



**SERMON VAY'CHI:<sup>1</sup>**  
**JOSEPH AND ASENETH**

Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 17 December 2021  
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue  
(bat mitzvah of Olivia)

- 1 Verse 22 of the Torah portion, which Olivia read so beautifully, glosses over quite a bit of material. “Joseph and his father’s family stayed living in Egypt, and Joseph lived for 110 years.”
- 2 That’s an awful lot of years, and an awful lot of family conflict, that the Torah just leaves to stew in that one short verse. What happened during that time? Surely the lives of all these people, whose quarrels and commotions took up so much of the book of Genesis, didn’t just suddenly calm down and end in tranquil harmony. That would be, if not disappointing, at least surprising.
- 3 If we delve into the world of midrash and other extra-biblical texts, we learn that things were certainly not tranquil and harmonious during those years. A vast amount of drama is inserted into the period covered by verse 22. In particular, the rabbis say, Joseph was Pharaoh of Egypt for the last 48 years of his life.<sup>2</sup>



- 4 We're all familiar with the idea that he was an influential figure in the Egyptian government. But Pharaoh? How did an outsider, an immigrant, an Israelite, become Pharaoh?
- 5 The most detailed account comes in a Jewish-authored, ancient Greek novel called *Joseph and Aseneth*.<sup>3</sup> It was written in Egypt in the 2nd century BCE.<sup>4</sup> And, goodness me, it packs in the drama and palace intrigue. It tells a story of how Pharaoh's son fell hopelessly for Joseph's wife Aseneth, and tried to stir up a conflict between the twelve brothers so as to have Joseph killed and take Aseneth for himself. Dan and Gad try to ambush and kidnap Aseneth; Levi, Benjamin and Judah successfully stop them. Thousands and thousands of Egyptian soldiers, divided between the two factions, are killed. And, in the end, the Pharaoh's evil son dies of wounds he sustained in the battle, and Joseph takes his place as successor to the throne of Egypt.
- 6 However, blood-soaked and testosterone-ridden as this story is, the true hero is, without question, Aseneth. Aseneth was the daughter of an Egyptian priest,<sup>5</sup> and she bravely married into Joseph's complicated, and decidedly non-Egyptian, family. How bizarre she must have found their Hebrew language; their religious rituals; their resistance to Egypt's many and varied gods. Yet she was not just absorbed into the Israelite tribe as



we might expect. On the contrary, it is her personality, and her moral convictions, that shine brightly throughout the ancient Greek narrative.

- 7 My colleague Student Rabbi Yael Tischler has observed: “Aseneth offers an alternative to the culture of violence: compassion. She stands up for Dan and Gad when Joseph’s other brothers want to kill them: ‘By no means will you commit evil for evil.’ She is clear about what justice looks like for her, and the other characters take her lead. She holds the reins in her own story.”<sup>6</sup>
- 8 The hero of this morning is definitely Olivia. Not only has she held her own throughout today’s service, but the obvious care and dedication which she has given to the preparation of her Torah reading and her inspiring d’var Torah, and also the depth of her commitment to her Jewish identity: all of these shine bright.
- 9 And Olivia, like Joseph and Aseneth, comes from a mixed family. A household where different traditions and backgrounds have come together – and, crucially, where neither tradition has cancelled the other out, nothing has absorbed anything else, nothing has overridden anything else. Olivia wrote to me to tell me how passionate she was about her Jewish identity and about being able to share it in what is a



non-Jewish society. In doing so, Olivia, you're following in the footsteps of the anonymous author of *Joseph and Aseneth*.

- 10 Because this extra bit of story wasn't just written for thrills and excitement, thrilling and exciting as it is. It was written to inspire people who were exactly in your situation, but in ancient Greece and ancient Egypt. People who were Jewish in a minority. People whose families may well have been mixed. People who had a real attachment to many different traditions.
- 11 How do we know this? Firstly, there's the simple fact that Aseneth's upbringing and family background were no obstacle to her being welcomed into Joseph's household. His brothers respected her (at least those of them who weren't trying to kill her) and she even provided them with a moral compass by dissuading them from murdering their enemies. Moreover, while later on, the rabbis were uncomfortable with the idea that Aseneth was from outside the tribe, and tried to come up with 'proofs' that she was actually an Israelite by birth, the author of *Joseph and Aseneth* had no problem with welcoming her as an outsider.<sup>7</sup>
- 12 But more than that, she led the story, and in doing so she enabled her husband, the Israelite, to be accepted into Egypt's highest office. Patricia Ahearne-Kroll, who wrote her doctoral thesis on this text, praises its



early acceptance of pluralism and multiculturalism. “*Joseph and Aseneth* presents amiable relationships between Hebrews and Egyptians, marriage where the family of origin does not prevent legitimate union, and codes of conduct that seek non-violent means for resolving even the most egregious acts of insult. It reflects a world where Jewish communities interact with those of different identities, while at the same time marking what is distinct about Jewish identity in this environment.”<sup>8</sup>

- 13 *Joseph and Aseneth* is an amazing document because it both depicts a society that is completely alien to us – kings and concubines, soldiers and slingshots, marriage and murder – but at the same time it describes the challenges so many of us face today. We are not the first Jewish people to live alongside non-Jews; we are not the first Jewish people to embrace non-Jews into our own families and households, and to be embraced by them.
- 14 This story was written for an audience of Jews in ancient Egypt who were in the same situation as Jews in modern Brighton. It was designed, says Dr Ahearne-Kroll, to “endow their presence with a heroic past and offer them guidance for living in an environment where Greeks, Egyptians and Jews inevitably interacted with each other”.<sup>9</sup>



15 Olivia, you don't live in ancient Egypt, and it will be many, many years before someone studies your work and does a PhD thesis about it. But there's no doubt that you are endowing your presence – in your family, in this community, in this city – with a heroic past. Your passion for sharing your Judaism; the efforts to which you, someone who goes to a secular school in a non-Jewish city, have gone to be able to read Torah so beautifully; the bridges you build; and above all your very apt description of BHPS as “a happy place where you can be yourself”: these are the powerful reminders we all need of how a Jewish identity can serve us today.

16 Mazel tov.

## **GKW 17.12.21**

<sup>1</sup> Genesis 50:14-26

<sup>2</sup> Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, (1909; repr Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003), trans Henrietta Szold and Paul Radin, vol 1: 378, n 234.

<sup>3</sup> Patricia Ahearne-Kroll. “Joseph and Aseneth” in Louis H Feldman, James L Kugel and Lawrence H Schiffman (eds), *Outside the Bible: ancient Jewish writings related to Scripture* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2013): 2,525-2,598.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*: 2,526.

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 41:45.

<sup>6</sup> Yael Tischler. “Asenath and the Amazing Technicolour Way We Can Re-envision Society” (Leo Baeck College: 2 December 2021): < <https://web.archive.org/web/20211205191635/https://lbc.ac.uk/parashat-miketz/>> The internal quotation is from Joseph and Aseneth 28:14.

<sup>7</sup> Patricia D Ahearne-Kroll. “Joseph and Aseneth and Jewish identity in Greco-Roman Egypt” (University of Chicago, 2005): 210-211.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*: 215-216.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*: 6.