

We've talked about Midrash before, but as a quick refresher, Midrash is an ancient approach to making sense of scripture. Written by rabbis in conversation with each other between 800 and 1700 years ago, they take the texts seriously and seek to clarify, to muddy, and more than anything, to encounter scripture to enrich people's understanding. In some ways, it's kinda like a collection of sermons. They aren't scripture, but they deal with it extensively, faithfully, and in ways that continue to inform Jewish theological discourse. Some of you may remember the story of where blood oranges come from as one of my favorite examples. Basically, a woman falls for Joseph, and she's so smitten that she tries to explain to her friends just how handsome Joseph is. They're sitting around, slicing oranges, chatting about this guy, and she keeps going on about him. The other women humor her until Joseph strolls by, and they catch a glimpse. Sure enough, he's so unfathomably hot that they slip, cut their hands, and blood mixed with citrus drips to the ground and grows! And that, that's where blood oranges come from! It doesn't matter if it's factual; it's not about the science of botany. It's about God, and it's such a delightful, evocative story that the next time you see a blood orange, I bet you're gonna remember it. And if you do, that means you're connecting something about God's story to something in your life. It's not trying to be factual; it's trying to enrich your life with an ever-expanding appreciation for where you can find God.

But this isn't the only place that same Joseph shows up in Midrash. Digging through those old texts and the words of Genesis, Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg turned up something unexpected. (A quick side bar: The Rev. Dr. Danya Ruttenberg is an established rabbi, author, and scholar; she knows more about Hebrew Scripture, theology, and tradition than anyone in this room, myself very much included. Her article on this topic can be found here: <https://lifeisasacredtext.substack.com/p/queering-joseph>) Her argument, in short, is that Joseph might've been trans. Stay with me. Take that amazing technicolor dreamcoat of his. The exact word for that coat of many colors refers specifically to a woman's garment, mentioned in only one other place in scripture describing King David's daughter's dress. Joseph is said to be "youthful" in spite of being a grown adult, and ancient Midrash describes him "penciling his eyes, lifting his heels, and curling his hair." Describing his blood-orange-creating good looks, Genesis uses a phrase never used in scripture about a man but used multiple times to describe women, including his mother, Rachel. He was "shapely and beautiful." Rachel was his dad's favorite wife, and Joseph was his dad's favorite kid. One of those old stories provides a possible explanation why: "Whenever Joseph would walk by Jacob, he would look at Joseph, and his (Jacob's) soul would be restored, as if he was looking at the mother of Joseph, for the beauty of Joseph was similar to the beauty of Rachel."

There's more, but for today, that's enough to get us rolling. At the very least, this all suggests there's something different about Joseph beyond being daddy's good-lookin' favorite. And there are, in some of those examples, ways to discount the suggestion that what's different is him being trans. Taken all together, though, there's something worth exploring. Because remember, Midrash isn't always about what's true. Sometimes it's trying to enrich your life with an ever-expanding appreciation for where you can find God. Now, no, we can't use the same social categories from today and force them onto the past. We shouldn't, at least not to make a definitive argument, but sometimes we can't help it. Maybe Joseph was trans, maybe he wasn't. But this reading opens the story to a group of people who're often ostracized by religion. And if someone ostracized from Christianity because of how it's deployed to injure them hears this story and sees themselves in the hero, finds a connection, desires to grow closer to God because of that, what gives us the right to set up stumbling blocks? If they see the amazing technicolor dreamcoat as a big old pride flag, great. They see that God loves them, and

their lives are enriched with an ever-expanding appreciation for where they can find God. And then, perhaps for the very first time, they see something of God's sacredness in themselves.

Queer people are starved for the world to recognize them as human, nevermind sacred. It's hard because that's so rarely made explicit (or is intentionally suppressed), so we grab hold of what's close enough or familiar enough or, ironically, a story that could pass for enough. Look, I've got no idea if Joseph was trans, but I know that reading his story through that lens provides a novel way to encounter it. Scripture shouldn't grow stale. There's new life in those old books yet. But also, consider the fruits of how we read scripture, and look at where we are now. Are we happy with where particular readings of scripture have taken us, what they've produced in people and in society, the hatred, the scapegoating, the cruelty all supposedly justified by the Word of God? If those're the fruits of reading scripture as we've always done, maybe we need to change how we read scripture. Maybe new readings bring about new fruits. Yes, this reading is different. Yes, there's academic scholarship to back it up. Yes, there's a lot of folks that'd really like to force agendas onto scripture. But also, if the new approach to scripture involves asking the question "how does this story help me love someone?" then maybe we should try that new approach.

The Psalm says "search for the Lord and his strength; continually seek his face." "Continually seek" implies that, once found, we aren't finished; there's more seeking to be done. There are facets to God we have yet to see and others we've yet to seek. How convenient that we usually stop seeking when we find a God that looks like us. Why is it so alarming to consider Joseph being something like what we call trans? Or what threat to your concept of God boils in that claim? Is it that God, who loves all, loves someone you don't? That's not new. God's love, by definition, reaches further than we know to places we don't understand. What makes us think we have permission not to love someone God does? If Joseph was trans, is his story less miraculous? Does his ability to interpret dreams cease to matter? Does his rise from the bottom of a pit to the halls of power stop mattering? More to the point, does that ever-expanding appreciation limit where you can find God?

In some ways, this comes down to a blunt question: Do you see trans people as human? Last month, a hair salon owner in Michigan refused service to trans people and said they should go to a dog groomer instead. If you come to the conclusion that they aren't human, I don't know what to tell you other than you're wrong. You just are. Gender is not what defines homo sapiens as a species. They are, by definition, human. And if they are human, are you comfortable with withholding healthcare or public safety protections or access to a ding dang bathroom? That's a human being, a human being that suffers, a human being that bears a sliver of the image of God. Paul says, "how are they supposed to call on a God they haven't believed in?" The best way to get people not to believe in God is to declare that God hates them and treat them as though that were so. They may know God loves them, but they'll know your cruelty, too, and stay far away from wherever you suggest they go looking for the God that you say hates them. The world tells them they shouldn't exist, can't be who they were created to be, shouldn't be seen or heard or allowed to take another breath.

No, our job is to refute those who would deny their humanity. To say "You are treasured by God. You are part of God's story, and we want you here because you know something about God we don't." The Good News we bring should never be a threat nor an ultimatum. The Good News is not "God loves you unless..." The Good News is "God loves you." Maybe Joseph was trans, maybe he wasn't. But that different reading of scripture shows what a downtrodden corner of society says they hear from God in those texts, enriching their lives with an ever-expanding appreciation for where they find God. Our Good News says we'll get out of the way and listen.