

# Joseph and Potiphar's Wife

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife has several earlier versions in Egyptian literature. But the earlier versions are, rather like European tales of bored wealthy or powerful women, deal exclusively with sexual betrayal. The Biblical narrative is more concerned with the morality and self-control rather than sex games.

Joseph succeeds in rising from being an ordinary slave, to becoming the steward, the manager of Potiphar's household. Potiphar trusts him explicitly. This is a common story throughout history of talented slaves rising to prominent positions through their gifts and hard work.

The Torah tells us that Joseph was good looking. Is this good, that he has charm and looks and these help him advance? Is it perhaps that he spent too much time making himself look good. This might be simply to advance his career because in general people prefer to be around well-groomed people. Potiphar's wife is attracted to Joseph and implores him to sleep with her. Joseph refuses. One day when he is out and Joseph is in the house working, she grabs hold of his garment trying to force him. He flees leaving the garment behind. Realizing that she will not have her way, her lust turns to anger. She has his garment. She pretends Joseph tried to rape her. Calls for help. When her husband returns, she gives him her spurious version of events adding xenophobic comments about bringing a Hebrew slave into their house.

Why does the husband listen to her? Did he really believe her? Didn't he know Joseph well enough to realize his wife had her own agenda? Did she succeed in poisoning his mind against Joseph or was he, simply for the sake of peace at home, determined to please her for the sake of quiet life? All these possibilities can be found in our sources.

But the main theme is that Joseph showed superhuman restraint. Was it morality or out of loyalty to his master? It seems he was not willing to descend to the level of Egyptian morality. He was a good honest human being. From being a seemingly spoiled, arrogant young man, adversity has taught him to be strong and ethical. Was this the education he got at home? In which case, how come neither Reuben, Shimon, Levi nor Judah seem to have been as influenced as much as he was? Indeed, both Reuben and Judah were guilty of sexual indiscretion. Perhaps Joseph's morality was natural, what we would call genetic, rather than nurture, the way he was brought up.