reader's likely disbelief that Joseph would find Potiphar's wife's advances unwelcome and asserts its truth:

> A matron asked R. Jose: "Is it possible that Joseph, at seventeen years of age, with all the hot blood of youth, could act thus?" Thereupon he produced the Book of Genesis and read the stories of Reuben and Judah. If Scripture did not suppress aught in the case of these, who were older and in their father's home, how much the more in the case of Joseph, who was younger and his own master.[44]

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[41] Lori Lefkovitz, "Coats and Tales: Joseph Stories and Myths of Jewish Masculinity," in Harry Brod, ed., *A Mensch Among Men* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1988) 19.
[42] Jeffrey K. Salkin, *Searching for My Brothers: Jewish Men in a Gentile World* (New York, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1999) 118-119.
[43] Lefkovitz, 22.
[44] Freedman, 811.

In other words, since the text did not conceal the wrongdoing of Judah and Reuben (selling Joseph into slavery), it would not conceal Joseph's wrongdoing if he had in fact succumbed to temptation.

Joseph's beauty is celebrated in the Talmud by Rabbi Yohanan, who himself is known as exceedingly beautiful. The Talmud states:

> "One who wishes to see the beauty of Rabbi Yohanan should bring a new silver cup and fill it with the red seeds of the pomegranate and place around its rim a garland of red roses, and let him place it at the place where the sun meets the shade, and that vision is the beauty of Rabbi Yohanan... Rabbi Yohanan used to go and sit at the gate of the ritual bath. He said, "When the daughters of Israel come out from the bath they will look at me in order that they will have children as beautiful as I am." The Rabbis said to him, "Are you not afraid of the Evil Eye?" He replied, "I am of the seed of Joseph, our father, of whom it is said, 'A fruitful son by the spring (Gen. 49:22)... [45]

Here, Yohanan, who compares himself to Joseph, is symbolized by a cup, pomegranate seeds and roses, all of which are symbols of the feminine. The other rabbis challenge his practice of lingering outside the *mikvah* in view of the women who have just finished bathing (and will presumably go home to mate with their husbands and conceive children). According to Daniel Boyarin, their challenge is based on the tradition that if a woman is thinking of another man while having sex with her husband, it is considered adultery, and therefore, Rabbi Yohanan is inviting the evil eye by tempting the women into adultery. Yohanan's defense calls up the example of Joseph. "I am of the seed of Joseph, our father, of whom it is said, 'A fruitful son by the spring (Gen. 49:22)..." The entirety of the verse Yohanan has brought as a proof text reads, "A fertile son (or young man) is Joseph, a fertile young man by the spring; the daughters walked on the wall." This is part of Jacob's blessing for Joseph before he dies. However, Boyarin explains, the last word of the verse, "the wall" *("Shur"),* can also be read, "to look," and the spring can be understood to refer to the *mikvah.* Therefore, Boyarin understands Yohanan to be

[45] b. Brachot 20a

claiming that Joseph did just as he does: he lingered by the *mikvah* to be viewed by the women.[46] Thus, Yohanan claims to be a Joseph of the rabbinic era, endowed with a pure beauty that flirts with feminine identity.

Yohanan's feminine aspect is further developed by the following Talmudic passage:

> One day, Rabbi Yohanan was bathing in the Jordan. Resh Lakish saw him and thought he was a woman. He crossed the Jordan after him by placing his lance in the Jordan and vaulting to the other side. When Rabbi Yohanan saw Rabbi Shim'on the son of Lakish [= Resh Lakish], he said to him, 'Your strength for Torah!" He replied, "Your beauty for women!" He said to him, "If you repent, I will give you my sister who is more beautiful than I am.[47]

Rabbi Yohanan, therefore, according to Boyarin, "is extraordinarily beautiful, nearly androgynous, beardless and so sexually attractive to the masculine Resh Lakish that the latter is willing to perform prodigious athletic feats to get to him."[48]

So far, the rabbinic responses to Joseph's beauty and to his chastity, even if they suggest gender ambiguity, seem positive. However, the library of more equivocal understandings of Joseph's behavior is extensive. Besides the loosely veiled characterizations of Joseph as feminine described in the preceding pages, many other midrashic responses to Joseph's chastity are found in the *Midrash Rabbah.*

Some midrashim, apparently uncomfortable with what refusing Potiphar's wife says about Joseph's masculinity, respond by making her repulsive, and thus excusing Joseph's lack of enthusiasm. For example, one accuses her of speaking "like an animal," using the vulgar words "Lie with me," rather than the more gentle words used by Ruth when she approaches Boaz, "Spread therefore thy skirt over thy handmaid." (Ruth 3:9)[49]

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[46] Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 213-214.
[47] Bava Metzia 84a
[48] Boyarin, *Carnal Israel,* 215.
[49] Friedman, 808.

Another posits that she keeps an idol near the bed in which she attempts to seduce Joseph,[50] (modeled after the Moabite women who seduce Israelites to worship Baal Peor in Numbers) and a third takes "She kept his garment beside her" (Gen. 39:16) to mean that "she let [his garments] grow old in her keeping, embracing, kissing and fondling them."[51]

Another midrash tries to explain Joseph's sexual inactivity by claiming that he does attempt to bed Potiphar's wife but is physically unable. The Rabbis arrive at this from an interpretation of the words "One such day, he came into the house to do his work." (Gen. 39:11) "His work" is taken figuratively for sex, and the next words, *"v'ein ish,"* (there was not a man), which in context means that no one was in the house except him and Potiphar's wife, are taken to signify that Joseph experiences impotence. "The bow was drawn but it relaxed," says R. Samuel, and R. Huna in the name of R. Mattena adds, "He saw his father's face, at which his blood cooled."[52]

Lefkovitz points to two midrashim that indirectly but bitingly question Joseph's manhood for not bedding Potiphar's wife:

> a she-bear (again, Potiphar's wife) is arrayed in expensive jewels; the crowd declares that whoever is brave enough to attack her may keep the jewels. The wise man looks at her fangs, not at her attire. In another, a man who is "pencilling his eyes and curling his hair" declares, to the amusement of the crowd, that he is a man. "'If you are a man,' the bystanders retort, 'here is a she-bear, up and attack it.'" If Joseph were a man, he would not apply make-up to his face. If Joseph were a man, he would attack the woman.[53]

The early rabbis, as we have seen, respond to Joseph in a variety of ways, some of which show discomfort with the model of masculinity he represents. A brief look at the use of the Joseph character by different rabbis some 1,500 years later shows us a glimpse

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[50] Ibid., 810.
[51] Ibid., 812.
[52] Ibid., 811-12
[53] Lefkovitz, 22-23

of how changing cultural context influences the reception of a biblical text. In a 19th century Hassidic legend, Rabbi Eliezer, the father of the Baal Shem Tov, leads a life strikingly similar to Joseph's. According to Daniel Boyarin, pirates sell Eliezer into slavery in a country with no Jews. He serves his master well and eventually finds himself working for the viceroy of the kingdom. Like Joseph, he has unchecked freedom except for a symbolic submission to his master (in this case, a requirement to wash the master's feet every day). The rest of the day he privately studies Torah and prays. Later, when the king is losing at war, Eliezer proves to be the only one who can formulate an effective military strategy, and he does this by dreaming the winning plan. Eliezer is given the viceroy's daughter as a wife. He foregoes touching her as well as all the wealth he could have, revealing his true identity as a Jew to his wife and fleeing back home with her assistance (Jews are subject to death in this country). Upon returning home, he finds his real wife and they conceive the Baal Shem Tov, both of them almost 100 years old.[54]

This story shows us that a significant strain of the Hasidic movement perceives Joseph in a different light from the rabbis of the midrash. The alternative model of masculinity that threatened the rabbis of the Midrash Rabbah – servant to a gentile master and resistant to sexual temptation – is embraced wholesale. Boyarin continues:

> He thus achieves wealth, power, and sexual access to a princess, all the signifiers of gentile masculine success, but he refuses all of them. He returns to his humble Jewish existence poor, weak, and married to a poor old Jewish woman. This is how he achieves his true vocation as father of a great mystic. This true Jewish existence had been maintained throughout in the domestic, private, "female" space of his own room, where he engaged in the nonmanly, quintessentially Jewish pursuit of the study of Torah. At the same time, the story signals that his passion for this inner, "passive" space is owed not to his inability to perform in the world of manliness but to his commitment to the alternative values of Jewish male gendering. There is, accordingly, nothing radical or even critical in this sequence vis-à-vis the traditions of Jewish masculinity. [55]

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[54] Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) 55-58.
[55] Ibid., 59.

The positive model of Joseph resisting the sexual urge resonates in our own time, as well, as part of what we conceive of as Jewish masculinity. In a book exploring modern Jewish masculinity, Jeffrey Salkin writes that surrounded by a secular world that encourages boys and men to "sow your wild oats... Judaism demanded sexual restraint outside of marriage. Joseph was praiseworthy because he rejected the advances of Potiphar's wife. 'Who is heroic?' the sages asked in *Pirkei Avot,* the ethical maxims of the Mishnah. 'The one who conquers his *yetzer,* the one who can control his inclinations, the one who has command of his libido."[56] The Joseph character, as we have seen, is a useful vehicle for examining biblical, rabbinic and later Jewish understandings of masculinity.

[56] Salkin, 4-5.

Chapter 4: King David: Lover and Fighter

King David is a character of immense complexity. The many stories about him in the books of Samuel and Kings create a nuanced picture of a man who is war-hungry and peaceful, passionately caring and indifferent, angry and forgiving. He shifts between piety and sin, between weakness and strength. The gender associations that can be attached to David must be examined in the context of the subtleties of his larger character that make him, in the words of Baruch Halpern, "the first human being in world literature."[57] After exploring some gender ambiguity in the way David is introduced to the narrative and gains prominence, we will examine three primary aspects of his character: his sporadic tendencies towards both passion and aggression, his emotional expression and his sexual persona.

We first meet David after God, through the prophet Samuel, has rejected Saul as king of Israel. Although Saul remains on the throne, convincing Samuel to keep up the pretenses of Saul's kingship before the people, the events that will see a new king take his place have been set in motion. God instructs Samuel to visit David's father, Jesse the Bethlehemite, for, God says, "I have decided on one of his sons to be king." (I Sam. 16:1) Samuel arranges a sacrificial feast where he can meet all of Jesse's sons. Seven of Jesse's eight sons (all but David) are then presented to him one by one:

> When they arrived and he saw Eliab, he thought: "Surely the Lord's anointed stands before Him." But the Lord said to Samuel, "Pay no attention to his appearance or his stature, for I have rejected him. For not as man sees [does the Lord see]; man sees only what is visible, but the Lord sees into the heart." Then Jesse called Abinadab and had him pass before Samuel; but he said, "The Lord has not chosen this one either." Next Jesse presented Shammah; and again he said, "The Lord has not chosen this one either." Thus Jesse presented seven of his sons before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, "The Lord has not chosen any of these." (I Sam. 16:6-10)

[57] Baruch Halpern, *David's Secret Demons: Messiah, Murderer, Traitor, King* (Grand Rapids, Mi: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001) 6.

From God's admonition to Samuel, we can infer that Samuel believes Eliab, and possibly his six brothers, to be fitting of royal anointment because of their size as well as other aspects of their appearance (the Hebrew word JPS has translated in verse 7 as "stature" refers to height). However, God makes clear that size and appearance do not matter in selecting the king (in contrast to the description of Saul in I Sam. 10:23-24). After not finding the chosen one from among these seven, Samuel asks Jesse if he has more sons, and Jesse responds, referring to David, "There is still the youngest; he is tending the flock." (verse 11) Although JPS translates the word *"hakatan"* as "the youngest," literally it means "the smallest." His father has not even included little David in the gathering, even though Samuel has invited Jesse along with all his sons. Everyone must then wait for David to be brought to the feast, and upon his arrival he is described in the text as *"Admoni, im y'fei einayim v'tov ro'i,"* translated by JPS as "ruddy-cheeked, bright-eyed and handsome." This translation suggests a boyish-looking, energetic David. However, a more literal translation would be, "red-complexioned, with beautiful eyes and good looking." Apparently, David's pleasing appearance, beautiful eyes and red skin make him an unlikely choice in the judgment of both Samuel and Jesse, a theme that will recur with Goliath.

In the following verses, David is introduced to Saul. Saul has been having spells of terror, because "the spirit of the Lord had departed from" him (I Sam 16:14), and his courtiers recommend that a musician be found to soothe him by playing the harp. One of the attendants identifies David as the perfect man for the job (presumably this is not coincidence, but rather God's way of bringing David on his journey to the throne), and he describes David as "skilled in music; he is a stalwart fellow and a warrior, sensible in

speech, and handsome in appearance, and the Lord is with him." The words JPS has translated as "stalwart fellow" are *" gibor chayil "*, which Brown-Driver-Briggs translates as a "mighty man of valour." (The phrase is related to war, since *"chayil"* also means soldier, and these same words are used previously to describe the father of Saul, translated by JPS as "a man of substance." (I Sam. 9:1)) Since he has not yet fought in any wars, this description is not yet really appropriate for David but, as Berlin and Brettler observe, it "summarizes David's traits, which will emerge in the following narratives (and which make him suitable to be king)."[58]

These two contrasting introductory descriptions of David exemplify the complexity of his character from the perspective of gender. In one passage, he is seen as seemingly unfitting for the kingship, owing to his size and looks. As the "little" son, he is not even presented to Samuel by Jesse, but rather left home to tend the flock. In the second passage, Saul's attendant does not hesitate to describe David in stereotypically masculine terms. However, he is not tapped for service on the basis of his skills as a warrior, his looks or his "sensibility of speech," but rather solely as a musician to soothe King Saul's anxiety.

The story of David's battle against Goliath occurs in the next passage. The Philistine and Israelite troops face each other for forty days in a pre-battle standoff. The giant Goliath, cloaked in armor, issues a challenge to any Israelite who dares to fight him man to man, thus settling the war without a larger battle. David, meanwhile, splits his time between tending the flocks for his father and playing the harp for Saul. When his father sends him to bring food to his three oldest brothers on the front line, he overhears Goliath reiterating the challenge. During the narrative that leads to David's defeat of

[58] Berlin and Brettler, 593.

Goliath, his fitness for his heroic role and his masculinity are questioned three times in a sequence of scenes that builds to an almost comedic level.

First, David's eldest brother Eliab hears him asking the other soldiers about Goliath's challenge and chastises him: "Why did you come down here, and with whom did you leave those few sheep in the wilderness? I know your impudence and your impertinence: you came down to watch the fighting!" (I Sam. 17:28) To his brother, David does not belong on the battlefield, much less conversing with soldiers. He is nothing but a pesky boy and a spectator to the man's work of fighting. David continues to speak with the soldiers, asking what reward will be given to the one who kills Goliath (the reward includes riches as well as marriage to the king's daughter, a possible step towards the throne). David expresses a readiness to fight, and he is brought to Saul.

Saul too shows disbelief that David is the man for the job: "You cannot go to that Philistine and fight him; you are only a boy, and he has been a warrior since his youth!" David is forced to convince Saul of his ability to fight, since evidently it is not apparent from his looks.

> Your servant has been tending his father's sheep, and if a lion or a bear came and carried off an animal from the flock, I would go after it and fight it and rescue it from its mouth. And if it attacked me, I would seize it by the beard and strike it down and kill it. Your servant has killed both lion and bear; and that uncircumcised Philistine shall end up like one of them... (I Sam. 17:34-36)

Saul, convinced to give David a chance, dresses David up in his own armor and sword, but David just does not fit the costume. "I cannot walk in these," he says, "for I am not used to them." According to traditional commentator R. Jonathan ben Uziel, David is perfectly comfortable in the armor, but he declines because his defeat of Goliath will not be seen as the miracle it is unless it is done without armor. (This interpretation is accomplished through reading the word *"nisiti"*, generally translated "accustomed" or

"experienced," instead as related to the word *"nes"*, "miracle".)[59] By interpreting the verse this way, R. Jonathan both preserves David's image as a soldier and emphasizes his courage and faith. However, from a literary perspective, it is clear that *"lo nisiti"* indicates that David is not accustomed to wearing the suit.

This comical scene, with David stumbling clumsily in the king's armor, is followed by his meeting with Goliath, dressed now in his shepherd's clothes and armed with a few stones in his bag and a sling in his hand. Goliath then issues the third challenge to David's masculinity. "When the Philistine caught sight of David, he scorned him, for he was but a boy, ruddy and handsome." (I Sam. 17:42) David's appearance is described here in nearly the same way as in his first introduction (the difference in wording is explained by Brown-Driver-Briggs as either word substitution or textual error[60]), literally "a boy, red-complexioned, with beautiful eyes and good looking."

In all these examples, David's manhood is questioned at least partially because of his age; his youth is emphasized. To underscore this point, Rashi reads into Goliath's scorn that he believes David is inexperienced based on his looks. However, mixed with his age and his inexperience in battle are references to David's small size as well as his beauty. As we found in the previous chapter on Joseph, beauty can be a hook for a more feminine characterization. We can see from the one description of David as a "stalwart fellow" and a "warrior" (which, as discussed above, appears to describe David's character as it develops later in the narrative and not as it appears at this point in the story) that his masculinity will be more firmly established later on during his life as king.

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[59] A. J. Rosenberg, *Samuel I: An New English Translation of the Text and Rashi, with a Commentary Digest* (New York: The Judaica Press, Inc., 1976) 147.
[60] Francis Brown, et al., *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2000) 421.

However, the introductory picture of David lacks the manliness we might expect for the future great king of Israel.

The author has a compelling reason for painting David as unmanly: the less capable David seems of defeating Goliath, the more credence for the claim that it is God that does the job. Although David does assert to Saul that he has been trained by his experiences protecting his sheep in the field, this appears to be aimed only at convincing Saul to let him fight. He follows this assertion by making the following prediction: "The Lord who saved me from lion and bear will also save me from that Philistine." Likewise, he asks the soldiers who fear Goliath's strength, "Who is that uncircumcised Philistine that he dares defy the ranks of the living God?" And he tells Goliath, who scorns him:

> "You come against me with sword and spear and javelin; but I come against you in the name of the Lord of Hosts, the God of the ranks of Israel, whom you have defied. This very day the Lord will deliver you into my hands... and this whole assembly shall know that the Lord can give victory without sword or spear. For the battle is the Lord's, and He will deliver you into our hands." (I Sam. 17:45-47)

This literary device serves to elevate God's role in David's rise to prominence. In addition, it conveys an important message: David's great strength comes from his faith. However, it also makes David appear less than masculine. So far, David looks like an effeminate boy who prevails only through faith in God. After David has incapacitated Goliath with his slingshot, the text makes David's status as less than a man even more clear by restating that he lacks what so commonly symbolizes the phallus: a sword, and he has to use Goliath's own sword to cut off his head (I Sam. 17:50-51).

After this mixed introduction of David as boyish and effeminate, on one hand, but somehow able to conquer Goliath on the other, David is granted status as a great warrior and becomes the popular commander of all the troops. But first, he must gain the trappings of true manhood, which he lacks up until this point. Saul's son Jonathan,

already known as a great warrior, (see I Sam. 14), provides this for him. "Jonathan took off the cloak and tunic he was wearing and gave them to David, together with his sword, bow, and belt. David went out with [with the troops]..." (I Sam. 18: 4-5) Thus, Jonathan gives David his masculine clothing and props. He can also be understood to be giving David his claim to military glory (in the previous war, Jonathan was the hero) as well as to the designation as the king's successor – Saul continues to want Jonathan to succeed him, but Jonathan consistently renounces that role through his support of David (we will discuss David and Jonathan's relationship later). Saul soon becomes wary of David – knowledge of his own rejection by God, combined with David's success, lead him to conclude that David may be his replacement. Thus begins a series of failed attempts by Saul to kill David or have him killed, even as he uses David to fight his wars as chief commander. One of these attempts is infused with a remarkable use by the author of David's simultaneous status of harp player and general for the king. The text pictures the two men in Saul's house, the harp in the young David's hand a spear in Saul's. Saul is overcome by an "evil spirit of God," and he "threw the spear, thinking to pin David to the wall. But David eluded him twice." (I Sam. 18:10-11) Again, David lacks the unmistakably male instrument of a spear, but even so he is able to take care of himself, presumably though God's intervention (Abravanel and Metzudat David both claim that David does not even move with intention to avoid the sword; he merely happens to move out of the way, guided invisibly by God[61]).

David goes on to become king and win many wars for Israel. However, the gender complexity in his character remains, manifested in three primary ways: he is at

[61] Rosenberg, 155.

times lethally aggressive and at times gently passive; his emotional expression is strikingly open; and his sexual persona varies drastically.

One cannot say that David's character, as seen by the narrative as a whole, lacks the masculine trait of aggression – in addition to the simple fact of his being a commander of troops, the text contains numerous examples that show him as aggressive by nature, sometimes to a fault. When Saul demands 100 Philistine foreskins as a bride-price for his daughter Michal (hoping that David will die trying to kill 100 Philistines), David comes back with 200 foreskins. Although the reason for using foreskins as the proof of David's killings is that Philistines were not circumcised and other Near Easterners were, the phallic connotation still must be noted (in the ancient Near East, removing the enemies' phalluses emasculates them). Later, David sends men to ask for hospitality from a wealthy sheep owner named Nabal, and Nabal rudely rejects the men. David, overreacting, flies into a rage and sets off with his troops for Nabal's household, swords drawn. But Nabal's wife Abigail stops him with apologies and a belated offer of hospitality. David thanks Abigail for restraining him, admitting, "Had you not come quickly to meet me, not a single male of Nabal's line would have been left by daybreak." Then, infusing even his final restraint with masculine bravado, the encounter ends with Nabal's sudden death, and Abigail accepts David's proposal of marriage. The Rabbis, troubled by the violence David exhibits here, seek to understand it otherwise: Rashi and Radak interpret the men's drawing of swords as a guilty verdict, meaning that they believe Nabal to be plotting rebellion. Therefore, he is acting not out of anger but out of judicial necessity.[62] This, however, is not the literary thrust of the story.

[62] Rosenberg, 209.

In other times in his life, David is also often shown to be gentle and passive, foregoing violence. In addition, he often relies on God to guide him as to whether and when to fight. Twice, while Saul and his men are pursuing David to kill him, David is given the opportunity to kill Saul and refrains, saying, "I will not raise a hand against my lord, since he is the Lord's anointed." (I Sam. 23:11) Later, as king, when his troops are about to defeat those of his son Absalom, who has turned against him and taken over the throne in a coup, he orders, "Deal gently with my son Absalom, for my sake," incredibly asking his soldiers to spare the life of their common enemy (II Sam. 18:5). This request is made all the more remarkable (and emasculating) by the fact that Absalom, as his first public act upon moving into his father's house, has slept with all ten of David's concubines.

David's pity for his enemies is also picked up on by the Rabbis. In the midrash (Yalkut, 2 Sam., § 149), a story is told of Absalom attempting to trick the elders of Israel to support his bid for the kingship. When the elders catch on,

> They seemed to go along with Absalom, yet they prayed in behalf of David, saying, "May it be God's will that we fall into David's hands and not David into our hands. For if we fall into David's hands, he will have pity on us; but if David falls into our hands, we will [be compelled to] show no pity to him."[63]

Absalom's ruthlessness is thus contrasted with David, who will surely be merciful.

In addition to pity for his enemies (or some of them), David's willingness at times to defer to the wishes and opinions of others provides an additional contrast with his hot temper at other times, described above. In preparation for the battle with Absalom, David expresses his intention to fight alongside his troops. When the troops ask him to stay behind, not wanting their leader to die, he acquiesces. "I will do whatever you think

[63] Bialik, 24.

best." (II Sam. 18:4) Not needing to dominate the situation, he is able to give up control to his troops. David's ultimate expression of trust, this time in God's will, comes also during Absalom's rebellion, when the priests offer to bring the ark with him, thereby hoping to ensure God's support. He declines their offer: "If I find favor with the Lord, He will bring me back and let me see it [the ark] and it's abode. And if He should say, 'I do not want you,' I am ready; let Him do with me as He pleases." (II Sam. 15:25-26)

Thus, throughout his life David exhibits a split personality as a lover and a fighter. The gentler, more passive traits of David's can be seen as manifestations of his feminine side. However, he conveys the message to his son Solomon that trusting God and acting only on God's wishes is precisely what makes one a man. He begins his dying speech to Solomon:

> I am going the way of all the earth; be strong and show yourself a man. Keep the charge of the Lord your God, walking in His ways and following His Laws, His commandments, His rules, and His admonitions as recorded in the Teaching of Moses, in order that you may succeed in whatever you undertake and wherever you turn. Then the Lord will fulfill the promise that He made concerning me... (I Kings 2:2-4)

It must be noted that later in the same speech, David's instructions also include killing certain people who have done wrong during David's life but are protected by David's vows not to harm them. Killing these men is seen as following God's will. Thus, the message is not that passivity or gentleness is God's will and therefore manly; rather, it is manly to kill when God wills it, and restrain oneself when God wills that. However, as we have seen from David's killing of 100 extra Philistines for their foreskins and nearly wiping out Nabal's male line, and as we will see from his murder of Uriah the Hittite and the soldiers with him, David does not consistently follow his own charge. Likewise, the fact that David states in his last words that manliness means following God's will does not make this the universal measure for masculinity in Biblical Israel.

Some of David's passivity throughout his life can certainly be explained by his acting in service to God. However, whether intended or not, the violent acts cited above have the literary effect of boosting David's masculine identity, and his passive acts have the effect of balancing out the appearance of his character.

The next area of focus is David's emotional openness. To read the books of Samuel is to see the recurring image of a weeping king. The following passage occurs as David and his men, running from both Saul's troops and the Philistines, return to their camp in Ziklag only to find it has been destroyed by the Amalekites:

> David and the troops with him broke into tears, until they had no strength left for weeping. David's two wives had been taken captive, Ahinoam of Jezreel and Abigail wife of Nabal from Carmel. David was in great danger, for the troops threatened to stone him; for all the troops were embittered on account of their sons and daughters. (I Sam. 30:4-6)

Most biblical heroes, upon finding their homes destroyed and their families taken captive, would react in anger and immediately take action. David and his troops, on the other hand, weep until they are completely drained of strength. What makes David's weeping even more remarkable is that he, the text states, is in present danger of stoning by his own soldiers, and yet he is still moved to cry for his own loss and the loss of the others.

Abravanel expresses discomfort that David is so emotional over the raid in Ziklag. According to A. J. Rosenberg:

> [Abravanel] explains that the people accused David of excessive grieving instead of immediate action. He renders thus: And David was very distressed (concerning his wives), but the people spoke of stoning him, for all the people were grieved, each man concerning his sons and concerning his daughters. (Therefore, why should David grieve more than they? Accordingly, he ceased to grieve).[64]

This discomfort may reflect a reaction to David's general propensity to cry – examples of David's weeping abound. He cries over the deaths of Saul and Jonathan,

[64] Rosenberg, 240.

even though Saul has been his enemy and sought to destroy him. He weeps when his son Amnon is killed by his other son Absalom in revenge for the rape of their sister Tamar. He then cries inconsolably over the death of Absalom, who has also sought to destroy him. He weeps when his general Joab murders Abner, even though Abner had sided with Saul in the war against David (II Sam 3:32). He weeps again when, driven out of Jerusalem by Absalom's armies, he climbs the Mount of Olives to plead with God (II Sam. 15:30). David cries far more than Joseph; while Joseph cries profusely, his tears are principally contained in one situation (his reunion with his family), while David seems to cry at every turn.

David's most famous expression of mourning is his dirge for Saul and Jonathan. Francisco Garcia-Treto explains that a mourning lament in ancient times is a ritual more commonly associated with women, and he therefore asserts that David is stepping into a woman's role in reciting it. While the lament does contain some of the boasting of battles fought by the deceased that would be expected of a male mourner, it is mostly devoted to "universal themes of the lament for the dead," traditionally the purview of women. Further, Garcia-Treto remarks:

> David dares to give full expression to his grief for Saul and Jonathan in a feminine *genre* and, without the cool restraint of the *gibbor* he himself was, weeps for the fallen *gibborim*. But more, he opens his heart to expose to the reader a stunning, sudden glimpse into the most intimate feelings of his soul. It is fascinating, and oddly embarrassing at the same time, to hear him cast all reserve or restraint aside and wail for the loss of Jonathan...[65]

It is possible that some of David's weeping can be explained as a political device by the author of the text. For example, if some Israelites or foreigners believed that David was behind the killing of Saul, Abner or Absalom, each of whom had substantial

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[65] Francisco O. Garcia-Treto, "A Mother's Paean, a Warrior's Dirge: Reflections on the Use of Poetic Inclusions in the Books of Samuel," *Shofar, Vol. 11 No. 2* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1993) 63.

support, this could lose support for David. Thus, showing that David was devastated by their deaths supports the claim that he did not desire them dead. In addition, the emotion expressed in David's lament for Saul and Jonathan may be understood as warranted by the high status of the deceased. However, no such explanation exists for the incidents at the Mount of Olives or Ziklag, the village destroyed by the Amalekites, discussed above. In any case, the literary effect is the same: not only was David not afraid to cry – he did so often.

This aspect of David creates a puzzling a picture of his character as a whole, and those around him are confused. Why is this man of war so weepy? His head general Joab expresses this confusion after the war against Absalom is over. During the final battle, Joab himself kills Absalom, against David's specific orders to treat him gently, apparently judging that Absalom's death is necessary for the troops' morale:

> Joab was told that the king was weeping and mourning over Absalom. And the victory that day was turned into mourning for all the troops, for that day the troops heard that the king was grieving over his son. The troops stole into town that day like troops ashamed after running away in battle. The king covered his face and the king kept crying aloud. "O my son Absalom! O Absalom, my son, my son!"
>
> Joab came to the king in his quarters and said, "Today you have humiliated all your followers, who this day saved your life, and the lives of your sons and daughters, and the lives of your wives and concubines, by showing love for those who hate you and hate for those who love you. For you have made clear today that the officers and men mean nothing to you. I am sure that if Absalom were alive today and the rest of us dead, you would have preferred it. Now arise, come out and placate your followers! For I swear by the Lord that if you do not come out, not a single man will remain with you overnight; and that would be a greater disaster for you than any disaster that has befallen you from your youth until now. (II Sam 19:2-8)

Joab chastises David for mourning excessively over Absalom, who is both his enemy and his son, at the expense of expressing approval and appreciation to his soldiers, who have risked their lives for him. The accusation is ironic coming from Joab, who is the one responsible for killing Absalom, deliberately and against David's direct orders. If it were not for Joab's actions, David would not be mourning at all.

On one level, Joab's criticism makes perfect sense. However devastated David may be at his son's death, it is his duty as king to be strong for the troops – they need to know he is happy with their victory. Joab may be correct that if David lets the confusion caused by his mourning continue he might lose support of the troops. At the same time, Joab's reaction shows again that even if men of the Bible enjoy greater freedom to express their emotions than western men, the range of emotional expression expected of them is still restricted (as I argue in Chapter 1). We can safely agree that if it were Absalom's mother Maachah in the king's position, it would not be suggested that her mourning was inappropriate. A man, and especially a king, is expected to swallow his pain and play his role – we see this from the repetition of the word "king" in verse 5. Of all people, how can their king be in tears? His troops are thrown into dangerous confusion.

We now turn our attention to the third aspect of David that suggests gender complexity: his sexual strength/weakness and sexual passion/aggression, both of which are seen at different extremes throughout his life.

Plenty of elements exist in the text that paint David as sexually aggressive and a sexual predator. First, nowhere in the Bible is it stated how many wives David has. However, from the genealogy in I Chron. 3, it appears that he has at least seven. In addition, from II Sam. 20:3, we learn that he has at least 10 concubines. Saul, the only Israelite king before him, appears to have far fewer wives: only two are mentioned in the text. This fact alone begins to suggest that David is sexually aggressive (although the marriages have also been interpreted as politically expedient). The rabbis (Abravanel, David Kimchi and T. B. Sanhedrin 21a) even enhance this impression by teaching that

David's wives numbered 18 (including the concubines) and constituted the most allowed under Deut. 17:17, which forbids Israelite kings from taking many wives.[66]

David's sexual aggression is underlined by the fact that he obtains three of his wives through violence or through stories related to violence. Two of these stories, those of Michal and Abigail, have been told earlier in this chapter. The third, concerning Bathsheba, is David's great transgression and brings calamity on his house. As told in II Sam. 11-12, David wanders on the palace roof and sees Bathsheba bathing below. Although he is told that she is married, David beds her. She soon notifies David that she is pregnant. David tries to trick her husband Uriah, one of his soldiers, into coming home from the war and sleeping with Bathsheba in time to make Uriah a plausible father of the child. When this fails David arranges to have Uriah killed, supposedly as a casualty of war. He then marries Bathsheba himself.

It is significant that the almost-pure David's principal transgression, which, as Nathan then predicts, brings God's wrath in the form of family strife and rebellion, is of a sexual nature. Usually, the sins of Israelite kings are of a different type – sanctioning the worship of other gods or failing to follow God's instructions to the letter. David, on the other hand, is unimpeachable in his service to God. However, when it comes to sex, as these three stories show, he is out of control.

It is also significant that the divine retribution Nathan foretells is sexual. Nathan tells David that, because Uriah has been killed by the sword, "the sword shall never depart from your house." Perhaps the sword is again used as a phallic symbol here, since the division in David's house begins when Amnon rapes Tamar. In his prediction, Nathan also relays the following:

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[66] Rosenberg, 285.

> Thus said the Lord: I will make a calamity rise against you from within your own house; I will take your wives and give them to another man before your very eyes and he shall sleep with your wives under this very sun. You acted in secret, but I will make this happen in the sight of all Israel and in broad daylight. (II Sam. 12:11-12)

The acts that David commits at the height of his power, which represent him at his most aggressive (sexually and otherwise), thus bring his downfall, again both sexually and otherwise. Preceding the loss of political power at which Nathan hints is a stark reduction in both David's sexual power and his sexual aggression. When he hears that Amnon has raped Tamar, the text says, "he was greatly upset." (II Sam. 13:21) However, as Berlin and Brettler observe, "he does not act." They further note that in this verse the Septuagint adds "but he did not rebuke his son Amnon, for he favored him, since he was his first-born."[67] Alternatively, Halpern suggests that David's inaction "is perhaps best understood as a result of his own status; as an adulterer himself, he is not in a position to take appropriate measures to punish his eldest son."[68] Whatever the reason for David's inaction, his failure to defend his daughter is his first act of sexual passivity, and it may be what sets the resentful Absalom on his course towards rebellion.

Next, after a period of nine years of banishment from the house and then continued estrangement from his father, Absalom regains entry to the court and begins his rebellion against David. Notably, at this point in the story, the text states, "No one in Israel was so admired for his beauty as Absalom; from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head he was without blemish." (II Sam. 14:25) At the beginning of his own rise to power, David too is described as beautiful. By noting Absalom's beauty here (long after Absalom's first introduction as a character), the author is hinting that David's days of sexual dominion are numbered.

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[67] Berlin and Brettler, 641.
[68] Halpern, 40.

During the rebellion, while Absalom is in control of Jerusalem, he fulfills Nathan's prediction by having intercourse with David's concubines publicly, on the roof of the house in a tent set up for that purpose. David has left the concubines behind, to mind the palace until he can recover the city. This can be seen as an act of complicity, since David should know that if he leaves the concubines there, Absalom will sleep with them: laying with the deposed king's wives is a way new kings declared their victory. Although David eventually regains Jerusalem and his concubines, he never again sleeps with them.

Thus, David's temporary loss of political domination in Israel coincides with what may be a permanent loss of sexual power; he never recovers even after defeating Absalom. In fact, near the end of his life, as David grows old, his sexual weakness is a textual focus:

> King David was now old, advanced in years; and though they covered him with bedclothes, he never felt warm. His courtiers said to him, "Let a young virgin be sought for my lord the king, to wait upon Your Majesty and be his attendant; and let her lie in your bosom, and my lord the king will be warm." So they looked for a beautiful girl throughout the territory of Israel. They found Abishag the Shunammite and brought her to the king. The girl was exceedingly beautiful. She became the king's attendant and waited upon him; but the king was not intimate with her. (I Kings 1:1-4)

This passage is puzzling: as Berlin and Brettler point out, "The warmth of a human body could have been provided by any of David's wives or concubines."[69] Why find a young virgin? Malbim argues that the advisers sought someone with whom he would not have intercourse, because they did not want him to be weakened further.[70] This interpretation, however, is unsatisfying. If David would be tempted by one of his wives or concubines, he would also be tempted by a young virgin, especially one who is "exceedingly

[69] Berlin and Brettler 671.
[70] Ibid.

beautiful." It is possible that the intention of this passage is to emphasize David's impotence in his old age – so old and weak that he does not even have intimate relations with a beautiful young girl lying with him in bed. This image calls David's masculinity into question at this stage of his life.

David's masculinity is also challenged by the story that follows the above passage. As David fades, his oldest living son[71] Adonijah asserts his claim to the kingship. However, both Nathan and Bathsheba want her son Solomon to succeed the king. Nathan suggests a plan that resembles Rebecca and Jacob's plot to steal the blessing in Genesis, and Bathsheba accepts Nathan's proposal. She visits the king and "reminds" him of his oath to her that Solomon would be king upon his death (traditional commentators differ on whether he actually made such an oath). Nathan then visits the king as well, expressing alarm at Adonijah's actions and asking David to name the next king. In response, David anoints Solomon, citing the oath of which Bathsheba spoke.

Thus in addition to being sexually impotent, David is shown to be powerless to name his own successor. Adonijah is already masquerading as king without his knowledge, and in the end, he is influenced to act (and possibly tricked) not even by Solomon, but Bathsheba, a woman. One need only read the narrative that follows David's death to see that David's readiness to accept Bathsheba's counsel unquestioningly is evidence of weakness. Adonijah wants to marry the late David's wife Abishag. He asks Bathsheba to advocate on his behalf before Solomon, and she agrees. Solomon seats his mother on a throne and promises to grant her any request. However, upon hearing the proposal, he immediately sees a plot (marrying a woman who is

[71] Ibid.

publicly known to have been intimate with David would be "tantamount to usurping the throne"[72]) and executes Adonijah. This shows that where David has been vulnerable to Bathsheba's influence, Solomon is his own man.

We have seen, then, the turbulent nature of David's sexual power. We have also seen that he behaves throughout most of the story as a sexual predator. There is another side to this story, however. We referred earlier to David's beauty, which is emphasized at his introductions to Samuel, Saul and Goliath. He has this in common with Joseph, whose beauty makes him prey to Potiphar's wife and, according to the midrash, even to Potiphar (see Chapter 3). David's beauty and heroism produce a reaction from more than one character in his story as well, although a reaction of a different nature. While in the case of Joseph the text itself (unlike the midrash) refers only to his physical beauty and Potiphar's wife's sexual desire of him, David is the object of the "love" of many – a word not frequently used in the Bible. Saul's son Jonathan and daughter Michal are both said to love David. "All Israel and Judah" love him as well (I Sam. 18:16). Even Saul, while perhaps he is too jealous to "love" David (and that word is not used), apparently feels some affection for him, since after David's defeat of Goliath Saul "took him [into his service] that day and would not let him return to his house." (I Sam. 18:2) Abravanel explains: "Since he was so strong and brave, he kept him permanently at the court."[73] This may be true. However, the verse's context, sandwiched between two verses that describe Jonathan's love for David (see extended quote, below), suggests Saul's reasons also include some sort of affection.

[72] Ibid., 675.
[73] Rosenberg 154.

Jonathan and David's relationship is exceptional for the extent of love expressed between the two, probably more than any other relationship in the Bible. For this reason, it deserves special attention. While none of the traditional commentators broach the question of whether the relationship is sexual, numerous modern commentators have. We will examine this question as well as other gender issues related to David and Jonathan's relationship.

We see the extraordinary nature of the relationship immediately upon their first meeting, which appears to affect Jonathan with love at first sight. Witness Jonathan's reaction when, still grasping Goliath's severed head, David identifies himself to Saul:

> When [David] finished speaking with Saul, Jonathan's soul became bound up with the soul of David; Jonathan loved David as himself. Saul took him [into his service] that day and would not let him return to his father's house. Jonathan and David made a pact, because [Jonathan] loved him as himself. Jonathan took off the cloak and tunic he was wearing and gave them to David, together with his sword, bow and belt.

In responding to this passage, two traditional commentators seek to explain why Jonathan is so overcome. From the text, it sounds as if Jonathan's emotional response is in reaction to David's words to Saul – Saul asks him whose son he is, and David responds, "The son of your servant Jesse the Bethlehemite." To explain this, Metsudat David suggests that Jonathan is simply impressed with David's genealogical stock, a difficult explanation to accept. Similarly, Moses Alshich comments that Jonathan realizes David will succeed Saul on the throne instead of Jonathan, and hearing that David is from a good family satisfies his jealousy. "He therefore loves him, not as his equal, but as one loves a superior person, even as the body loves the soul."[74] This is also hard to believe, since it is doubtful that Jonathan, the son of the king, could judge David's ancestry superior to his own. Both commentators are troubled by Jonathan's sudden and

[74] Ibid., 153.

unusual emotional expression, but neither is able to address the real question: what is the nature of the love Jonathan feels? Other rabbis seek more directly to dismiss any notion of sexual love, commenting on I Sam. 19:1, "But Saul's son Jonathan was very fond of David..." This wording is ambiguous. The Hebrew phrase that JPS renders "was very fond of David" is *"chafetz b'David me'od."* The Brown-Driver-Briggs dictionary defines *chafetz* as "take pleasure in, delight in" and cites numerous examples of the word referring to sexual desire. However, the same word is found in II Sam. 20:11, where Joab's henchman calls on a group of soldiers to affirm their loyalty to Joab and David. The henchman says, "Whoever favors *(chafetz)* Joab, and whoever is on David's side, follow Joab!" Here, the meaning is clearly not sexual. Regarding the appearance of the word in I Sam. 19:2, Metsudat David explains, Jonathan "*desired David* – i.e. his success and well-being," and Joseph Kara renders, "desired to save him from Saul's hand."[75] Both of these explanations are plausible given the context in the verse of Saul's stating his intent to put David to death. On the other hand, given that context the comments seem superfluous. These rabbis appear defensive of the nature of Jonathan's desire; they protest too much.

Where these commentators fail to address the true nature of Jonathan's love, others begin to succeed. Abravanel makes the following comment: "And Jonathan loved him according to the greatness of his soul; i.e. of David's soul, or 'he loved him as himself,' i.e. as one loves his own self."[76] Abravanel recognizes that Jonathan's love for David goes beyond respect for his family or his worthiness for the throne. They have

[75] Ibid., 159.
[76] Ibid., 153.

made a deeper connection than that. In *Pirkei Avot,* the rabbis comment further on this relationship:

> All love which depends on some thing, when the thing vanishes, the love also ceases; but if it does not depend on any thing, it will never cease. Which love depended on some thing? The love of Amnon and Tamar. And which did not depend on any thing? The love of David and Jonathan. (5:16)[77]

Here, the rabbis send the message that a loving relationship should not be built on sex, which they call a "thing". They invoke the example of Amnon and Tamar. Amnon, David's son, is obsessed with his half-sister and rapes her. Immediately afterwards, he is filled with distaste for her (the "thing vanishes") and throws her out of his house. They both meet ill ends: she is forever disgraced, and he is killed by his brother Absalom in punishment for his actions.) David and Jonathan, on the other hand, enjoy lasting friendship and loyalty to each other: they each defend the other and the other's offspring until death. The Rabbis may also be sending a message that the relationship between David and Jonathan is not sexual, and that is what allows it to flourish. However, this is not entirely clear. Just as the biblical text of Jonathan's love for David does not clarify whether his love has a sexual component, the rabbinic text could also be interpreted to mean that David and Jonathan's relationship was not based *only* on sex.

Subsequent passages in the story of Jonathan and David's relationship contribute even more to the uncertainty of whether the relationship was sexual. For example, when the two bid each other their final farewell, "[David] flung himself on the ground and bowed himself low three times. They kissed each other and wept together; David wept the longer." (I Sam. 20:41) Some of the rabbis are uncomfortable with this scene and

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[77] Jeffrey Teitelbaum, ed., *Luach and Limud: Personal Torah Study, Vol.16, No. 8* (New York: Orthodox Union, 1995) 35.

seek to understand the meaning of the kiss. The midrash (Vid. T. Shemot 28[78]) calls it "a kiss of parting," leaving the modern reader wondering what that explanation is meant to clarify. What other kind of kiss would it be? Underscoring the significance of the meeting and suggesting that it belies a sexual relationship, Tom Horner points out, "David did not seek to arrange any tearful farewell meeting with his wife, Jonathan's sister, before he went into political exile."[79]

According to Horner, a text that strongly supports the sexuality of the relationship comes when Saul rages at Jonathan for his alliance with David: "You son of a perverse, rebellious woman! I know that you side with the son of Jesse – to your shame, and to the shame of your mother's nakedness!" (I Sam. 20:30) The Masoretes read the Hebrew word *bet, chaf, reish* as *"bocher,"* and JPS translates it as "side with." However, Horner explains that in the Greek version of the Bible this word is read as *"bacher,"* which means "companion." Further, when the word is found preceding the genitive of a person or thing, it means "sharing" or "participating in." Thus, Horner contends, the verse should be understood, "For do I not know that you are an intimate companion to the son of Jesse?" In addition, Horner continues, the word rendered "shame," *"boshet,"* as well as the word *"arvah,"* or "nakedness," are both associated in Israelite society with sex. Horner's interpretation is open to rebuttal: even if Saul is calling Jonathan a "companion" of David, it does not necessarily follow that the relationship is intimate. Further, the shame Saul predicts for Jonathan may be for losing the kingship to an outsider, not for having sex with that outsider, and the shame he predicts for Jonathan's mother may be

[78] Rosenberg, 178.
[79] Tom Horner, *Jonathan Loved David: Homosexuality in Biblical Times* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1978) 33.

because David will (and does according to II Sam. 12:8) have sex with her upon becoming king.

Later, when Jonathan dies, David recites a mourning lament for him and Saul, in which he calls Jonathan's love "more wonderful to me than the love of women." (II Sam. 1:26) Although the Rabbis interpret this variously, none interprets the love to be sexual. However, this passage conspicuously raises the question.

Horner contends that all this evidence is conclusive in favor of the presence of a sexual relationship: "Israel's greatest king and hero did have such an affair and he made no secret about it."[80] Psychiatrist George Henry, who analyses David with respect to sexual pathology and calls David "a study in narcissism," does not explicitly say that David's relationship with Jonathan is sexual. He does, however, assert that while the influence of women on David is negligible, the opposite is true with respect to Jonathan: "All references to them indicate that Jonathan was the aggressor and that David was unreservedly responsive."[81] Christian scholar Derrick Bailey asserts that there is no reason to believe there was any sexual nature to the relationship:

> The homosexual interpretation of the friendship between David and Jonathan... rests upon a very precarious basis. No special significance can be attached to the oriental vehemence with which both men expressed their emotions when they parted company after Saul had suspected a conspiracy between them, excessive though it may seem by comparison with the reticence which our conventions impose upon male intercourse. Nor must the words of David's lament be misconstrued... it was simply an acknowledgement of a friendship of remarkable warmth and constancy, such as in those times and under the conditions of marital life and political intrigue would be more likely to subsist between men than between a man and a woman.[82]

It is impossible from reading the text to know whether the relationship between David and Jonathan was a sexual one, and each of these modern scholars' explanations is

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[80] Horner, 39.
[81] Henry, 498.
[82] Derrick Sherwin Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1955) 56-7.

believable. If the men do have a sexual relationship, the author might obscure this fact for two reasons. First, sex between males is strictly forbidden in the Bible. Therefore, the author may seek to avoid explicit mention of such an act, especially by King David.

Second, Horner asserts that homosexuality was probably commonplace in the ancient Near East, especially among the Philistines, whose culture greatly influenced the Israelites (because of the lack of archeological evidence, this assertion is difficult to substantiate).[83] If so, the nature of David and Jonathan's relationship might have been assumed by the reader without saying it outright. While it is more likely to be explicitly noted in the text when a man and a woman have relations, such a statement may not be seen as necessary for two men, since the men's legal status is unaffected and there is no chance of pregnancy. It may make little difference in the ancient reader's mind whether the two had sex, unless the reader is concerned with the biblical prohibition.

The fact that homosexuality may have been widely accepted in the ancient Near East does not suggest that strong norms did not exist regarding masculine characteristics and behavior. Horner states:

> "Above all, this type of homosexuality had nothing to do with effeminacy. Such men were warrior friends. They were, of course, aware of extremely effeminate men who were exclusively homosexual, and these men were looked down upon – not because of their homosexuality but because of their effeminacy."[84]

Horner points to an example in which David himself curses Joab for murdering Abner, praying that Joab's house might see the birth of a boy with defects. One of the defects David names is "one who handles the spindle," or in an alternate translation, "one that leans on a staff." (II Sam. 3:29) Horner explains:

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[83] Horner, 36-7.
[84] Ibid., 38.

> In any case, it refers to an effeminate man; for in this heroic and lusty period of Israel's history, "real men" did not pass their time spinning thread and weaving cloth. There might have been those who did, but such men were not considered to be manly."[85]

A parallel to the story of David and Jonathan exists in the ancient Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh, which dates back to around 2000 BCE. Alexander Heidel describes Gilgamesh, the king of the Sumerian city of Uruk, as notorious for his "undisciplined desires."[86] He routinely has his way with the women of the city, even stealing brides from grooms on their wedding night. The people pray for relief, and the gods create a wild, long-haired man "of titanic strength" named Enkidu whose purpose is to distract Gilgamesh from his exhausted subjects. Gilgamesh foresees meeting Enkidu through dreams. In one, he encounters a star too big to lift, to which he is attracted "as to a woman." [87] When they meet, the two fight, Gilgamesh wins, and Enkidu recognizes Gilgamesh's superiority. Then the two forge a friendship and embark on many adventures together. They become devoted to each other to the exclusion of relations with women. When Enkidu dies, Gilgamesh "cries 'bitterly like unto a wailing woman.' For seven days and seven nights he weeps over his friend and refuses to give him up for burial..."

Gilgamesh and Enkidu share much in common with David and Jonathan. All characters are physically strong and are heroes of their people. Like Enkidu, Jonathan acknowledges the superiority of David. He gives him his clothing and sword and helps him succeed his own father as king. Like Gilgamesh, David is sexually aggressive, with many women. He also, like Gilgamesh, weeps profusely, as a woman weeps (see

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[85] Ibid.
[86] The summary of the epic is taken from Alexander Heidel, *Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946) 5-13.
[87] Horner, 17.

discussion earlier), over his friend's death. Finally, like Gilgamesh and Enkidu, David and Jonathan's love for each other surpasses that for women and, although it is not stated that the two have a sexual relationship with each other, some eroticism is suggested. The question of the nature of the relationship between Enkidu and Gilgamesh remains debated by Assyriologists. One of the most prominent, Thorkild Jacobsen (1904-1993) wrote in 1930 that Gilgamesh violated men and women because his "bisexualism [was]... a token of superior strength. In 1976 Jacobsen changed his mind and described the relation as companionship.[88]

The ambiguity of David's relationship with Jonathan mirrors the complexity of his general character, from a gender standpoint among other aspects. Just as David's character presents a full human picture of a national and religious hero, it offers a fascinating look at biblical attitudes towards masculinity.

[88] J. Cooper, "Buddies in Babylonia: Gilgamesh, Enkidu and Mesopotamian Homosexuality," T. Abusch, ed., *Riches Hidden in Secret Places* (Winona Lake: Einsnbrauns, 2002) 73-85.

Conclusion

We invariably impose associations from our own time and place onto our readings of texts, and these associations may or may not be shared by the author. This is particularly true when we approach texts as sacred as the Bible. Paradoxical though it is, we regularly expect the sacred texts to affirm our own values. Like many other social constructs, norms around gender are subject to vast changes over time and across cultures. Lori Lefkovitz, in her reading of Jacob's stealing of the blessing in Genesis 27 (see Chapter 2), cautions that "this biblical legacy has been reinscribed in modern conceptions of Jewish masculinities since the nineteenth century."[89] She continues, pointing out that even those theories that attempt to remain conscious of shifting gender norms

> occasionally assume a continuous definition of what makes a man and what defines masculinity, suppressing the variability of ideal masculinity among cultures and over time. Eighteenth-century high culture in Europe defined masculinity as heightened feelings (the cult of sensibility), in a culture in which the well turned out male aristocrat wore powdered wig, high heels, frilly blouse, and spoke and carried himself in ways that were later characterized as feminine. It was only when the nineteenth century began to redefine man as animal rather than angel that idealized masculinity became increasingly beastly, took on the appearance of the hairy Esau.

Thus, some modern or Western assumptions regarding masculinity have undoubtedly found their way into this thesis, and it is essential to remember Lefkovitz's warning when reaching conclusions.

Nonetheless, while some of our attitudes regarding masculinity may be new or modified in recent history, there is evidence that some of these norms date back to rabbinic or biblical times. Examples that have been discussed in the preceding chapters include the Mari letter from a king to his son defining masculinity as fighting wars rather than staying at home (Chapter 2); the pre-biblical story of Gilgamesh and Enkidu, in

[89] Lefkovitz, "Passing as a Man," 1.

which Gilgamesh's crying is compared to a "wailing woman" (Chapter 4); and Rashi's suggestion that Joseph acted like a girl, curling his hair, painting his eyes and "lifting his heals" (Chapter 3). As much as conceptions of masculinity may have changed over the centuries, there do seem to be aspects of gender norms that cut across time and place.

Reading the stories of Jacob, Esau, Joseph and David through the lens of gender association provides opportunities to examine attitudes towards masculinity that may be present in Jewish texts as well as a chance to reflect on our own attitudes. A next step would be to explore the image of the Jewish man in the minds of Jews and non-Jews over the centuries – fascinating work on this has been done by scholars such as Daniel Boyarin and Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, who suggest that the Jew is placed by Western culture in the position of the feminine.[90]

My reading has begun to make me aware of the complex nature of biblical narrative and its rabbinic interpretations. I can only hope that my readings of the biblical and rabbinic texts as well as the readings of others studied in this work will add to the range of options available to us as we study Torah, offering new ways to conceive of our stories, our characters and ourselves.

[90] Ibid., 11.

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