

Parashat Vayeshev - D'var Torah
12/4/15

In this week's Torah Portion, Vayeshev, we encounter the familiar story of Joseph and his dreams. Now just to recap, Joseph is Jacob's favorite son and the preferential treatment he receives from his father (including the coat of many colors) creates a rift between Joseph and his brothers. Joseph shares his dreams in which he rules over his brothers, fueling their envy and hatred of him. Reaching their limit, the brothers throw Joseph into a pit, selling him as a slave to a band of Ishamaelites passing by. The brothers dip his multi-colored tunic in goat's blood convincing Jacob of Joseph's slaughter at the hands of a wild animal. You can practically hear the Andrew Lloyd Weber songs from the musical ringing in your ears.

We know how the story goes. Joseph is sold to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh's guard and quickly rises through the ranks, proving to be a responsible and trustworthy servant. But the honeymoon period doesn't last and Joseph's time with Potiphar takes a dramatic turn for the worse. Potiphar's wife, finding Joseph attractive not only because of his

dashing good looks, but also because of the power he wields in the household, makes several unwanted sexual advances on Joseph. He resists her multiple times, citing many different reasons why he does not wish to engage with her sexually. But one day, when no one else was in the house, Potiphar's wife approached Joseph again. "She caught hold of him by his garment and said 'lie with me!' but he left his garment in her hand and had fled outside" (Genesis 39:23). Potiphar's wife turns the tables on Joseph, framing him for sexual impropriety and adultery, convincing her husband of his guilt.

Joseph is immediately thrown into prison, without a trial, due process, or even an attempt to corroborate the claims made by Potiphar's wife. To us, this may seem a result of antiquated times – the Ten Commandments had not yet been received, a set legal system had yet to be firmly established. Surely Joseph's wrongful imprisonment was merely a product of draconian, biblical times. Surely, our society has evolved enough that wrongful prosecution of the innocent no longer occurs. Sadly, this is not the case. Unfairness in the justice system remains rampant.

In the United States alone, our prisons are full of modern day Josephs, individuals who are prosecuted and convicted for crimes for which they are innocent. According to the Innocence Project, a non-profit legal clinic dedicated to overturning wrongful convictions, “to date 333 people in the United States have been exonerated by DNA testing, including 20 who served time on death row. These people served an average of 14 years in prison before their exoneration and release.” For example, Marvin Anderson “despite having an alibi, was convicted of rape, largely on the basis of eyewitness misidentification and suggestive police practices. He served 15 years in prison and was finally exonerated by DNA testing proving his innocence. Ralph Armstrong served 28 years in a Wisconsin prison before a judge overturned his conviction in 2009 based on evidence that a prosecutor had deliberately withheld evidence of his innocence.” It pains me to say that these stories are nearly countless and there are many causes for such egregious miscarriages of justice. We can only imagine how Joseph must have felt, imprisoned for a crime he did not commit. There is much to change to keep this from happening to more people.

Not only was Joseph wrongfully convicted, but he was also imprisoned without a trial or questioning by the police. Again, we may think, this couldn't possibly happen today! Those were biblical times! But I'm here to tell you that in just the city of Chicago, there is an epidemic of people being taken into police custody without their arrests being reported, let alone receiving a lawyer or a trial. In the past few years, Chicago police have detained more than 7,000 people at Homan Square, an off-the-books interrogation warehouse. According to the Guardian, "Nearly 6,000 of those held at the facility were black, which represents more than twice the proportion of the city's population. Only 68 of those held were allowed access to attorneys or a public notice of their whereabouts." Like Joseph, these people are being systematically denied their rights and, unfortunately, the public remains largely silent, either because of lack of information or because often it is easier to ignore a problem than address it head on.

In many ways, Joseph was lucky – since he was a servant of such prominence in the house of Potiphar, the chief jailer recognized him immediately and actually gave him special responsibilities in the prison.

He had an innate talent for interpreting dreams that propelled him out of the depths of prison and into the palace of Pharaoh. Whether it was because of a close relationship with God or just sheer luck, Joseph had privilege and he exercised it to reverse his fortune and change his fate.

Criminal justice reform is an issue about which I am very passionate. From my time serving as a Spanish translator in the Dane County Jail to working at the Center on Wrongful Conviction at Northwestern Law School, I have heard countless stories inequality, discrimination and wrongdoing in our legal system, a system that is designed to increase justice in our world, not diminish it. We can only hope that with the expanded accessibility DNA testing and public awareness of injustices like Homan Square, the number of Josephs in our midst will begin to decrease with time.

Like Joseph, we can always dream of a better future. But dreams are not always enough to move us towards a more just world. We must educate ourselves about the corrupt policies of our criminal justice system, hold public officials accountable, and increase awareness. Together, we can change the conversation. Shabbat Shalom.