

Shabbat Shalom
from Rabbi Michael Gold

Candle Lighting Time
Friday Erev Shabbat 5:12 pm

Services

Thursday Morning Dec. 11 8:30 am, minyan followed by Bagels and Bible, the Temple Beth Shalom choir will put us in a Hanukkah mood with songs.

Saturday Dec. 13 9:30 am Shabbat morning service

Hanukkah begins Sunday night December 14. Light first candle.

Hanukkah begins Sunday night. I wish you a joyous festival of lights.

PARSHAT VAYESHEV
POTIPHAR'S WIFE

“After a time, his master’s wife cast her eyes upon Joseph and said, Lie with me.” (Genesis 39:7)

Last week, in writing about my relationship with my late brother Jeffrey, I mentioned my work in Jewish sexual ethics. I mentioned the two books I have written on the subject, *Does God Belong in the Bedroom?* and *The Rabbi's Sex Class*. Over the years I have also taught secular sexual ethics, particularly in the ethics class I developed for Miami Dade College. In my new [udemy.com](https://www.udemy.com/course/applying-ethics-to-real-life/) course *Applying Ethics to Real Life* I have an entire video on secular sexual ethics.

When I teach this subject, I always spend time on the work of the French historian-philosopher-postmodernist Michel Foucault (1926-1984). His work is fascinating. He looked at the history (what he called “genealogy,” a term he borrowed from Nietzsche) of some of our most important institutions – crime and punishment, education and discipline, health and illness, particularly mental illness. His question was why certain activities were considered normal and other activities were considered deviant. His answer was that those in power decided what was acceptable and what was unacceptable.

Some of his strongest work was in the field of human sexuality, where he wrote a multi-volume work. Why did society decide that certain types of sexual behavior are normal and to be encouraged, and certain types of sexual behavior are abnormal and deserve to be condemned. Foucault said that those

in power made these decisions, and the powerful try to force their vision on an entire culture. According to Foucault, one cannot separate sexual behavior from power relationships. His work was probably heavily influenced by his own sexual orientation. He was gay and died of AIDS in the early 1980's, when AIDS was decimating the gay community.

Foucault gives us an important insight. We cannot talk about sex without talking about power. This seems particularly relevant today in the discussion of the Epstein files, powerful men who used women, often underage, to assert their own power. When I teach sexual ethics, I say that sex is immoral if it involves a person in a position of power over another person – a rock star and a groupie, a professor and a student, a doctor and a patient, or what is a frequent sad reality, a rabbi and a congregant. (When I consider sexual encounters between a rock star and a groupie, I think of the 2000 film *Almost Famous*, and the Academy Award winning performance by a young Kate Hudson. She is impregnated and abandoned by the leader of the rock band she is following.) Sexual encounters involving someone in power too often involve a boss and an employee. That is why every company's employment manual forbids sexual harassment, or any sexual encounter between a supervisor and someone they supervise. This was the beginning of the influential #metoo movement.

What was the first recorded case of sexual harassment in the workplace, an attempt of an employer to use power over an employee for sexual favors? It happens in this week's Torah reading. And it is a female boss exerting power over a male employee. The employee was Joseph, sold into slavery in Egypt. The boss was Potiphar's wife, who attempts to seduce Joseph. Joseph refuses, calling it a great sin. So Potiphar's wife accuses Joseph of trying to rape her, and by the end of the portion he is in prison. Of course, we know that eventually he will become the second most powerful man in Egypt, based on his ability to interpret dreams.

What irony that the first example of sexual harassment in the workplace is a woman using her power over a man. But such misuse of power will continue throughout history until our own day. I believe Foucault was correct, that we cannot separate sex from power. When I teach secular sexual ethics, I always say that any sexual relationship where one person is in a position of power over another is ethically wrong. Will the world ever listen to these ideas?