

Potiphar's Wife and the Cultural Template of Sacred Sexuality

Die Autorin bezieht sich im folgenden Beitrag auf den in der letzten Nummer von *lectio difficilior* veröffentlichten Vortrag von Mieke Bal (Amsterdam). Sie geht davon aus, daß kulturelle Typen und Raster die Struktur und Tiefenstruktur eines Textes auf subtile Weise prägen, und versucht, solche verborgenen Prägungen am Beispiel der Erzählung von Potifars Frau und Josef (Gen 39) sichtbar zu machen. Indem sie vergleichbaren Erzählstoffen der Antike und dem reichen Weiterleben der biblischen Geschichte u.a. in der jüdischen Tradition (bis ins 14. Jh.n.Chr.) sowie im Koran nachgeht, trägt sie viele überzeugende Indizien für die Tiefendimension dieser Erzählung auf. Während der biblische Text in einer höchst problematischen Verquickung von Weiblichkeit und (negativ konnotierter) Erotik Potifars Frau als sexuelle Verführerin, Josef aber als sexuell enthaltsamen, tugendhaften Helden darstellt, der sich gerade dadurch als loyaler Diener seines ägyptischen Herrn und zugleich als rechtgläubiger JHWH-Anhänger erweist, lassen sich unter der - nicht vollständig geglätteten - sexualitäts- und frauenfeindlichen Oberfläche von Gen 39 Spuren älterer Traditionen von sexuellen Beziehungen mit Gästen des Hauses, von der Schande der Abweisung sexueller Gastfreundlichkeit und von Frauenbanketten ausmachen.

In this article I present the section that concerns Potiphar's wife and her passion to Joseph.¹ The presentation contains two parts. The first part concentrates on textual analysis. I will thus begin with the biblical text, evoke traces a mythical template that could show similarities to the story, and including the *Koran* follow selected rabbinical texts. My textual analysis will lead me to attest residual cultural templates. In the second section, I will implement the cultural template of cultic sexuality to the matrix structure of the story.

My main thesis is based on theories that promote the idea that cultural type-patterns may mould texts. **I will bring data of texts that will serve to promote the idea of a reciprocal relationship between a**

cultural pattern and a text. In this sense, a cultural template may formulate a narrative type-pattern and archetypes, in the same fashion that a subliminal idea generates a type pattern of some or other kind, or in a similar **way that** a deep structure under-girdles a text. In this a cultural mode is transformed into a structural and textual force, which in turn shapes a mode of behaviour.²

I will try to prove that side by side with patriarchal matrimonial rules, that **may have proven** lethal for women and even for men, there coexisted alternative sexual rules of a different nature. These alternative sexual rules seem to contradict the patriarchal sexual demarcation whilst complementing its goal, which is continuity. The alternative sexual rules seem to be manifested in two areas: sexual hospitality and cultic sexuality. Sexual hospitality and cultic sexuality are associated with mystical rites, seasonal festivities and cultic and socio-cultural customs, each bearing resemblance and variation of their own.

At this point one is led into the sexual values of family life in the Middle East. I hereby will mainly rely on two modern Jewish researchers Raphael Patai and Issachar Ben Ami.³ The existence of such custom may relativise texts like Genesis 19 and Judges 19 about Sodom and mistress of Gibeon, according to Raphael Patai.⁴ According to the above-mentioned researchers, sexual hospitality and (seasonal) ritual sexuality were not an exception to the rule in ancient Middle East.

Thus biblical texts and may be obscuring accepted ancient rules within a narrative pattern that alternately conceals its compromising attitude towards the custom at one time, while negativising it at another.

The Biblical text. In its presentation of Potiphar's wife's sexuality, Genesis 39 lacks motifs of threatened continuity of race or family. The biblical text suggests crude feminine sexuality proper. The framework puts to the fore the dichotomy of masculinity and femininity, in which masculinity represents moral superiority. Joseph embodies the biblical taboo on sexuality; Potiphar's wife materialises the world that threatens it. It is the crudeness of feminine desire that demarcates the Hebrew editorial imposition. From another angle, one could claim that this presentation also preserves the a-moral element of mythical Eros as a cultural template **as myths and folk-tales carry a-moral elements.**

¹ My article on Potiphar's Wife follows a lecture titled *Religious Canon and Literary Identity* given by Prof. Dr. Mieke Bal, University of Amsterdam, during the Conference on *Literary Canon and Religious Identity* at Nijmegen, the Netherlands, 7-9 September 2000. It can be read in *lectio difficilior*, 2:2000, European Electronic Journal for Feminist Exegesis.

² Susan Witting, *Semeia* 5, 1976, p. 82.

³ Issachar Ben-Ami, *Saint Veneration Among the Jews in Morocco*, Jerusalem, The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1984, p. 205;

³ Raphael Patai, *Sex and Family in the Bible and the Middle East*, Dolphin Books, Doubleday & Company, Garden City, New York, 1959, pp139-145.

⁴ Raphael Patai, 1959, pp139-145.

The biblical text recounts how Joseph was bought by Potiphar, a *saris* of Pharaoh. A *saris* may mean both an officer or a eunuch, an emasculated man. Joseph was good looking. Potiphar adopts Joseph into his household gives him a prominent position. Potiphar's wife lifts her eyes unto Joseph and says to him 'lie with me'. She repeats her request day by day. Joseph refuses for fear of his God and the Hebrew taboos on sexuality and in view of his loyalty to his master. As she forces herself on him one day when she finds him alone, clutching him by his garment, he leaves it with her as he escapes outside. The garment is used as a testimony of sexual abuse, to which Potiphar's wife emphatically adds that she cried aloud.

Structural Kernel. The description is cumulative in describing Joseph beautiful complexion (Gen. 39:7) and his moral motivation (Gen. 39:8-10), which thus form a binary transformation with the short description of Potiphar: a *saris* and Wife's illicit sexuality. The bare structure offers dialectical opposition in a triad pattern. This encloses a classical progress of a mythical structure. According to Levi Straus every opposition progresses towards a resolution by a third factor that serves both as a mediator and a catalyst for a new opposition; in the process one term generates the next by a double process of correlation and opposition until resolution is achieved.⁵ In this text, this can be formulated in the following:

1. Potiphar # Wife Master # Wife
Joseph slave

Master's emasculation⁶ forms opposition to Wife's sexuality. The Opposition is modified by Slave's sexual attraction, but the Slave is socially and ethnically inferior.

2. Potiphar # Joseph Master # Slave
Wife wife

The social and ethnic oppositions of Master # Slave is modified by Wife's passion towards Slave which equalises Slave to Master (though the master's equalising treatment obscures the crucial oppositions.), but Wife's sexuality is ethically forbidden.

3. Wife # Joseph Wife # Slave
Potiphar Master

The social/ethnic opposition Master # Slave is reverted back by Wife's slander and by the Master exercising his power on Slave as a punishment for 'attempting' to reach Wife's forbidden sexuality. The balance of power is resorted. Wife's sexual illicit sexuality fails. Social, ethnic and gender rules of segregation are restored. Hebrew moral superiority is established at the cost of masculine and ethnic victimisation.

⁵ Claude Levi-Strauss, tr. Claire Jackson, Basic Books, New York London, 1963, pp 224-225.

⁶ Gen. 39:9, the Hebrew Bible describes Potiphar as a *saris* which may mean both an officer and a eunuch.

The survey would attest how the template holds its own throughout the development of its expanded variants. The variants show various degrees of processing. This processing shows interpretations by which units of the matrix template will be shifted from one character to the another, relativised, dialogised and replenished with complementary details.

A Comparative Mythical Template: Queen Stratonice and Combabus. Lucian's *De Dea Syria* offers a narrative the characteristics of which seem relevant to the biblical story of Joseph, Potiphar and his wife.⁷

Queen Stratonice rebuilt the temple of Hierapolis in which served Galli, emasculated priests whose emasculation was offered for female deities.⁸ On going on her journey to rebuild the Temple, her husband sent a young aide called, Combabus, to assist with the rebuilding of the temple at Hierapolis. Before leaving for Hierapolis with the queen, Combabus emasculated himself and left his genitals in a box at the king's palace. They built the temple. Queen Stratonice then fell in love with Combabus and tried to seduce him. He resisted and told her what he had done. However, she persisted; a kind of love that is still conducted in the temple between Galli and women at Hierapolis, according to Lucian's *De Dea Syria*.⁹ On returning home, the queen falsely accused Combabus before the king of seduction. Combabus was arrested and sentenced to death. On producing the box with his severed genitals, Combabus was pardoned and greatly rewarded for his loyalty.

The cultic emasculation of the Galli, is seen in the figure of Combabus. This figure seems related to Potiphar's 'underlined' emasculation, and at the same time to Joseph's sexual abstention on account of devotion to both his master and his religion. In these cases, cultic emasculation as well as sexual abstention are offered as tokens of loyalty to higher patrons; that includes earthly ones, metaphysical ones, namely female and masculine deities.

Biblical Transformation. On the level of presentation, the biblical narrative surfaces recurrent motifs. We have a master, a wife and a young aide. One of the masculine figures is emasculated the other one opts for sexual abstention. The wife wishes to seduce the young aide. He resists. She falsely accuses him publicly before the household and before the master, of a sexual foul play. The young aide is arrested but finally rewarded for his services by a powerful master.

Characterisation shifts. The emasculated figure is transferred from the young aide to the husband but is also transformed, in Joseph, into sexual abstention for the reasons of marital taboos on sexuality and for loyalty to the master. The rewarding master is transformed into the Pharaoh, instead of the husband, who later greatly reward Joseph. The object, a mute token to prove or disprove a sexual deed,

⁷ Stephen Benko, *The Virgin Goddess, Studies in The Pagan and Christian Roots of Mariology*, Brill, Leiden, New York, Koln, 1993, p.53-55

⁸ As an additional theme Stratonice's step son falls in love with his step mother Queen Stratonice.

⁹ Stephen Benko, (on *De Dea Syria*, chapters 21,22), 1993, p. 55.

in both narratives belongs to the young aide. In the mythical narrative, the severed genitals are brought up as a token of innocence. The biblical narrative gives it an ironic twist. The innocent young aide is stripped of his garment, and the wife owns and misuses it as an accusing object.

Thus the biblical transformation offers a permuted diametric. On the generative level, the biblical narrative posits the same dialectical triangle seen in the mythical text. In the mythical template, the young aide who protests his innocence is also an emasculated man. However, in the biblical text masculine sexual abstention is distributed over two figures; the emasculated husband and his Hebrew aide. If we refer back to the triangle pattern then the initial opposition of Potiphar versus Joseph as a Master and Slave is collapsed socially, and that obscures the fact that also sexual opposition between the emasculated husband and the potentially sexual Joseph is also erased in the process of the narrative pattern. Both Potiphar and Joseph embody sexual separation from female sexuality in relation to Wife. As a result, masculinity forms one front against femininity in a double structure. This diametric can be perceived in female sexuality versus masculine sexual abstention.

Joseph's moral abstention is thus challenged by Potiphar's wife in the similar way that Cambabus' emasculation is attested by female seduction and false accusation. Joseph proves to be a loyal subject to deity and earthly master by rejecting immediate sexual gratification. In this, Joseph's story evokes an analogy with the Galli's cultic emasculation and that of Combabus whose sexual sacrifice is justified by loyalty but coloured by the cultic custom of the Galli. Joseph thus relates both to the Galli, the emasculated priests, and to the emasculated officers of kings and pharaohs who mutilate their masculinity as a token of loyalty to their masters.

One end of the continuum contains a marker of sexual mutilation and abstention, and to its opposite end contains a marker of female sexuality. Female sexuality remains the stable constituent in both narratives.

Mosaic prohibition on sexuality represented in Joseph overshadows the originally mythical template of cultic castration. Potiphar's emasculation is underlined by his mere ambiguous title *saris*. The farther one moves in the evolution of exegesis, the scarcer the motif of Potiphar's sexual mutilation becomes. Philo is one of the closest to the biblical text who implicitly deals with this theme (see below). *Genesis Rabba* brings it in Potiphar's wife self-defensive speech of (see below).

Characteristics of Midrash. Stories around biblical texts show a specific development which is characteristic of biblical exegesis. The original biblical text is taken to serve as a consistent matrix for narrative production. Whereas the biblical matrix is considered a sacred text, absolutely unchangeable

and infallible, its exegesis shows the character of an open dialogue.¹⁰ It is contestable, shifting, imaginative, diverse, argumentative and sometimes even contradicting. Exegetic texts are thus defined as extended biblical stories; the extensive biblical narrative is generated according to the following characteristics:¹¹

1. The formal aspect is generated by Aristotelian classical narrative such as, replenishing ambiguities, narrative structure with beginning and end, round characters, detail multiplicity and completion of details. These literary principles already infiltrated the Israelite culture at the time.
2. Interpretations of verse and or sometime even a word by means of a homiletic narrative, the purpose of which is both exegetic and deductive.
3. Actualisation of the biblical story to the contemporary time of the extended narrative.¹²

The biblical text epitomises the feminine figure as the Master's wife. The biblical story of Potiphar's wife has been amplified by midrashic homiletical exegesis. Hebrew Exegesis would usually entitle her, Potiphar's wife. Characteristically of exegesis, the midrashic texts concerning Potiphar's wife rely on one and the same biblical text while engaging in dialogue with preceding midrashic texts in a cumulative fashion. As a dialogic tradition, the extended texts recycle scenes around the major prototype matrix. In this, midrashic production shows similarity to formulaic

The Testament of Joseph (2nd B.C.E). The Testament of Joseph is written in first person narrator. The biblical verse 'that she spake to Joseph day by day, that he hearkened not unto her' (Gen. 39:10) describes Potiphar's wife's actions by the past continuum. This allows exegetic compilations an open space for numerous variants on the seduction scene.

Potiphar's wife is entitled here the Egyptian Woman, Mof's wife and Potiphar's wife alternately. Joseph relates to his sons how Potiphar's wife initially embraced him like the son she lacked, and that her gestures gradually became seductive (*Testament of Joseph* 3:8-9)¹³. This replenishes the matrix with age difference and a folk-tale element of step-mother and step son. In chapter 5:2, Joseph tears his own clothes when Potiphar's wife threatens to kill her husband in order to marry Joseph, and she promises him that she would make him the master in her husband's stead. In chapter six she tries to entice him with bewitched food, which he refuses. Chapter 7 describes the woman falling ill for her unrequited passion. As the master leaves she threatens to kill herself if Joseph persists. To this his answer is that her husband's other wife will beat her children if she dies. This detail may indicate that

¹⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, University Texas Press, Austin, 1982, pp. 275-301, 426.

¹¹ Dov Noy, *Folktales in Talmud and Midrash*, (ha-sipur ha-amami ba-talmud u-ve- madras) Universita ha-ivrit birusalayaim, 1968, p. 10-11.

¹² Dov Noy, 1968, p. 10-11.

¹³ The Apocrypha, ha-sefarim ha-hitsunim, 'The Testament of Joseph' ed. Avraham Kahana, Masada, 1959.

there were a number of versions circulating already then, as Potiphar's wife had been previously presented as a childless woman. Joseph immerses himself in praying in between scenes (*Testament of Joseph* 3:3, 4:3, 7:5) and brings to his memory his father's words of teaching (*Testament of Joseph* 3:3). She takes off her clothes revealing her breasts, arms and legs to seduce him, at the moment at which Joseph relates that she is a most beautiful woman (*Testament of Joseph* 9:5). Finally the woman gets hold of his clothes to force him down. As he frees himself, his garment is left with her, and he runs out naked (*Testament of Joseph* 8:2:4). The clothes left at the woman's hands are used to accuse him. With this, the extended text reverts back to the biblical matrix text.

The biblical text pictures Potiphar's wife as adulterous woman who then bears a false witness. If there are no adjectivals added to Potiphar's wife's emotions in the biblical text, the extended tale here provides them in abundance. Joseph's 1st person narration dehumanises Potiphar's wife's passion. Her sexuality is embodied in terms of evil lust (*Testament of Joseph* 3:10) and frenzy (*Testament of Joseph* 8:4). In the *Testament of Joseph* the basic story is extended to capture femininity as a dark evil dream of men the beauty of whom is reluctantly admitted. For her passion she plots, is ready for murder and suicide, uses witch-craft and offers him bewitched meal, (chapter 6) and forces Joseph down clutching to his clothes in frenzy (*Testament of Joseph* 8:3-4). This has since then served as a proto-type, which eventually was generated in various rabbinical texts. However the need for variation and contestation overcome the urge to duplicate, as will be shown below.

The *Testament of Joseph* is unique in its employing the first person's voice. Eventually, while other texts follow the biblical text stressing Joseph's beauty, the first person narrator in this text emphasises Potiphar's wife's beauty instead that of Joseph.

The Book of Jubilees, (1st Century B.C.E)¹⁴ seems closer to the biblical story. It adds a detail worth mentioning. In this version, Potiphar's wife bolts the bedroom door before Joseph. On his flight, she gets hold of his garment, which he eventually leaves behind in her hand. On his way out however, he also breaks the lock, (BOJ, 39:10). In this text thus, Potiphar's wife uses two mute witnesses of 'violent crime' against Joseph: his garment left with her and the broken lock.

On the level of metaphors and psychological archetypal images the broken bedroom-lock may offer as many interpretations as the garment left behind in the woman's hand while the man flees away with bare skin.

Philo. (1st CE) While remaining loyal to the biblical text, Philo follows the extended descriptions laid for him in the *Testament of Joseph* and *The Book of Jubilees*, thus re-establishing a tradition rather than creating a novelty. In Philo, Joseph prays less frequently than he does in *Testament of Joseph*,

¹⁴ The Apocrypha, 'Sefer ha-jovlot', 'The Book of Jubilees', 1959.

mostly he preaches to Potiphar's wife instead. In putting a long monologue in Joseph's mouth, Philo revives the first person voice of Joseph of the earlier text. Joseph's monologues are turned to the means to proclaim the teaching of the Judaic moral codes and thus claiming an ethnic moral superiority. In addition to superiority of ethnic moral, Philo attach the derogative attitude towards foreign women and men alike:

'We, the descendent of the Hebrews, are guided by special customs and laws of our own: in other nations the youths are permitted, after they are fourteen years of age, to use concubines and prostitutes, and women who make gain by their persons, without restraint.' (IX:42-43 On Joseph).¹⁵

In his enthusiasm, Philo's Joseph states that a harlot among the Jews is not permitted to live (On Joseph IX, 43) which has no basis in the Mosaic laws.

Joseph's monologue gives an idealised picture of the Jewish codes of sexuality which dictate that both men and women approach their marriage without prior sexual experience: *'we approach our virgin brides as pure as themselves* (IX:43 'On Joseph').

Philo advocates purity and pollution not only in deferred sexual gratification but sexual abstention as well. Sexuality and abstention of it form the main dichotomy in Philo's Joseph and Potiphar's wife in another variation appearing in 'Allegorical Interpretation' III, LXXXIV (236). In this text, Philo transforms the story of Joseph and the Master's wife into a platonic dichotomy of Soul and Pleasure. Pleasure appears as a personified woman, the cook's wife entitled Pentephoe. Philo transforms both characters into the dualistic personification of virtue and vice. The text is remarkable in the sense that it collapses the emasculated husband with the unyielding lover Joseph, into one front which supports the mythical matrix. The husband being a eunuch is likened to Joseph who resists temptation for spiritual reasons. Philo introduces misogyny in the platonic dichotomy of body and soul, in which femininity bodies forth the corruption of body and masculinity materialises the purity of the soul:

'One of these women is Pentephone, the wife of Pharaoh's chief cook. We must now consider how a man who was a eunuch can be represented as having a wife... On another principle, therefore, it appears most desirable thing to be a eunuch, if our soul, by that means, escaping vice, might be able also to avoid all knowledge of passion. (237) On which account Joseph, that is to say, the disposition of continence says to Pleasure, who accosts him with, 'Lie with me, and being a man, behave like as a man, and enjoy the pleasant things which life can afford''. He, I say, refuses her, saying 'I shall be sinning against God, who loves virtue, if I become votary of pleasure, for this is a wicked action'.(Philo LXXXIV (236-237)... pleasure never ceases from struggling against the yoke but seizing hold of his clothes, she cries, 'Lie with me'. Now clothes are, as it were, the covering of the

¹⁵ *The Works of Philo*, ed. C.D. Yonge, 'Allegorical Interpretations III', Handrickson, 1995.

body, just as life is protected by meat and drink. And she says here 'Why do you renounce pleasures, without which you cannot live? (240) Behold, I take hold of the things which cause it; and I also say that you could not possibly exist unless you also made use of some of the things which cause it'. What, then says the temperate man? 'Shall I' says he, 'become a slave to passion, on account of the material which causes passion', for leaving his garment in her hand, he fled, and escaped out of doors''. (Philo, LXXXV238-240).¹⁶

Talmud Jerushalmi and Genesis Rabba (4th Century C.E).

Joseph humanised. Early Talmud texts humanise Joseph associating him with low mimesis of realism. In allowing Joseph to possess sexual inclination as a characteristic common to all human beings, his moral resistance is thus humanised but his moral superiority is established as a human model for all men. *Talmud Jerushalmi*, horaiot, 82:46 and *Genesis Rabba* 86:7 describe Joseph's passion being as strong as that of Potiphar's wife. Then his parents' images appear before him (in *The Testament of Joseph*, Joseph remembers his father's teaching); first appears his dead mother Rachel, then that of his father Jacob and ending up with his aunt Lea. This cools down his blood.¹⁷

Potiphar's Wife subjectivised. Midrash *Genesis Rabba* also subjectivises Potiphar's wife. In this text she defends her sexuality, arguing that as she can not enjoy her husband's embraces, nor he can enjoy hers, being a eunuch, it can not be a sin to enjoy it with Joseph.¹⁸ This speech humanises Potiphar's wife. Joseph's garment remaining in her hand also aids to build a humanised if not emphatic figure. Potiphar's wife is described to keep Joseph's garment hidden in her bed, so as to fondle and kiss it for love of Joseph in her (lonely) bed (Vayeshev parasha 86:15)¹⁹

Potiphar's Wife Degraded by Midrashic Analogy. Midrashic analogy is perceived in a rhetorical device, which brings up one biblical text in order to explain another. In intertextual terms, the meaning of one biblical text is dialogised by the analogy with the other. The following texts consistently rely on this device.

An analogy degrades Potiphar's wife of Gen. 39 by putting her on par with bestiality by relating to a previous chapter in Genesis 37. *Genesis Rabba* (Theodore Albeck) 64:33 draws an analogy between the imagined beast that supposedly had devoured Joseph in Genesis 37:34 and Potiphar's wife in Genesis 39: 'And he (Jacob) recognised it, and he said, my son's coat, a wild animal devoured him. Rabbi Humiah said, God's spirit inspired him (as Jacob knew) a wild animal devoured him, (namely) Potiphar's wife.'

¹⁶ *The Works of Philo*, 1995, pp 78-79.

¹⁷ on oedipal analysis of Potiphar's wife, see Mieke Bal, 'Myth a' la lettre : Frued, Mann, Genesis and Rembrant, and the Story of the Son' in *Feminist Companion to Genesis*, ed. Athalya Brenner, *Feminist Companion to Genesis*, Sheffield, 1993, pp 343-379.

¹⁸ Robert Graves and Raphael Patai, *Hebrew Myths, The Book of Genesis*, Cassell, London, 1963, p. 254--256

¹⁹ *Genesis Rabba*, J. Thoedor, Ch. Albeck, M. Popperlauer, 1927, Berlin p. 1075

Potiphar's Wife redeemed. Another analogy redeems Potiphar's in the very same compilation which contests the former text. *Genesis Rabba* (Theodor Albeck) 85:45 transcends Potiphar's wife's passion to the revered (illicit) sexuality of Tamar considered to have been committed for a sacred purpose. The Hebrew expression literally says, for the sake of Heaven. Tamar, having tempted Judah her father-in-law, was exempted of breaching the sexual rules imposed on widows for she succeeded in building a house in Israel by bearing a masculine offspring to Judah. Tamar's sexuality is already established as a 'virtue' in the biblical scriptures: first by Judah's recognition of her 'rightful act' and then in analogical statement made to Naomi in the Book of Ruth: 'And let thy house be like the house of Pharez, whom Tamar bare unto Judah...' (Ruth 4:12)

The analogy that redeems Potiphar's relies on the notion of descending *ird*. The midrash draws an analogy between Judah going down away from his brothers to dwell with Hira the Adullamite and Joseph brought down away from his brothers to Egypt. Judah was tempted by Tamar who made him lie with her, and the latter was encountered with Potiphar's wife who tried to make him lie with her. Both women, the passage argues, were targeting a sacred duty (that of conceiving a son). Potiphar's wife saw in her stars that Joseph would bring her offspring; and the stars were right. However, she could not know that it was her daughter Asnat, Joseph's destined wife, who would bring her offspring by Joseph. The idiomatic ruling that both women meant to use their sexuality 'for the sake of heaven' thus implies a sacred cause. In this idiom the Hebrew exegesis does echo polytheistic fertility rites in which sexuality is defined as a sacred intercourse offered to the deity.

Potiphar's Wife's Clothes. *Babylonian Talmud* (6th CE) Yoma 35:2 brings the following:²⁰ '*clothes that she would put on for him in the morning, she would not put on for him in the evening.* The Midrash brings a description of Potiphar's wife changing clothes over and over again for him. The Hebrew passage however may imply that it was either Joseph's clothes that she would change every day or her own. The ambiguity is created by the Hebrew words changing clothes unto him or for him, seen in the Hebrew pronoun *lo*, indirect third person dative case, which may imply both unto him and for him and sometimes even a female pronoun 'her'.

Tanhuma (Vayeshev 33) unambiguously relates changing of clothes to Potiphar's wife: '*And she would change three sets of clothes day after day, objects that she wore at dawn she would not wear at mid day, and that she would not wear in the evening; why? So that he would cast his eyes upon her.*' The description of a woman changing her clothes evokes the stories of Tamar and Ruth in which the theme of a woman's changing garments anticipates an erotic trickery to achieve her (sexually sacred) means (Gen. 38:14, 19, Ruth 3:3 respectively).

²⁰ Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, the Jewish Publication Society of America, 1925, 1968, p. 224, note 112.

This theme is taken by a later exegesis. *Sefer ha-yashar* (12th Century CE), which expands on the query of changing clothes but is solved by distributing the detail on both figures. This text describes both Potiphar's wife changing her own clothes for him in one scene and her changing his clothes in another. The book thus resolves the ambiguity by using the pronoun twice, describing both Potiphar's wife and Joseph changing clothes on two different occasions (Vayeshev ch. 14). One exegetical passage describes Potiphar's wife clothing Joseph every day a number of times, then cladding him with handsome clothes for her women's party. In the last scene of seduction she is the one to change into her royal dresses to tempt him when he comes back into the house to do his work; and after the erotic confrontation she changes back into her regular clothes so as to mislead the household and her husband. The latter reinforces the connotation of temptation by change of clothes by Tamar and Ruth (see above). The detail of Potiphar's wife's changing of clothes is repeated in *Yalkut Shimoni* (13th Century CE) Va-yeshev 52, which leaves the object of the change of clothes ambiguous.

Tanhumah (8th-9th CE). Midrash, *Tanhuma* (8th -9th CE) expands the detail gaps of its former texts and describes the very human Joseph already mounting the bed together with Potiphar's wife. Then he finds that he is 'unable to find/meet himself' (*Tanhuma*'s euphemism) as he sees his father's image. He thus drops himself onto the ground and thrusts his ten fingers into the floor. This detail is related by a Midrashic analogy to Jacob's last blessing of Joseph that says that 'the arms of his hands were made strong' (Gen. 49:24).

The *Tanhumah* brings a story that shows an undeniable similarity to the Joseph story of a women's party appearing in the Koran (see below). The *Tanhuma*'s time of compilation is disputable but it is estimated at between the eighth to ninth century C.E. which means that the Koran (compiled in mid 7th century) must be considered its precedence. However, the *Tanhuma* is believed to have incorporated earlier texts some of which may have been lost to us.²¹ The *Koran* also shows a plot better justified and more elaborated which may indicate a work evolving from an earlier subliminal text.

²¹ TANHUMA YELAMMEDENU: a group of aggadic Midrashim complete or fragmentary, published or still in manuscript, attributed to Rabbi Tanhuma. It is homiletical Midrash, i.e., a Midrash divided according to the old Palestinian division of the reading of the Pentateuch in a triennial cycle, and containing homiletical explanations (*derashot*) to the first verse (or sometimes to the first two of three verses) of each *sidra* of the above-mentioned cycle. Many of its *sedarim* open with a distinctive halakhic poem, using the formula: "Yelammedenu Rabbenu, etc...?" "May our teacher instruct us, etc." Some have tried (unfortunately in vain) to look for one common basic text (*Urtext*); others have gone further and tried to identify one of the surviving texts as "the ancient oldest *Tanhuma* or *Yelammedenu*," using interesting hypotheses though very few, if any, substantial proofs, and have achieved very little. Some scholars whose attention was mainly drawn to the section of the printed *Tanhuma* discussing the Babylonian academies on the one hand, and to the similarities between the *Tanhuma*, *Yelammedenu* Midrashim and the *She'iltot* of Rav Aha on the other, have directed their main efforts to looking for the origins and growth of this genre in Babylonia, bearing in mind the famous homily of Rabbi Tanhum of Neva (Shab. 30a). It belongs to Midrashim of a distinct literary genre. In most cases it is difficult to trace the chronological order within the works belonging to this type. All of them borrowed from the tannaitic literature 2nd century C.E., the Jerusalem Talmud, 4th AC, and the classic amoraic aggadic Midrashim such as Genesis Rabba 4th AC.; Lev. Rabba 5th AC.; Lamentation Rabba, 5th Pesiqta diR. Kahana 5th, and various other Midrashim as well as some later works. It therefore follows that even the earliest of the extant texts was not edited before 800 C.E. (Moshe David Herr, Encyclopaedia Judaica, 1971.)

The *Tanhuma* describes how the Egyptian women came to watch Joseph's beauty. On this occasion Potiphar's wife offers them the fruit called *Etrog* served with knives to peel it. As she calls Joseph to appear before them, astonished at his beauty, they cut their hands.

Tanhuma (also entitled *Midrash Yleamdeinu*²²) *Yalkut Torah* – Genesis 161 p.104, 72 brings the following: 'and his master's wife lifted her eyes onto Joseph...' (Gen.39:7). 'Once the Egyptian women gathered and came to see Joseph's beauty. What did Potiphar's wife do; she took *Etrog*in and gave to each one of them, a knife to each; and she called Joseph and made him stand before them. When they beheld how handsome Joseph was, they cut their hands.'²³

The exegesis for verse 39:11 'he came to do his work...' remains the main axis of the seduction scene in the *Tanhuma* after the model of the biblical text. Joseph in this text is humanised after the model of *Genesis Rabba* which acknowledges his sexuality. The passion is mutual: 'Rabbi Jehuda says, that day was the worship day of the Nile. And all were out she and he remained with her in the house and she caught him by his clothes and he mounted with her onto the bed and he willed to find himself but found himself not for he saw his father's image and he dropped himself to the ground and thrust his fingers into the ground as is said in his blessing (Jacob's blessing to Joseph 49:24. And his bow abode in strength (...and his arm were made strong), clear language speaks the Torah, and he thrust his hands in the ground.' (Tanhuma Vayeshev 33). Phallic connotations can well be read in the analogy seen in the biblical image of a strong bow and the Midrashic image of fingers thrust into the ground. In this, the rabbinical text advocates the logic that Joseph's strength is embodied in his overcoming a human passion that he felt, not the lack of it.

Sefer ha-yashar The 12th century *Sefer ha-yashar* presents a chronologically round story since Joseph's arrival at Egypt and his rise to power at the Pharaoh's palace.²⁴ It brings on the description of Potiphar's wife's passion aroused for Joseph, and including the women's party. *Sefer ha-yashar* repeats the story appearing in the *Tanhuma* with great elaboration of a folk tale. Potiphar's wife receives a name for the first time, Zulica, and her passion is initially described independently in terms of 'soul cleaving'.²⁵ Though later, her love sickness is described in terms of passion proper, soul cleaving is the highest biblical term for love in its both transcending and erotic aspects. Thus it evokes the primordial gender union (Gen. 2:24); erotic love (Gen. 34:3); humanistic love (Ruth 1:14) and spiritual love between God and a believer (Deut. 30:20).

²² My own translation to the Hebrew text *Midrash Yleamdeinu* (Mann), *Yalkut Torah* – Genesis 161 p.104, 72 (on Genesis 39:7).

²³ *Tanhuma*, Adolf Cohn Verlag und Aniquariat, Berlin, 1875, pp 91-94.

²⁴ *Seffer Hayashar*, ed. Joseph Dan, Bialik, Jerusalem, 1986.

²⁵ *Seffer Hayashar*, , 1986, p. 1999.

*And Zulica his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and saw that he was a beautiful youth and lovely of appearance and she desired his beauty in her heart. And her **soul clave** deeply unto Joseph and she enticed him day by day to be with her and she clad him with clothes every day; and she tempted him with all things every day but Joseph would not lift his eyes to look at his master's wife...and when she could not seduce him while her **soul clave** unto him she fell heavily ill for her passion for him.*

All the women of Egypt came to visit her and they said unto her, why are so thin and doing so poorly while you lack nothing; for are you not the wife of a mighty minister highly respected in the king's eyes, do you lack anything that your heart desires. She answered them saying, today it will be known to you that which you have witnessed to be the matter with me. She commanded her maids to put bread before all the women, and they did so. And she prepared a feast for them, and the women ate at 's house. And she gave Etrogim in their hands and she gave them knives to peel the Etrogim so as to eat them. And meanwhile she ordered to have Joseph dressed in splendid clothes and bring him before them. And Joseph came before them and the women saw Joseph and the women stared at Joseph and they would not shift their eyes away. And they all cut their hands with the knives that they held in their hands and the Etrogim were filled with their blood; but they did not know what they were doing and only stared to grasp Joseph's beauty and could not turn their eye lashes away. And she saw what they did and said unto them; what is the deed that you were doing, for I handed before you Etrogin to eat and you all have cut your hands. And all the women saw that their hands were filled with blood and their blood was flowing over their clothes...(Sefer ha-yashar p.200)

Sefer ha-yashar develops the story into a detailed text, which I bring here in a simplified narrative.

The compilation recounts two seduction scenes.

Potiphar's wife was turning ill with love and failed in her health. The inhabitants of the house asked her saying: why are you so thin and failing in your health while you lack nothing. To whom she answered that she knew not the cause of her illness. Her women friends and the women that loved her came to see her every day to talk to her. And to them she said that the reason must be her love for Joseph. Their advice was to seduce him and find an opportunity to detain him secretly, so that he might yield to her and release her of that lethal ordeal. All the while she kept failing in her health until she had no strength to stand on her feet.

Like preceding rabbinical texts, the exegesis expands the seduction scene.

(Seduction Scene 1). One day, Joseph when he was busy labouring in his master's service inside the house, she stealthily came and fell upon him by surprise. But Joseph overcame her and set her onto the ground. She wept bitterly and tearfully pleaded with him to requite her love. She entreated him to say whether he ever saw a more beautiful or better woman than her who was doing so poorly on his account, after all the honour she had bestowed on him; why, he would remove that death for why

should she die thus on his account. She ensured him that no harm will come unto him from his master. To this Joseph answered that she should cease to entreat him for he could not sin against his God and against his master who was so generous to entrust the entire house into his hand.

(Scene 2). On the day that the banks of the Nile were overflowing, all the inhabitants of Egypt celebrated with music, songs and dance according to their custom. Also Potiphar's house joined the festivity. Only Zulica stayed at home saying she was ill. And there was no one in the house but her. She went and dressed up in splendid clothes, with gems, silver and gold, and lit scent in the house and then sat at the opening of her quarter facing the way which Joseph would take when coming to do his obligation at home. And here he was coming from the field into the house to do his duty work for the master. When he saw all that he flinched. She said, what is it Joseph, come in to do your duty work. When he returned into the house and went to his place to do his master's work as usual, she came and stood before him with her splendid attire and the scent of her dresses were all around. She hurried and caught Joseph by his clothes saying, by the life of the king if you do not abide by my command you shall die today. With her other hand she hurried to fetch a knife beneath her clothes and held it against his throat. Greatly frightened of her, Joseph tried to run away. But she caught his clothes up front. And it happened that when he ran away in great fear, that a piece of the clothing that she was clutching, tore. Joseph left his garment with her and escaped outside for fear.

When she saw that the Joseph's clothes were torn, she greatly feared for her safety that a hearsay rumour might be spread against her on this account. Thus she conducted herself in cunning. She put off the garments that she had worn and changed back to her clothes. She kept Joseph's clothes with her and went to her sick bed where she had laid before everybody went to the Nile. Then she called a little boy that was left in the house to summon all the household men to whom she declared yelling: 'Look, that he whom your master had brought into the house, the Hebrew slave, for he came to lie with me. So it happened that as you all went out of the house, he saw that no one was in the house, he came and held me down to lie with me. I held his clothes and tore them, and I screamed against him in a loud voice. When I raised my voice, he feared for his self and he left his clothes before me and ran away'. The household staff said nothing, but were furious with Joseph, and went to relate to the master his wife's words. When the husband came to his house in fury, his wife called against him: 'What is the thing you have done to bring into my house a Hebrew slave, for he came today to have a laugh with me'.

Potiphar ordered Joseph to be flogged. As he was flagellated, Joseph bewailed, screamed and prayed to God, pleading his innocence. God then had endowed a ten-month baby with speech, and the boy opened his mouth and told the truth about the matter of affairs. Potiphar was embarrassed and ordered a stop to the beating. Potiphar then took Joseph to be tried by the priests who were the king's

judges. Joseph denied the allegation. Thus the priests ordered Joseph's garment to be brought, saying that if the tear be found in the front it proved that Potiphar's wife held him down to lie with her. When they saw that the tear was in the front they acquitted him of the deed that carried a death penalty but ordered that he should be put in prison for the hearsay rumour that was brought upon Potiphar's wife on his account. (Sefer ha-yashar ch. 14 pp 198-205).

Characteristics of Hebrew Exegesis in Sefer ha-yashar. In *Sefer ha-yashar*, Potiphar's wife offers her guests, bread and finally the fruit named *Etrog* which carries cultic connotations, (see below), and knives to eat the meal to peel or slice and eat the fruit. Eventually, they cut their fingers at the sight of Joseph's beauty when she calls Joseph to stand before them with splendid clothes. She receives a Persian name, Zulica, which appears for the first time in Hebrew exegesis in the *Sefer ha-yashar*. It is derived from post Koranic literature which romanticised Potiphar's wife.²⁶

Potiphar's wife repeats the same story to her husband, with a change of verb. To the servants she says that he came 'to lie with her', whereas in her speech to her husband she uses the verb to 'laugh with' *sahek* with. In this, she evokes the biblical Potiphar's wife saying: 'The Hebrew slave servant that which thou hast brought us came unto me to laugh (at) with me' Gen. (39:17). The biblical idiom 'to laugh with', or 'to make laugh' *sihek, le-sahek* (pattern *kitel*) which has a sexual connotation meaning to make love to, a foreplay, to fool around with, as in the original story in Gen. 38:16 and in Gen. 26:8: 'Abimelech king of the Philistines looked at a window, and saw, and behold, Isaac was laughing with (*sahe ket*) Rebecca his wife', translated into 'mock' and 'sport' respectively in King James Bible.

Hebrew Midrash texts repeat Potiphar's wife's claim that she raised a loud cry. The biblical Potiphar's wife stresses that she cried in a loud voice when Joseph had assaulted her, which is repeated three times, in verses Gen. 39:14,15, 18. It is recited in *Seffer Ha-Yahsar* too, which thus remains loyal to the biblical text. This refers to Duet. 22:24 which exempts a woman of blame if she is found to have committed illicit sex within the limits of the city but cried out, as it proves that it was a rape and that she resisted her rapist.

The tear in Joseph's clothes is found here up front, which shows the judges that she clutched to him. In the *Koran* the tables are reversed. The tear is found at the back, proving to the judges that she was trying to hold him as he was fleeing towards the door.

Yalkut Shomoni (13th century). Again the biblical text 'that she spake to Joseph day by day, that he hearkened not unto her' (Gen. 39:10) in the past continuum allows the exegetic compilation a space

²⁶ James L. Kugel, , *In Potiphar's House*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1990, p. 61; also noting J. Macdonald 'Joseph in the Qur'an and Muslim Commentary: A comparative Study' *The Muslim World* 46, 1956, pp 113-131, 207-124, Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, vol. 5 *Jewish Publication Society*, Philadelphia, 1925, p.224, note 113;

for numerous variants on the seduction scene. While one variant develops into a separable scene; another variant shows consistency as an episode and yet entails more than one interpretation of the manner it took place. All variants are closely associated.

1. One description relates that Potiphar's wife led Joseph from one room to the next until he stood before her bed, at the point of which he argues his way out by evoking his God.

2. A second addition mentions that he did not listen to her on account of his father's image that appeared before him and made him ashamed and he run away.

3. In the next scene no active role is given to Potiphar's wife; it is narrowed down the description of Joseph entering Potiphar's wife's chamber for 'the second time' (*Shimoni's* words). On this occasion, Joseph is hindered by a paternal authority higher than his father, that of God. God threatens Joseph that if he touches Potiphar's wife He will cast down the 'drinking stone' and destroy the world. The mythical 'drinking stone' or 'drinking rock' is associated with the primordial water held down by God's power with the Creation (Gen.1:2). The 'drinking stone' is essentially a feminine figuration. In this text, the drinking stone is turned into a power yoked to control masculinity by God, like the Creator God who hovers over the primordial water in Genesis 1:2. However, in the biblical verse God's spirit appears in female third person and so is His object of suppression *maim*, the primordial water.

4. After that variant scene, Potiphar's wife is described to change clothes, morning and evening, his clothes or hers. (*Yalkut Shimoni, Va-Yeshev 53*); and giving him a thousand silver coins, but he would not hearken to her.

5. In the exegesis on the phrase 'he came to attend to his affair', (Gen. 39:11; *Yalkut Shimoni Va-Yeshev 53*), the *Yalkut* allows variants on the seduction scene to replenish the bare biblical verse, bringing interpretations of various commentators. In this detail completion the reader is provided with more variations on the seduction scene:

5.a. One rabbi repeats the appearance his father's images, the sight that cools Joseph's blood (see above *Genesis Rabba, Tanhuma*);

5.b. another rabbi repeats that his mother's image appeared before him (*Genesis Rabba*).

5.c. Another variant mentions that he came home to attend to his affair, during the festivity of the Nile, meaning to satisfy his own need for her. In this exegesis, the *Yalkut* turns Joseph into the only actant subject, on which occasion God Himself was the one who came embodied in the image of Jacob, Joseph's father, which cooled Joseph down (*Yalkut Va-Yeshev 53*).

Midrash ha-Gadol (14th century). In classical rabbinic intertextuality, the details are repeated in this late medieval exegesis while replenished. Compiling preceding texts, it adds its own expansion and

variation on the same matrix. *Midrash ha-Gadol* evokes the sexual euphemism of Joseph thrusting his ten fingers into the ground in the heat of his passion (instead of his penis...) as appearing in *Tanhuma* (Vayeshev 33) and *Yalkut Shimoni* (Vayeshev 39). *Midrash ha-Gadol* adds its own exegesis onto the preceding ones, bringing the interpretation of a certain rabbi Isaac who says that as Joseph was thrusting his fingers into the ground, his semen spilled through his finger nails (*Midrash Ha-Gadol* Vayeshev 39:15).

In *Midrash Hagadol*, Genesis, (Triest), 14th C.E, Potiphar's wife arranges for a women's party, as found in *Tanhuma* and *Sefer ha-yashar*. However, in this text she offers her guest ladies bread and meat, not fruit. Eventually they cut themselves with their knives, astonished at Joseph's beauty when he is called to stand before them. This text is considered to have driven its source, from *Tanhuma*, independently of the *Koran*, according to Louis Ginzberg.²⁷

The Fruit; the *Etrog* The *Tanhuma* and *Sefer ha-yashar* relate that Potiphar's wife offered her women guests fruit named *Etrog* and knives to eat it. Translations replace it incorrectly with citrons – which makes little sense as it is an inedible fruit; or oranges which is a poor replacement.

The appearance of the *Etrog* in the stories of Joseph may carry multiple meanings. The *Etrog*, known today as a cultic fruit of Jewish Feast of Tabernacle is as inedible. The fruit *Etrog* bears multiple connotations in the Rabbinical texts. Inconsistency among the sources concerning the *Etrog* suggests a discrepancy between a legendary fruit, a ritual fruit and an actual fruit.

The word *Etrog* does not appear in the Hebrew Bible. *Etrog* is the Aramaic word for the Hebrew word *hadar* meaning loveliness or splendour. The fruit *Etrog* is accordingly translated from the Hebrew word *Perri Hadar*, fruit of loveliness or beauty. The conventional and known application of the *Etrog* is found in the ritual of the Sukkoth, the Feast of Tabernacle. Here *Etrog* refers back to the command in Leviticus 23:40 to make an offer of fruit of a tree of beauty, *peri hadar*. King James translates it into: 'fruit of a goodly tree'. The *Etrog* according to *Leviticus Rabba*, (Margaliot) 5th C.E, section 30, confers that *Etrog* implies a tree and fruit which equal each other in taste and beauty. This means that for *Leviticus Rabba* the *Etrog* is an edible fruit. Quoting the Aramaic translation to the Bible, *Onkelos* (3rd AE), *Leviticus Rabba* (Vilna), 30:8) says that *hadar* it is a tree growing on water. In the *Babylonian Talmud*, (6th C.E), Sukkah 35:1, the writer refers to the *Etrog* as a fruit growing on water. It is thus confers that *Etrog*, being a fruit of beauty could refer to all fruit generically, as all fruit trees produce fruit of beauty. *Talmud Jerushalmi* Sukka 3:53 constitutes that *Etrog* is that of which both tree and fruit are splendid. *Rashi* (11th C.E) 23:40, referring to Leviticus 23:40 still

²⁷ Louis Ginzberg, 1910, p.224 note 118

interprets that *Etrog* is a fruit the taste of which equal to splendour of its tree. However, *Rashi* in *Sokkah* 35:1, refers to the *Etrog* as an offer fruit forbidden for consumption yet allowed and meant for mere enjoyment, namely for its scent and pleasant shape.

Tosfta, shabat 88:1 (2nd C.E) refers to *Etrog* as the fruit *tapuah* relying Song of Songs 7:8 ‘the scent of thy breath likens to apples’. The biblical word *tapuah* may not be the fruit known today as apple into which it has translated in European languages. Interestingly, a parallel Hebrew exegesis *Chronicles of Yerahmeél*, (13th C.E) reintroduces the same episode incorporating the conventional apples as the treat at the women’s party: ‘when they started peeling their apples they all cut their hands since they were so much captivated with Joseph’s beauty that they could not take their eyes off him’.²⁸

The fruit *Etrog* as still known today in the Feast of Tabernacle appears to be a citric fruit characterised by a pleasant scent and beautiful shape, solely meant for decoration of the tent of the *Sukkah*. Its breast like shape ends with a nipple shape, and is so called after this feature. This ritual fruit as it is known today is conventionally inedible.²⁹

Here one finds the first discrepancy between the *Etrog* fruit in Joseph’s midrashic Hebrew stories and the citric inedible *Etrog* of the ritual feast. In Hebrew text, Potiphar’s wife hands her women guests an edible fruit, which is the point of the story.

The Legendary *Etrog*. At this point one turns to a survey of the legendary fruit *Etrog*. As seen above, rabbinical literature offers various versions in which the *Etrog* is a fruit of exquisite beauty and taste, but also a ritual offer fruit. *Genesis Rabba* 15, 4th C.E. , mythifies the *Etrog* into a high mimetic level and relates it to the Eden story. In *Genesis Rabba* 15 one finds Genesis 3:7 quoted, ‘and the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable’. Thus *Genesis Rabba* concludes that as *Etrog* refers to both the fruit and the tree being equally splendid and consumable, literally saying edible, the fruit of the Garden of Eden described in these terms must be *Etrog*.³⁰

The *Etrog* can be thus found linked with the predestined pains of pregnancy and labour and the primordial sin of the first woman in a 16th century Midrash compilation in Yiddish *Tzenah u-Reenah*³¹. This most popular Midrash has been known also as the Women’s Bible intended for children, simple-minded folk and women who could not read Hebrew exegesis nor the Bible proper. *Tzenah u-Reenah* relates the legend of the *Etrog* of Eden to rite of a folk-anthropological character practised by women only. In this medieval rite, Jewish women at the end of the Tabernacle Feast would bite the dry stub of the *Etrog* (the inedible ritual citric *Etrog*). In doing so they would pose the query. Would not Eve have

²⁸ M. Caster, *The Chronicles of Jerahmeel*, reprint, Haim Schwarzbaum, Ktav, 1971, p. 94.

²⁹ I did come once across an old Moroccan recipe in a newspaper of an *Etrog* marmalade.

³⁰ Other queries in the same section suggest that the forbidden fruit of Eden may have been grapes or figs.

³¹ Jacob Ben Isaac, *Zeenah u-Reenah*,. Kaftor vaFerakh, Brooklyn, 1949

eaten from the tree of knowledge, all women would not have fallen into such danger that may bring them their death. And thus if I (the praying woman) had been in the Garden of Eden (in the primordial mother's stead) I would have derived as little pleasure of the forbidden (edible and delicious) fruit as I derive presently from its inedible edge of the *Etrog*, thus praying to God for an easy pregnancy and delivery.³²

Tanhuma and *Sefer ha-yashar* that describe a fruit as the treat given at the Egyptian ladies' party retain the word *Etrog*, implying an edible fruit, which indicates intertextual contingency between Hebrew texts. The *Etrog* in these texts evokes both the legendary and the ceremonial connotations. In this, the ladies' party ending with the women cutting their hands and bleeding over it all calls forth traces of folk tale and myth. The *Etrog* also denotes any beautiful fruit that one can imagine. All this opens a space for fantasy and interpretations as to the meaning of the fruit in the story. At the conference, which led me to this survey (see opening) I remembered that the fruit at Potiphar's wife women's party were peaches. My imagination had carried me off it seemed. This may show that I am a careless scholar, or that the text opened its lines for interpretations.

The Koran. The text offered by the Koran remains loyal to Hebrew exegetic means in its replenishing details in the biblical text, and actualising it in time, place and culture. The Koran relates the following:

...His master's wife sought to seduce him. She bolted the doors and said; 'Come'. "Allah forbid!" he replied. 'My Lord has treated me with kindness. Wrongdoers never prosper.' She made for him, and he himself would have yielded to her had he not been shown a veritable sign by his Lord. Thus we ward off from him indecency and evil, for he was one of our faithful servants. He raced to the door, but as she clung to him she tore his shirt from behind... At the door they met her husband. She cried: 'Shall not the man who sought to violate your wife be thrown into prison or sternly punished?' Joseph said: 'It was she who sought to seduce me.' ...And when her husband saw Joseph's shirt rent from behind, he said to her: 'this is one of your tricks. Your cunning is great indeed! Joseph, say no more about this. Woman, ask pardon for your sin. You have done wrong'.

In the city women were saying: 'The Prince's wife has sought to seduce her servant. She has conceived passion for him. It is clear that she went astray.' When she heard of their intrigues, she invited them to a banquet at her house. To each she gave a knife, and ordered Joseph to present himself before them. When they saw him they were amazed at him and cut their hands, exclaiming: 'Allah preserve us! This is no mortal, but a gracious angel.'

³²Jacob ben Isaac, *Zeenah u-Reenah*, Kaftor vaFerakh, Brooklyn, 1949, p.20, Yiddish. The book has been translated into German by Bertha Pappenheim, *Zeenah u-Reenah*. Frauenbibel. Uebersetzung und Auslegung des Pentateuch von Jacob Ben Isaac aus Janow. Nach dem Juedisch-deutschen bearbeitet. Frankfurt a. M. 1930. Part I only: Bereschit, erstes Buch Moses.

*'This is the man,' she said, 'on whose account you reproach me. I sought to seduce him, but he was unyielding. If he declines to do my bidding, he shall be thrown into prison and held in scorn'. (Koran, Sura 12 vv 24-32).*³³

The story of the women's party and its sources. Standing on its own, the Assembly of Ladies may relate to the template of the biblical Song of Songs in which the female lover shares with lady friends the sickness of love (Song of Song 5:9). In another passage the collective groups of women friends come forth with challenging the infatuated woman to attest to the merits of her lover: 'What is thy beloved more than another beloved' (Song of Songs 5:8). This introduces a description of a masculine beauty after a classical love poem. The Hebrew verb 'see' which Potiphar's wife uses generically in Gen. 39:14 is traced in the Song of Songs in feminine imperative plural: '*Go forth and see (behold), O daughter of Zion...*'³⁴ In all this one may read masculine sexuality objectified and exhibited before the eyes of adoring group of women.

Another intertext may be found in the Book of Esther in which Queen Vashti throws a feast for women only (Esther 1:9) parallel to the feast Persian King organises for his male friends. The male feast of the king was supposed to culminate in exhibiting the feminine beauty of the Queen before the male guests. In Potiphar's wife's party, the tables are turned; the socially superior woman exhibits the sexual beauty of a socially inferior man.

The particular detail of the Potiphar's wife's women's party appears in Jewish writing in early compilation *Tanhuma* (Warshaw) *Vayshev*, 8,25 (5) also known as *Midrash Yelamdenu* (Mann). These Misrahim texts are believed to rely on earlier rabbinical texts. *Tanhuma's* suggested date of editing moves between 8th to 9th century.³⁵ However rules of editing and originality of those periods were looser than ours. According to Louis Ginzberg, as *Tanchuma* opens with *yelamdeinu rabeinu*, (our teachers teach that,) the text refers to earlier Hebrew sources and was created independently of the Koran.³⁶

The Koranic story however is recorded to have been edited earlier in the seventh century. Both early compilations, the Hebrew *Tanhuma* and the *Koran* may have survived variants of oral tradition, and thus may have related to a cycle or to a tradition of a master's wife's love to her servant.³⁷ The Jewish early origin of the episode of the women's party could have been drawn from the Koran, edited

³³ *The Koran*, Tran. N.J. Dawood, Penguin Books, Bungay, Suffolk, Great Britain, 1956, 1983.

³⁴ Richard N. Soulen, 'The wasf of the Song of Songs and Hermeneutic', in ed. A. Brenner, *Feminsit Companion to The Song of Songs*, Sheffield, Sheffield, 1993, pp. 214-225.

³⁵ See above

³⁶ Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1910, 224 note 118.

³⁷ Robert Graves and Raphael Patai in *The Hebrew Myth*, 1963, mention a number of variants on stories of incest in which the male lover repels an incestuous woman: the earliest can be seen in the Egyptian 'Tale of Two Brothers'. Greek myths bring the tales of Biadice and Phrixus (originally Canaanite), Antea and Bellerophon, and Phaedra and Hippolytus. However, the story about the eunuch Cambabus that I favoured however (see above), is edited in Benko's book *The Virgin Goddess*, without the analogy to Potiphar's wife, Stephen Benko, *The Virgin Goddess*, Brill, Leiden, New York, Koln, 1993, pp 71-72.

around the years 644-656. However, the Koran could also derive its story from Jewish texts lost to us, or on the other hand, from orally transmitted stories. According to Ginzberg, Potiphar's wife's story was already consolidated in the Hebrew Bible and *Testament of Joseph* of the first to second century AE.³⁸ These were recycled and incorporated in later medieval books, *Tanhuma* 8th-9th and *Sefer ha-yashar*, 11th-12th both of which include the women's feast.

In *Sefer ha-yashar* Potiphar's wife's appears with the Persian name, Zulica which is derived from post-Koran literature of romantic nature. The Koran proper refers to her with anonymous titles, and she is still 'the wife of', similar to the female protagonist in Hebrew Bible. She is 'his wife', 'his master's wife' to Joseph, and 'the Prince's wife' for the women of the city. *Koran* retains the biblical title Master's wife, which may show that it derived its source directly from the biblical text and not from *Midrash* as the Jewish texts would often entitle her Potiphar's wife.

However, we can detect undeniable similarities between Joseph in the Koran who would have yielded but was hindered by a sign from Allah and Joseph in *Bereshit Rabba* who saw a sign from his father, mother and aunt. The later *Yalkut Shimoni* translates the domestic image into a divine revelation in disguise similar to the *Koran*. The *Koranic* narrative structure is consistent with both the biblical text and its extended midrash texts. The Assembly of the Ladies seems an additional innovation; and yet it is difficult to prove whether the *Tanhuma* nourished on the Koran or vice versa, or that both relied on some oral tradition.

The issue of influence and precedence has been disputed since the 19th century and has remained unresolved.³⁹ As a compromise, my comparative discussion will treat the both Koran and the *Tanhuma* as parallel end-production within the context of this article.⁴⁰

The Jewish Zulica . A Jewish Moroccan legend about a certain Jewish maiden recycles a similar story in an inverted mirror: the chaste Jewish youth is a maiden while the powerful foreigner who wishes to seduce her is a Muslim Prince. The legend is related to the beginning of the 19th century, and yet it bears a typology of an oral folk tale. The Jewish heroine is known among the Moroccan Jews as Lala Zulica or Lala Sol (Lala meaning a lady in Berber) and is an example of a Jewish maiden who preferred death to marriage outside her religion. Stories praise her beauty. A Muslim family with the purpose in mind to force her into marriage with their son abducted her. Another version relates that the Sultan's son passionately fell in love with her, and offered her the pleasures of his palace and a high social state by a royal marriage . However, she resisted and chose death instead. In every version of the legend, the Jewess prefers death and is endowed with the veneration of Jews who died for their belief, *Kiddush*

³⁸ Louis Ginzberg, 1910, p.224 note 118

³⁹ James L. Kugel, *In Potiphar's House*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1990, pp 33-35

⁴⁰ James L. Kugel dedicates an entire chapter on the various Jewish midrashs on the Assembly of Ladies, James L. Kugel, 1993, pp 28-65.

Hashem, a martyr's death for a Jewish cause.⁴¹ Religious martyrdom and virginal martyrdom both hued with an ethnic touch elevated to the status of *Keddosha*, a female Jewish saint. As a virginal martyr and a female righteous, capable of engineering a miracle, Zulica is considered a protecting saint patron of baby daughters and young girls. Mothers come to pray by her gravesite especially after a death of a female child. At nights the *Shekhina*, the feminine spirit of God is seen to descend on the grave.⁴² Similarities are persistent. In the Jewish folk hagiography, Zulica surfaces as a female transformation of the Hebrew Joseph. Both Joseph and the Jewish Zulica protect their virginity and Jewish belief, confronting an erotic adversary of the privileged class who in addition belongs to another ethnic and religious group. Both resist not only erotic seduction but also the temptation of social and economic privileges relying on their Jewish codes of belief and rules of sexuality, which clash with those of their erotic adversaries.

The biblical text and its extended midrash texts all stress the presence of divinity accompanying Joseph. Based on *Rashi*, the 11th century rabbinical exegesis, *Zena u-Rena* (1601 CE), the Yiddish compilation of rabbinical texts, writes that Joseph is endowed with a cloud that descends on him to prove to the Egyptians that God is with him.⁴³ Divinity as a cloud is recurrent a biblical image as in Numbers 9:18: 'As long as the cloud abode upon the tabernacle they rested in their tents'. In the legend of Jewish saint Zulica we find the *Shekhina* descending on the saint's grave at nights.

Cultural Templates on Levels of Generation and Presentation

In a modest survey on formulaic theories, Susan Witting conflates various theories of level structures. She formulates that the one belongs to the level of presentation, and the other to the level of generation.⁴⁴ One is thus engaged with the question how things are generated, or how things are presented. Following Susan Witting's basic definition, we are on the level of generation when the question posed is that of how a text is generated. When we are concerned with the question how a text is presented, the level is that of presentation.⁴⁵ On the level of generation, everything may be formulaic and concentrated in subliminal form. On the level of presentation a process of choice with takes place with regard to selection and combination. On this level of presentation, everything is textually bound and inter-textually related. But intertextual factors may influence level of generation as well. The simplified thesis of two levels, generation and presentation, allows elements such as metaphor, ideology, cultural ideas, time aspect and anything else to be reviewed on both levels without

⁴¹ Isachar Ben-Ami, 1984, pp 577-581.

⁴² Issachar Ben-Ami, 1984, p.581.

⁴³ Rashi, Vayeshev; *ZenaRena* Vayeshev p. 211, Kaftor vaFerakh, Brooklyn New York, 1949, p. 211.

⁴⁴ Susan Witting, 'Theories of Formulaic Narrative', *Semeia* pp 65-90.

⁴⁵ Susan Witting, 'Theories of Formulaic Narrative', *Semeia* 5 pp 65-90.

confusion. Both factors are interrelated. Accordingly, cultural templates, mythical metaphoric elements or formulaic subliminal patterns will be generated in from within the deep level into the surface level of the text by way of presentation. Generation will produce variants on the synchronic level. Reverting to the presentation of these variants back to their generative level will deduce the formulaic constructs that paradigmatically associate and group them.

On the level of generation, I will thus be looking for the cultural and mythical templates that have generated the text. On the level of presentation, I will be looking for characteristics revealed diachronically. The characteristics may show only a residual formulaic structure on the level of presentation of a text. Fragmental representation may thus show a selective choice of characteristics out of a pattern, which would be proven to be such, only on the generation level. A synchronic analysis can reveal the coherent generative matrix, which answers the coherent pattern. In this way, I may be able to prove that such characteristics sustain a deep cultural idea or a mythical template, and that these templates have survived both on the level of presentation and on that of generation.

Tension and Coexistence of Cultural Patterns. I would like to refer back to the *Koran* in order to introduce the discussion on the cultural template of alternative rules of sexuality.

The *Koran* evokes a number of striking elements that may alert a resistant reader. A number of crucial queries can be asked. Why should the adulterous wife go unpunished in the *Koran* in which the husband 'discovers' his wife's treachery and deceit towards both Joseph and himself. In this detail the *Koran* deviates from both the biblical texts and the Hebrew expanded exegeses, with the exception of *Sefer ha-yashar* in which it is proven that Potiphar's wife committed falsehood. His imprisonment is thus left ambiguous the *Koran* and is derogative of his judges: 'Yet in spite the evidence they had seen (the torn garment) the Egyptians thought it right to jail him for a time' (*Koran* p. 41)

If the husband found his wife guilty, why should Joseph be punished? If the Wife in the *Koran* goes to the extent of hiding her passion and falsely accusing Joseph for fear of her husband and for society, what is the meaning of her speech to her fellow women? In this she claims that if Joseph does not yield to her he will be subject to imprisonment and shame. In this Potiphar's wife implies that a sexual refusal to her, is Joseph's liability.

The text of the *Koran* seems to present contradictory patterns. In the first pattern, a woman's sexual passion is subject to suppression, rebuke and eventual punishment by her husband who owns it, as both the unyielding lover Joseph and the husband confirm. In the second pattern, a woman's passion is not only recognised but must be requited, or face public shame; public shaming being equivalent to punishment in such cultures.

Residual Cultural Template. The story attests a paradox that contradictory socio-cultural templates may coexist side by side. This reminds us of the hybrid character of the Hebrew Bible itself. Both the

Koran and *Tanhuma* expose stamps of contradicting cultural patterns. On the one hand, the texts witnesses to the strict patriarchal sexual rules known to have been lethal to adulterous women and men as well. On the other hand, residual templates surface alternative rules of feminine sexuality that oppose these rules. The women's party speaks for the latter.

A number of details can be deconstructed and isolated. There is evidence of women's collectivity operating on a level parallel to that of the patriarchal circles. The women have their gatherings, exchange information with each other, visit the sick, lend advice on amorous and marital issues during exclusively women assemblies, share meals and show modes of values and judgement of their own. During the women's banquet, Potiphar's wife exhibits Joseph's masculine beauty before her women friends as her own and she demands to be satisfied. One may recall that in the Book of Esther, King Ahasuerus orders to have his wife's beauty displayed before his all-men's feast (Esther 1:11); while the queen throws a party exclusively for women as well, the description of which is lacking. In the case of Ahasuerus and Potiphar's wife both respective subjects perceive the sexuality of the other as their possession. In both cases refusal is met with reprisal by the mightier possessor. In our context, it is interesting that a woman shows the same attitude as that of a patriarchal master. This attests to a logical fact that women of older cultures within a hierarchical structure may have been shown to be inferior to men of their own rank, but superior in relation to men of ranks lower to their own. As a punishment for refusing her, Potiphar's wife threatens with jail; but interestingly, she also threatens Joseph with shame and scorn, to come unto him not unto herself, according to the *Koran*. Shame would befall him possibly by the same women's assembly.

In a later scene, there is a tear in the garment of the unyielding lover who has failed to answer his hostess' sexuality, which then becomes an object of public shame in the first place and then an object of accusation. The tear is recounted in the *Koran* and *Sefer ha-yashar*. In other texts including the biblical one, it is a garment proper left in the woman's hand. The two scenes, the women's party and the garment left in the woman's hand, seem separable. However, my purpose is to show that these details, seemingly fragmental, synchronically harbour a consistent cultural template.

The Cultural Template Proper. In his book *Sex and Family in the Bible and the Middle East*, Raphael Patai offers a survey of customs and tradition concerning sexuality in the Bible and Ancient Middle East.⁴⁶ Raphael Patai first brings to the fore the traditional viewpoint that patriarchal hospitality was so highly regarded that it would override considerations of sexual chastity. The guest's safety was taken into account to the extent of sacrificing the chastity of one's virginal daughters as

⁴⁶ Raphael Patai, *Sex and Family in the Bible and the Middle East*, Dolphin Books, Doubleday & Company, Garden City, New York, 1959, pp139-145.

shown in Lot's story in Genesis 19 and that of one's wife and virginal daughter as presented in Judges 19 when the protection and honour of one's guest were at stake.⁴⁷

However, hospitality according to Patai's survey may include a guest's other needs.⁴⁸ The satisfaction of the guest being part of the host's honour, a guest's neglect is perceived as the host's liability. Reports of medieval travellers and 19th century researches of tribal life recount that hospitality may include sexual gratification. The frequency of the habit shows it to be a custom in its own right, defined as sexual hospitality, being at the same time part of the general concept of hospitality. The origin of the custom is rooted in pre-Islamic tradition surviving through the Islamic era and practised by tribes from Yemen through Arabia, North Africa, Egypt to Afghanistan. In some tribes it would concern the unmarried daughters, in other tribes only married women would practise it. In some tribes the woman would be led to the guest by her relative, a brother or husband. In other areas the woman would look for her guest herself. The woman would then entertain the guest initiating the custom by rubbing his feet with butter.⁴⁹ According to these data, a deep cultic conviction is attached to the custom. The tribes who promote it believe that if they fail to perform the rite, nature will show its displeasure by way of a catastrophe.

Certain habits recorded amongst the tribes of Arabia could juxtapose this tribal cult with matriarchal aspects. The guest must sleep with the hostess, disregarding her age or appearance. The guest would leave a token with the woman, by which she may claim his parenthood if she conceives. If the guest is found agreeable to the hostess, he will be discharged with honour, and the host would furnish him with provision for his further journey. If however, the guest fails to satisfy or answer the hostess' wishes and need, she would leave a tear in his garment. Once the women folk see a missing part in the guest's clothing, he will be shamed and chased away by the tribe's women and children with yells of scorn.⁵⁰ Data about sexual hospitality relativise stories like Lot and the mistress of Gibeon, according to Patai.⁵¹ As Patai leaves the reader here with no further elaboration, I will take his position from here onwards. In addition to Patai's survey mentioned above⁵², researches of folkloristic saint cults in the Middle East record folk seasonal feasts that may waive sexual taboos and limitations. Such festivities are usually conducted out of doors in natural sites that may be attributed to some saintly figure, a seasonal event or a sacred monument. The festivities carry pre-Islamic and pagan character of ecstatic nature, and are known as *Zaira* among the Arabs. Adapted festivities of similar nature are called also *Hillula* though the word *Zaira* is also popular. These events are popularly visited in modern Israel of today.

⁴⁷ *ibid*

⁴⁸ *ibid*

⁴⁹ Raphael Patai, 1959, p.143.

⁵⁰ Raphael Patai, 1959, p. 140.

⁵¹ Raphael Patai, 1959, p. 139.

⁵² Raphael Patai, 1959, p. 139-145

During such festivities, food and wine are served in abundance. In both communities, animals are offered on holy sites and often their blood is smeared on the participants' hands or ailing part of body for cure, as part of the cult. Ecstatic dancing and chanting follows. The Muslim *Zaira* erases gender segregation, which is unbelievable for communities in which rules of sexuality might prove lethal for adulterous woman or unmarried daughters. In seasonal feasts like the *Zaira*, women practise cultic sexuality with participants outside matrimonial rules. They offer themselves freely to guests, who are not allowed to refuse them; likewise they cannot refuse any. It is believed that relaxing sexual segregation would be unusual for the Jewish feasts.⁵³ However, an invoice of a certain Rabbi Mashash presumably belonging to last century (date is not given in my source) strongly speaks against the Jewish *Zaira* complaining that among other reckless habits like drinking, laws concerning married women are transgressed.⁵⁴

Biblical connotation of cultic sexuality associated with such festivity can be seen in the fragment mentioned in the *Seffer Ha-Yasha* describing Sodom: '*In their land they had a vast valley, about a day and half away, rich with brooks of water and many pastures over the water. Four days a year, all the people of Sodom go there, they and their wives and their sons and all that is theirs, to go out with drums and dances. And during their feasting, they would get hold of each other's wife, and of each other's virgin daughter, and abuse them and lie with them. Each man saw his wife and his daughter in the hand of his fellow man, and would say nothing. And this they would do from morning till evening. After that each man would go back to his home and each woman to her tent in the evening; this is what they would do always four days a year.* (*Sefer ha-yashar* p.100).

The uniqueness of this text is perceived in the formulation of Sodom's sins. Their iniquity receives the form of a cultic custom by two characteristics in the Hebrew texts. The first one is a festivity characterised by dancing with drums out of doors (Jephtah's daughter, Judges 11:34; Miriam and the Israelite women, Ex. 15:20 and the women in I Sam. 18:6). The second is a customary rite of four days a year (Judges 1:40). It is worth our while to notify that in the Hebrew Bible going out with dancing and tapping on drums seems to be classical of women's festivity. *Sefer ha-yashar* thus epitomises a yearly four-day custom of going out into nature. The medieval text may have thus survived the Israelite Ancient custom of seasonal cult of an ecstatic nature. This may be the fact that Midrashic texts add the festivity of the Nile to scenes of seduction in Joseph's and Wife's erotic encounter.⁵⁵

⁵³ Ben-Ami, 1984, p. 205.

⁵⁴ Ben-Ami, 1984, p.205.

⁵⁵ Robert Graves and Raphael Patai, *The Hebrew Myths*, Cassell, London, 1963, note 3 page 256: Possible festivities could be either 'The Reception of the Nile' also entitled 'The Night that Isis Weeps' on 20 June, or mid July New Year Festival celebrating the re-appearance of Sirius, at the time that the Nile reaches its highest flood level.

It is also possible that *Sefer ha-yashar* may reflect the existence of such cultic festivity still practised in contemporary medieval Middle East, which is the opinion of Robert Graves and Raphael Patai. In *The Hebrew Myths*, Robert Graves and Raphael Patai introduce contemporary documentation that provides parallel recounting of festivities involving cultic sexuality in South Arabia, or a similar feast entitled *Tuareg* in the Sahara. The *Hebrew Myths* brings the journals of Yaqut Al-Rumi, 1179-1229, a Geographer, which shows respective relationship to customs of Ancient as well as Medieval Middle East. Yaqut Al-Rumi relates the following:

'The custom there are those of Ancient Arabs. Though good people, they have rough and repulsive customs, which explain their freedom from jealousy. At night, their women go outside the town and entertain such men who are not forbidden to them, sporting with them for the greater part of the night: a man pays no heed when he sees his wife, his sister, mother or father's sister in a neighbour's arms; but himself seeks some other mate and is entertained by her as though she were his wife'.⁵⁶

Yaqut Al-Rumi, endows the rabbinical compilations with anthropological evidences. *Sefer ha-yashar's* folkloristic exegesis and Yaqut Al-Rumi's data mutually reinforce their recounting of custom of alternative rules of sexuality.

Sacred Sexuality and Baptism in Blood, Pain and Mutilation The banquet offered by Potiphar's wife can be perceived as a residual preliminary of cultic group-activity. Pleasure of food, erotic adoration and pain intermingle turning into a collective mutilation of guests cutting their fingers with eating knives. Their blood mingles with food or fruit in a moment of collective erotic ecstasy. The mutilation of fingers can be paradigmatically linked with cultic emasculation that under-girdles the masculine figures in the story. In this, a woman's finger becomes euphemism for a phallic symbol, being feminised and displaced. In her lecture mentioned above, Mieke Bal suggests that the finger-cutting confers 'emotional defloration' which is penetrated by Potiphar's wife shared experience.⁵⁷ I would adopt Bal's point here, not so as to contradict it but to direct it to my point of sexual euphemism proper and cultic sexuality. In this case, the knives would become permuted euphemism for phallic penetration and vaginal bleeding; and would denote erotic ecstasy. On the other hand it can denote mutilation of female sexual organs common in the Middle East and Africa, and would denote in this case sexual suppression and mutilation. (Certain mutilations are still performed on both genders in the Middle East and Africa for socio-cultic reasons).

Here, I would rely on Albert .B. Lord's assumption that biblical stories harbour a core of myths of gods, that were generated into narrative presentations about semi-gods, then divinely called human-

⁵⁶ Robert Graves and Raphael Patai, *The Hebrew Myths*, Cassell, London, 1963, p. 169.

⁵⁷ Published *Lectio Difficilior* 2/2000, ESWTR electronic publication

beings.⁵⁸ Adopting this assumption, one could see Potiphar's wife as a transformation of a goddess, mimetically diminishing from a goddess of Eros to a priestess of Love, and from a priestess to a woman in love --- to whom the feminine group of worshipers collectively bring a sexual offer or perform an ecstatic rite mingling eroticism with self inflicting wounds. Note that the guests in the *Koran* exclaim: '*Allah preserve us! This is no mortal, but a gracious angel.*' In this we may detect a theme of mythical mimesis which reinforces motifs of mutilation and ecstasy. In a sublime nutshell, the biblical text materialises Eros of high mimesis already in Potiphar's wife's crude sexuality. The fact that exegesis developed such diverse variants shows that the meagre biblical text already conceals more than one layer. Both the *Koran* and the *Tanhuma* that processed the story in details bring to the fore the deductive message of Islam and Judaism while paradoxically preserve the a-moral and mythical elements. Both texts share a derogative policy towards cults associated with pre-Judaic and pre-Islamic cultures. Potiphar's wife and her women friends posit a proto-type of the alienated cults; the women's party embodies the characteristics of their rites. Nevertheless, the alienated proto-type receives attention to such an extent, that sympathy and repulsion ambiguously permute.

In his book *The Virgin Goddess*, Stephen Benko, provides readers with complementary data of such cults. Cults in Little Asia might show associated roots to the Middle Eastern seasonal feasts.⁵⁹ In *De Civitate Dei* 2:26, Augustine records rites of cultic sexuality at ceremonies in honour of the virgin goddess Caelestis, still massively attended in the year 375 CE.⁶⁰ Those rites have been generally defined as cultic prostitution. In accordance with the aim of this article, I would argue that such rites are better defined as sacred sexuality; and they can be separated from prostitution, which is economical. Cultic sexual rites of Venus, Dea Syria, or Aphrodite were all defined as cultic prostitution. However, Herodotus (Histories 1.999) states two facts concerning sexual rites of Aphrodite in Babylon. In the first place it was considered a sacred obligation to the goddess of love and secondly, both and rich women abided by it.⁶¹ Such cults were especially predominant in festivities like those of Dionysus and Cybele. Women who otherwise would be bound to a restraint life style would welcome such a seasonally festival in which sexual restraints were temporarily ignored.⁶² This interlinks us with the Middle East festivities mentioned above. Thus Stephen Benko concludes from these data that the kinds of prostitution for the purpose of collecting a dowry were undertaken on one's private initiative. Here, he defines cultic sexuality as sacred intercourse, which supports the purpose of this survey.

⁵⁸ Albert B. Lord, 'Patterns of Lives of the Patriarchs from Abraham to Samson and Samuel', in ed. Susan Niditch, *Text and Tradition, The Hebrew Bible and Folklore*, Scholar Press, Atlanta Georgia, 1990, p. 8.

⁵⁹ Stephen Benko, *The Virgin Goddess*, Brill, Leiden, New York, Koln, 1993.

⁶⁰ Stephen Benko, 1993, pp 71-72, 36-37.

⁶¹ Stephen Benko, 1993, p. 39.

⁶² Stephen Benko, 1993, p. 66.

With the terms like sacred intercourse, Stephen Benko provides me with an appropriate concept. Sacred intercourse functioned as a sympathetic magic, which appeals to the gods to take interest in the human, in a similar way that any other offer would. Such cultic sexuality would function as a sympathetic rite to re-enact the primordial harmony in which the sexes, heaven and earth, upper water and lower water and all the elements were united in 'harmonious' unity before differentiation. By re-enacting the primordial sexual union, man would achieve a mystical union with the gods.⁶³ Sacred intercourse was believed to be the means to magically influence powers of nature; to enhance fertility of man, animals and vegetation and also restore the same primordial state of Golden time back on earth in which no toil, sickness or death did not exist.

This mythical worldview is closely associated with rites of baptism of blood and cultic mutilation. Like the rites of unleashed sexuality, rites of emasculating and mutilation aim at reaching a mystical union by means ecstatic state, considered to connect the soul to the metaphysical world. In baptism in blood and in mutilation, man is believed to mystically unite with the primordial undifferentiated state, in which heaven and earth were one, and the sexes were one flesh. *Dies Sanguinis*, (Day of Blood) and *Taurobolium* take the form of besmearing oneself with blood-offer, self-mutilation and castration. The Day of Blood is marked by frantic worshippers who flagellate, inflicting injuries and wounds upon themselves, including biting and cutting themselves and sprinkling blood upon alters.⁶⁴ In *Taurobolium* the devotees are washed with the fresh blood of an offered bull as they stand in a pit under a grate which, as I understand it, must have held the offered animal bleeding upon them.⁶⁵ The cult of mutilation was also aimed at mystical identification with the primordial state through reverting differentiation. The emasculated Gallis were those worshippers who dedicated their sexuality as a token of unlimited loyalty to Cybele's. Besides the longing for the mystical union with the primordial chaos, emasculation also materialised identification with the female deity. A Galli reverting back to the primordial state of both genders becomes an imitation of an androgen, believed to have been the pure primordial state. As such the undifferentiated body was considered a sacred intermediary between divinity and mankind. In his state of purity, like a virgin, the emasculated man was believed to be an appropriate vehicle for the divine and the holy and was also believed to form a mystical union with the gods.⁶⁶

Similar rites of ecstatic nature are also connected with Isis and Osiris, and Tamuz. Originally Egyptian, the cult centred around the severing of Osiris' body including sexual mutilation, and its

⁶³ Stephen Benko, 1993, p. 39.

⁶⁴ Stephen Benko, , 1993, pp 71-72. Benko compares this cult with the biblical description of the priests of Baal described in the Hebrew Bible:...'they cried aloud , and cut themselves after their custom with swords and lances until the blood gushed out upon them .. and they raved on until the time of the offering' 1Kings 18. 28-29.

⁶⁵ Stephen Benko, 1993, pp 72-79

⁶⁶ Stephan Benko 1993, p. 72, 78.

resurrection by Isis, which thus enacted Nature in its the cycle of decay and return to primordial undifferentiated state. In *Metamorphoses* 11.2, Isis is entitled ‘the Queen of Heaven’, by which deities like Venus and Juno Caelestis in Carthage are also known.⁶⁷ Both Tamuz mourned by women, mentioned in Ezek. 8:14 and the ‘Queen of Heaven’ are described to be worshipped by entire families in communities by Jeremiah 7:18, 44:17,18,19,25. These cultic customs, ironically described by adversary prophets, prove such rites to be popular customs practised amongst the Israelites in the biblical times.

Sacred Sexuality and Sexual Hospitality. Like other festivities of ecstatic nature, the Mediterranean cultic feasts posit permuted rites of mystical union with deities. Customs of sexual hospitality and sacred intercourse seem closely associated with the purpose of mystical union of a kind, the purpose of which is to create magical sympathy with the deities. The sexual force seems to be one of such means of mystical union and magical manipulation of deities.

A number of data can be summed up to show a coherent pattern. Ritual sexuality and sexual hospitality can be found to have been paradoxically practised in cultures in which gender segregation may be uncompromising and masculine domination may become lethal to women, taken the form of ‘honour killing’ of unmarried daughters or wives.

However, in another context, these societies would transcend women’s sexuality within a highly mimetic system of cult and culture. Whether it is accepted, feared or even revered as part of endocentric worldview or whether it is survived the matriarchal world is an unresolved question. This is a query of the chicken and the egg; what generates what.

Neutralised of moral or cultic connotations, sexual hospitality and cultic sexuality enhance women’s chances for conception and guaranty offspring against all odds. Under the crude conditions of survival of the ancient world, continuity was the crucial interest of both sexes. These conditions may have resulted in alternative rules of sexuality that may have coexisted as a subculture or even side by side with the patriarchal socio-cultural templates.

The Characteristics of the Cultural Template. The cultural template can be shown in the following sum up of characteristics:

1. Patriarchal hospitality situation – an outsider / an insider:
2. an offer of sexual hospitality
3. a seasonal or cultic festivity
4. cultic sexuality:
- 5 a family member introducing the woman to the guest or a woman chooses alone

⁶⁷ Stephen Benko, 1993 49- 51.

6. preparatory preliminaries; ritual characteristics or a meal
7. anonymity/non-affiliation of collective participants
8. a token left with the woman as a future claim/ a tear marks a failure
9. collectivity of women as a supportive structure of an individual woman
10. mutilation/ baptism in blood
11. disaster follows/ disaster removed depending on sacred sexuality consummation
12. continuity secured/ continuity endangered

Joseph and Wife and the Cultural Template. A cultural template may surface in the presentation of the text by a process of selection and combination as it mirrors the community that came in touch with it or practised it. The various texts about Potiphar's wife, from the original Bible onwards, provide the material for implementation of the cultural template.

Following, the relevant procedure will be to apply the sum-up of the cultural template to the story of Potiphar's wife, from the biblical text throughout mythical templates and its expanded stories. The *Koran* and the *Tanhuma* would both be regarded as end-production, as these two texts have accumulated the previous traditions and at the same time have served as models for the proceeding texts. In this paradoxically, I avoid the unresolved query as to which is the origin of which.

The following characteristics of the cultural template can be recognised in their adaptation state in the story and its related variants;

1. Patriarchal hospitality – outsider/ insider: host/guest -- Potiphar is the insider, Joseph the outsider
2. The host offers a guest the pleasure of his entire house, (Gen. 39:6)
3. a family member introduces the woman to the guest – Potiphar's wife claims that Potiphar brought Joseph into the house and he sported with her (Ge. 39:14,17)
4. Woman chooses her own sexual partner-- sexuality is offered directly by the wife, (Gen. 39:7), but the husband Potiphar is the one who brought the man home.
4. A personal item/ a token left for future claim: Joseph's coat (Gen. 39:12-16) of the man is left with the woman for her to be used as an evidence (Gen. 39:14)
5. The guest fails to fulfil the hostess' wife's expectations, (Gen. 39:8, 13)
6. collectivity of women – Potiphar's wife brings her complaint before the community of women (Koran, Tanhuma)
7. cultic preliminaries – a banquet (*Koran, Tanhuma*).
8. A man is the sexual subject of women's collectivity (*Koran, Tanhuma*)
9. sexual offer/mutilation/ baptism in blood ---Potiphar's emasculation, Joseph's abstinence; women's fingers cut and their blood flows together with banquet food (Biblical text; *Koran, Tanhuma*),

10. seasonal feast : the feast of the Nile is recorded at the background, (*Genesis Rabba* 76:7 ; *Tanhuma*)

11. A tear of shame and weakness: *Testament of Joseph* (self inflicted); Potiphar's wife leaves a tear in Joseph's clothes (*Koran, Sefer ha-yashar*):

11. the personal item left with the woman is used for the woman's claim

11. The guest meets with public shaming (Gen. 39:14; *Koran*)

12. A disaster follows/removed : (draught and hunger Gen 41:54-57)

Thus I end up with setting out the story with regard to the cultural template laid before me in the following:

An outsider, Joseph, is accepted with due patriarchal hospitality by the insider host, Potiphar (Gen. 9:1, 6). The host belongs to the privileged class, and may be linked to a cultic or social association that demands sexual sacrifice. The outsider is offered the pleasure of the entire house for his needs by the host. A sexual offer is made involving the host's wife (Gen. 39:7). Potiphar's wife invites for a banquet her women friends. To the assembly of women, she reveals her illness for love. She gives them knives for the meal and/or fruit. She exhibits Joseph's sexual beauty before them in his best clothes. Astounded at his beauty, the ladies meanwhile cut their fingers instead of the food, and their blood flows with fruit over their dresses (*Koran, Tanhuma, Sefer ha-yashar, Jerahmeel, Midrash Hagadol, Mahzor Vitry*⁶⁸). She tells the ladies that if he does not yield to her he will be subject to imprisonment and shame (*Koran*). A seasonal feast takes place (*Genesis Rabba* 76:7, *Tanhuma va-yeshev; Sefer ha-yashar va-yeshev* 78:1)⁶⁹ Sexual and social segregations are erased: a confrontation occurs between the host's wife and the outsider. Sexuality is refused (Gen. 39:13). The woman in question leaves a tear in the man's garment (*Koran, Sefer ha-yashar*). He leaves a personal garment with her (Gen. 39:14). The man's personal item left with the host's wife is used for her claim (Gen. 39:14). The tear in the garment is then used to bring shame on the outsider, (*Koran, Sefer ha-yashar*) . No continuity is secured. Later, seven years of plenty befall; but seven years of draught follow bringing hunger on the community (Gen 41:54-57).

My next step would be to prove that the characteristics of alternative rules of sexuality left residual marks on the biblical texts and may be reconstructed as a coherent culture template; which follows in my next chapter.

⁶⁸ on the different meals offered, see James L. Kugel, *In Potiphar's House*, 'The Assembly of Ladies', HarperSanFrancisco, 1990, pp 28-66. The *Tanhuma* and *Sefer Ha-yashar*, mention *Etrogim*, which the later fails to translate.

⁶⁹ possible feasts 'the Reception of the Nile' due in 20th June or 'The Night that Isis Weeps' due in mid-July Robert Graves and Raphael Patai, *Hebrew Myths*, Cassell, Londong, 1964, p. 256.

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3. I. B. Levner, *Kol Aggadot Israel*, „Akhiever, Hemed, Jerusalem, 1990, in Hebrew

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