

Torah Message for GENESIS: MIKETZ by Cantor Carol Garrett

The parasha for the Shabbat of December 23-24, 2022 was titled Miketz, which means “at the end of”. It is the end of the famine years. It is the end of Joseph’s family being estranged. It is the end of life for Jacob and it is the end of Joseph being enslaved, or the beginning of his freedom, as it was for the Jews during this time of Chanukah and many other times in history! These ancient stories ARE MODERN and AT THE SAME TIME, they touch upon science, history, philosophy, ritual and ethics. Included are stories of individuals, families, wars, slavery and more. No subject IS taboo for Torah.

In the prior parasha, Joseph immediately recognized his brothers, yet he, fully dressed in royal garb, is unrecognizable to them. Remembering the pain he suffered at the hands of his own kin, some would not judge Joseph had he rejected his brothers’ plea for help. However, Joseph does not turn his brothers away; instead, he offers them an opportunity for *t’shuvah*, repentance. Well, perhaps he first puts them through some trials and some pain, but eventually pledges himself to be the ultimate protector of his kin. Joseph’s exercise provides a lesson for us all about forgiveness and second chances.

In *Miketz*, we learn about a man who was nearly killed by his own brothers, yet who was willing, nonetheless, to offer them a second chance. At the start of this week’s Torah portion, Joseph is sitting in an Egyptian jail, wrongfully imprisoned by Pharaoh for refusing the advances of the wife where he was serving as slave. It is one of the Torah’s first examples of unjust incarceration. Suddenly, Joseph the prisoner – who had been Joseph the slave – becomes Joseph the royal prince, illustrating an important lesson: all prisoners, no matter their alleged crime, are capable of redemption and renewal.

How does this apply to us today?

Although we would like to think that the rule of law in the United States is fairer than the arbitrary ancient Egyptian **penal** system, hundreds of thousands of people continue to be deprived of their basic rights by our criminal justice system. This is especially true of minorities, who generally make up about 13% of the population, but 35% of those imprisoned.

What do you think is a crime that deserves one’s freedom to be taken away?

Do you think that being homeless is a crime? Did you know that people are jailed for being homeless?

What about mental health problems? Are there enough resources available for mental health or are the police supposed to incarcerate you when, perhaps, a medication would normalize your life?

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If you can't afford bail, and your trial is a year away, should your family be deprived and sink deeper into poverty because they can't make bail, when wealthier families can?

These are examples of our unjust justice system.

Did you know, that today, more than 450,000 Americans are in jail because they are too poor to afford bail. Although these people are presumed innocent until proven guilty, some will spend months in jail awaiting their day in court. What's more, according to the New York Times, "Black and Latino defendants are far more likely to be detained before trial and less likely to be able to post bail compared with...white defendants. In fact, black and Latino men respectively pay 35 percent and 19 percent higher bail than white men."

Where is their justice? Where is their redemption?

- Our jails and prisons are filled with people who have been targeted by over policing for conduct related to homelessness, substance use, and mental health. Too many people of color have been killed at the hands of the police. Many people who can't pay court fines and fees or bail for minor violations face license suspensions and jail time, essentially criminalizing poverty. Prosecutors perpetuate an unjust system that imprisons more people than anywhere in the world.

-Black people account for 53% of all the people in this country who were falsely convicted of a serious crime and then freed after serving at least part of their sentence. – (this is according to a new report from the National Registry of Exonerations, Sep 27, 2022)

The ways in which our criminal justice system operates should be informed by Joseph's example. On all levels, governments must act to open doorways for *t'shuvah*, by eliminating harsh mandatory minimum sentences for low level drug offenders, reforming prison systems to rehabilitate inmates, and funding grant programs that help formerly incarcerated people successfully re-enter society.

As a formerly incarcerated person, Joseph was willing to extend an opportunity for his brothers to do *t'shuvah* for their sins. Our prison system should too.

Please consider taking one or more of the following actions to help reform our criminal justice system:

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- **Join the Urgency of Now**, North American Immigrant Justice Campaign: at www.rac.org- the Religious Action Center for reform Judaism.

- Write or call your Senators to urge them to support sentencing reform, which includes provisions that address the problems of mass incarceration and over-criminalization, reducing mandatory minimums for nonviolent drug offenses and granting judges greater discretion in sentencing decisions. This new legislation represents the most significant attempt at criminal justice reform in the United States in many years.

- Read the book and/or watch the movie: Just Mercy, a true story by Bryan Stevenson.

Using lessons from our forefather Joseph, we can help ensure justice and redemption to many of today's incarcerated individuals.

On the precipice of upcoming Martin Luther King day, this is a particularly important and timely issue. In the words of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, "We must pray with our feet". I am asking you to take a step towards fighting unjust prosecution and criminal reform and redemption by any of the above actions- get more informed, join a campaign, read a book or write a postcard or call your congresspeople and senators.

Thank you and Shalom to you all, Cantor Carol Garrett