

Wait For It • Parshat Vayeshev

Joseph, Jacob's favorite son, got thrown into prison for a crime he never committed. We know as readers that he will find a way out of confinement and grow in his leadership as a result. Joseph got out of a pit. He will get out of a jail.

Yet, despite Joseph's suffering or because of it, his struggle in prison sensitized him to the suffering of others. He noticed that two other courtiers in prison were deeply troubled: "He asked Pharaoh's courtiers, who were with him in custody in his master's house, saying, 'Why do you appear downcast today?' and they said to him, 'We had dreams, and there is no one to interpret them.' So Joseph said to them, 'Surely God can interpret! Tell me [your dreams]'" (Gen. 40:7-8). Having dreams and sharing them got Joseph in trouble. Interpreting dreams saved Joseph and got him promoted.

Joseph was a problem-solver and, giving all the credit to God, told the baker and cupbearer imprisoned with him that he had a solution. At first, he did not say he could interpret their dreams; he simply asked them to share their night terrors, knowing that unburdening themselves of their dreams could itself be healing. After giving one courtier an unhappy interpretation and the other a joyous one, Joseph was hoping that some future reciprocal kindness would be thrown his way. He then unburdened himself. "Think of me when all is well with you again, and do me the kindness of mentioning me to Pharaoh, so as to free me from this place. For in truth, I was kidnapped from the land of the Hebrews; nor have I done anything

here that they should have put me in the dungeon" (Gen. 40:14-15).

Not only did Jacob ask for a favor, he also explained that his current jail term was not the beginning of his woes. He did not identify himself as a Hebrew but told them he came from a distance. He mentioned nothing of the harm he experienced at the hand of his brothers. He was bewildered at his prison sentence. His prospects looked bleak. Jailed together and sharing, for the moment, the same grim fate, the courtier with the positive dream interpretation made a promise to seek Joseph's freedom should he ever gain his own.

The moment did arrive, but, as so often happens in life, with the climb out of difficulty, the newly liberated erase their past: "Yet the chief cupbearer did not think of Joseph; he forgot him" (Gen. 40:23). Joseph wasn't even a thought. Rashi explains that, "Because Joseph had placed his trust in him that he would remember him, he was doomed to remain in prison for two years." Hanging on to hope for two long years, Joseph could not see any other way out. R. Abraham Ibn Ezra, defines 'remember' in this verse as 'mention,' citing many Biblical prooftexts to support this

