



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 reading: "He did not verbally mention him to Pharaoh."

The cupbearer may have remembered Joseph in some vague and distant way, but he never repaid the favor by speaking to those in power. R. Yosef Bekhor Shor adds that the cupbearer never really intended to speak up in the first place. This was not a malicious act; it was just plain forgetfulness.

That which is unimportant to us can be easily forgotten. The Hizkuni also mentions the passage of time. Since the cupbearer did not bring Joseph's plight to Pharaoh's attention as soon as he had been released, "he forgot him totally, erased him from his memory." This reading reminds us that when we don't act on our compassionate impulses immediately, we risk forgetting them.

Joseph thought the solution lay in human intervention. Instead, he found himself disappointed and on the brink of despair. Only God and time would come to Joseph's rescue.

A stunning midrash from Genesis Rabba 88:7 reviews our story from God's perspective. Allow me to paraphrase: "The cupbearer forgot, but I did not forget. Who waited with Abraham and Sarah when they were old until they had a son? Who waited with Jacob until he crossed the Jordan River and attained wealth? Who waited with Joseph to overcome all of his difficulties until he became a royal? Who waited when Moses was thrown into the Nile to become who he became? Who waited with Ruth the convert until she returned monarchy to the Israelites?" The midrash continues to name other figures in Biblical history who required God's steady presence over long swaths of time to aid in the realization of their futures. Our midrash says hold fast to your conviction and strategy until it's the right time.

Leadership books and articles often recommend action, not waiting. Don't wait for approval. Don't wait to get things done. Don't wait for exactly the right moment. Become who you want to become now. But now may not be the right time. Dan and Chip Heath, in their book *Decisive: How to Make Better Choices in Life and Work*, write that "Because day-to-day change is gradual, even imperceptible, it's hard to know when to jump."

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in *Lessons in Leadership*, writes, "When bad things happen, some avert their eyes. Some wait for others to act. Some blame others for failing to act. Some simply complain. But there are people who say, 'If something is wrong, let me be among the first to put it right.' They are

the leaders." Joseph was such a leader.

The musical *Hamilton* contrasts the impetuosity and speed of Alexander Hamilton with the slow, intentional, and considered pace of Aaron Burr. In the second half of the musical, Burr sings the song, "Wait for It," as a testament to his strategy and as a criticism that Hamilton lacked restraint.

We rise (and we fall)
We fall (and we break)
(And we make our mistakes)
And if there's a reason I'm still alive
When so many have died
Then I'm willin' to-
Wait for it.

Joseph rose and fell, rose and fell. But he was not broken. He held fast to his childhood dreams. He used dream interpretation and problem-solving as a strategy to rise again. He learned to wait.