

What is the Coat of Many Colors?

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Right up front, let me say that if you're happy with the Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat version of Joseph's coat, stop reading now. We're going to take a much more text-based approach here and you may not like what we're about to find. So if you want to stay with Weber's version, you might want to delete this now.

Let's go now to the beginning of Parshat Vayyeishev (Genesis 37:1ff). The last real bit of action we had was the birth of Benjamin and Rachel dying. Now we pick up Joseph's story. He is 17 years old and his father gives him a k'tonet passim, a coat of many colors or a coat with long sleeves and/or a long train.

Several years ago, I wanted to know more about the coat, as no one seemed to have a very good notion of what it was. So I did the most reasonable thing one does when trying to define an obscure word in Tanakh: I concordanced it to see if I could find other examples of such garments elsewhere in Tanakh to find out what they are.

I found that only one other character in all of Tanakh wears such a garment: David's daughter Tamar, who is raped by her half-brother Amnon (II Samuel 13). It is a truly harrowing story of a beauty who is tricked and seduced into a vulnerable position and then is tossed aside because her abuser feels disgust at what he's done. After this attack, Tamar rips her "coat with long sleeves" as a sign of mourning, for only maiden princesses wear this garment.

How are we to visualize such a garment? It is something with long sleeves that cover the hands and/or the feet. It would be highly ornamental, drawing the eye. It would also be impractical for anyone doing any real work. You can't really walk anywhere without getting it dirty and you can't let your hands get wet or dirty without ruining the sleeves. It would be similar to the grand gowns of the Romanov tsarinas, with trains that extended back ten feet; so heavy they could hardly stand without assistance. Think of it this way: in such a garment, you would be ready for neither fight nor flight.

The Tanakh is a highly deliberate document. If only two people wear such a garment, then there may be some connection between them.

Let us think of how Joseph and Tamar are alike:

Both wear the garment.

Both garments signify a special status (favored son and maiden princess)

Both are quite beautiful.

Both garments end up torn.

Both...experience some sort of sexual abuse?

Yes. Believe me, I understand how hard it is to let that last thought form in your mind. But think about it. If you were a social worker, and you saw 12 brothers, one an infant and the next oldest made to wear a highly stylized garment that keeps the wearer home and isolates him, that was given as a sign of "favor," would you not, given all we know about Penn State, the Catholic Church and any number of other tales of horror, think "grooming for abuse"?

This isn't a comfortable or comforting reading. It is, however, a valid interpretation of the text as it stands. Once that first thought is allowed to form, the rest of Joseph's story begin to make much more sense. We will be exploring this interpretation in the weeks to come.

Why write this interpretation now, when I have known it for many years? Because there is comfort in this interpretation. Human beings become angels. People we previously thought wholly craven turn out not to be so bad. Characters for whom we've made excuses are finally seen as they really are.

But there's a more important reason to speak now. If there is even one person in your circle of life or community who might be helped by knowing that someone can survive sexual abuse as a child and thrive, and more, that that person is a hero of the Torah, then forward this lesson and the ones upcoming. It is time we smashed the silence to bits, for silence is the agar on which abuse thrives.

Let me know your questions and insights.