

Like They Did in Egypt: Queer Jewish Ancestors & Passover

compiled by Emily Rogal (MHWOW Jewish Life Specialist)



Inspiring
Jewish
Homes

Source 1: Rambam, Hilchot Isurei Biah 21:8¹

It is forbidden for women to rub against each other; it is among the “ways of the Egyptians,” about which we were warned in Leviticus 18:3 and about which our sages expounded, “What would they (the Egyptians) do? A man would marry a man, a woman would marry a woman, and one woman would marry two men... A man ought to be exacting with his wife on this matter and should prevent her from associating with women known for this, not to permit those women to visit her nor her to visit them. [Translation by Rabbi Steven Greenberg]

נשים המסוללות זו בזו אסור וממעשה מצרים הוא שהזהרנו עליו שנאמר כמעשה ארץ מצרים לא תעשו, אמרו חכמים מה היו עושים איש נושא איש ואשה נושא אשה, ואשה נשאת לשני אנשים, אע"פ שמעשה זה אסור אין מלקין עליו, שאין לו לאו מיוחד והרי אין שם ביאה כלל, לפיכך ב אין נאסרות לכהונה משום זנות ולא תיאסר אשה על בעלה בזה שאין כאן זנות, וראוי להכותן מכת מרדות הואיל ועשו איסור, ויש לאיש להקפיד על אשתו מדבר זה ומונע הנשים הידועות בכך מלהכנס לה ומלצאת היא אליהן.

Discussion:

- This text is meant to assert dominance in the sense that the Rambam is naming queer sex and then denouncing it as a decidedly un-Jewish and illegal practice, according to Jewish law. If we read the text “against the grain,” or against the authority that the Rambam is presenting, what possibilities does the text open up for us?
- What resonances does Egypt have in the Jewish tradition? Why does the Rambam equate queer sex with the “ways of the Egyptians”?
- Rabbi Jill Hammer teaches that reading about the prohibitions against queerness in Jewish text also allows us to see that queer Jews have always existed. Does this idea resonate with you?
- What does the idea of queer ancestors mean to you?

¹ Rambam (1138-1204), also known as Maimonides, was a Sephardic rabbi, physician, and thinker who was born in Spain and later lived in Morocco and Egypt. Issurei Biah details the Rambam's thoughts on what was considered “forbidden intercourse.”

Source 2: Genesis 37:3-4

Now Israel loved Joseph best of all his sons, for he was the child of his old age; and he had made him an ornamented tunic. And when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of his brothers, they hated him so that they could not speak a friendly word to him.

וְיִשְׂרָאֵל אָהַב אֶת־יוֹסֵף מִכָּל־בְּנָיו כִּי־בֶן־זָקֵנִים הוּא
לוֹ וַעֲשָׂה לוֹ כְּתֹנֶת פָּסִים: וַיֵּרְאוּ אֶחָיו כִּי־אֹתוֹ אָהַב
אֲבֵיהֶם מִכָּל־אֶחָיו וַיִּשְׂנְאוּ אֹתוֹ וְלֹא יָכְלוּ דַבֵּר
לְשָׁלֵם:

Discussion:

- How does Joseph appear as a queer character here? What does that mean to you?
- In what ways do you understand the coat of many colors? Do you think this coat functions as drag in any way?
- In our world, queerness is still hated in some places, just as Joseph is hated by his brothers. How do you understand this connection?

Source 3: Genesis Rabbah 84:7

Joseph [son of Rachel and Jacob] would engage in childish/girlish behavior, penciling his eyes, lifting his heel and curling his hair.

והוא נער אלא שהיה עושה מעשה נערות,
ממשמש בעיניו מתלה בעקיבו מתקן בשערו.

Discussion:

- Does this midrash (essentially rabbinic fanfiction) build on your perception of Joseph in any way?
- How do these appearance-based practices contribute to your understanding of Joseph and his coat?
- Why would this be an important aspect of Joseph for the rabbis to highlight?

Source 4: Genesis 50:24-26

At length, Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die. God will surely take notice of you and bring you up from this land to the land that He promised on oath to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob." At length, Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die. God will surely take notice of you and bring you up from this land to the land that He promised on oath to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob." Joseph died at the age of one hundred and ten years, and he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt.

וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹסֵף אֶל-אָחָיו אֲנֹכִי מֵת וְאֱלֹהִים פִּקְדוּ יִפְקְדוּ אֶתְכֶם וְהֵעִלָּה אֶתְכֶם מִן-הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת אֶל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לְאַבְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק וְלַיַּעֲקֹב: וַיִּשְׁבַּע יוֹסֵף אֶת-בְּנָי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר פִּקְדוּ אֱלֹהִים אֶתְכֶם וְהֵעִלְתֶם אֶת-עַצְמוֹתַי מִצְרָיִם: וַיָּמָת יוֹסֵף בֶּן-מֵאָה וְעֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָיִם וַיַּחַנְטוּ אֹתוֹ וַיִּשֶׂם בְּאֲרוֹן בְּמִצְרָיִם:

Discussion:

- Does this midrash (essentially rabbinic fanfiction) build on your perception of Joseph in any way?
- As part of Joseph's story, he will be sold into slavery and rise to power in Egypt, thus bridging the story of the matriarchs and patriarchs in the book of Genesis with the story of Israel becoming a nation in Exodus. How do you understand Joseph as a liminal character?
- Why is it important that Joseph's bones be taken with the Israelites when they leave Egypt?

Source 4: Midrash Tanchuma Yelammedenu, Ex. 4:2

How did Moses know where Joseph's grave was to be found? They say that only Serach daughter of Asher had survived from that generation, and that she revealed to Moses where Joseph's grave was located. The Egyptians had made a metal coffin for him and then sunk it into the Nile. Moses went to the bank of the Nile . . . and called out, "Joseph, Joseph, the time has come for the Holy One to redeem his children. The Shekhinah and Israel and the clouds of glory await you. If you will reveal yourself, good, but if not, we shall be free of your vow that we should carry your bones with us to Canaan." Then Joseph's coffin floated to the surface.

Discussion:

- What do you think about this story? What do you make of the fact that Joseph's bones had been lost to his descendants?

Source 4: Rabbi Jill Hammer, "Uncovering Joseph's bones Parashat Vayechi (Genesis 47:28–50:26)" from *Torah Queeries*

Joseph teaches us that remembering is as important as physical survival in establishing identity. Jewish memory encodes itself in text, in liturgy, in folktales and music and dance, in every way that humans express themselves. Queer folk too must find the gift of memory, even when memory has been repressed. We must search for the bones of our queer ancestors wherever they are hidden. We cannot leave Egypt without them, for when memories are lost or blotted out, a part of the tribal truth is obscured. Joseph is a messenger to LGBT Jews not (only) because the sages imagined that he curled his hair but because his bones waited hundreds of years for his people to find them.

We now have the opportunity to be modern-day Serachs and show others where the bones of our ancestors may be found. Memory is critical to creating positive LGBT identity, just as it is to a positive Jewish identity... What is true of the larger world is also true of Jewish society. Talmudic tales of Rabbi Yochanan and Reish Lakish have homoerotic tropes. The poetry of male Jewish scholars of Muslim Spain expressed love and admiration for young men. In the 11th century, Yishaq ben Mar-Shaul wrote of one object of his admiration: eyes like David / he has slain me like Uriah." ...Meanwhile, Maimonides notes the existence of lesbian-living women in Cairo in the 10th century, warning men to keep their wives away from such women, lest they be seduced! "A man should be strict with his wife in this matter, and should prevent women who are known to engage in this practice from visiting her." Even this stern admonition shows that LGBT Jews have a presence in history.

The bones of our queer Jewish ancestors lie waiting to be found. Queer Jewish history is not yet part of a normative Jewish education. Like Joseph, these pieces of our history lie beneath the river of time, waiting for us to call out to them and say, "The Shekhinah and Israel and the clouds of glory await you." May all our ancestors one day reveal to us their bones.

Discussion:

- What does honoring our queer Jewish ancestors mean to you?
- What practices could you put into place this Passover to "call up the bones" of your ancestors - even those you do not know exist?
- How does this practice tie into other ways that we can do tikkun olam (repairing the world)?