

Unlock ALL of Their Shackles

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Nehar Shalom

Shana Tova, and welcome to those of you who are local to JP, and those of you who traveled from other towns or cities to enter the new year together in this room! It has been so wonderful to pray with you so far!

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We're going to begin with a Hasidic story about Reb Zusha of Hanipol. Reb Zusha once visited Motl to ask for a donation to help bail out a family that was sentenced to indefinite incarceration. This family could not afford to pay off their debt, and the way of the land was to place individuals and entire families in prison until that debt was completely paid off. Motl was not home yet, so the Rebbe sat down on his porch to wait for him. As he waited, he noticed that there was a cage before him, and within the cage there was a small bird enthusiastically and consistently beating her wings against the bars. The rebbe watched for a while, and then said aloud to himself, "isn't it strange that I am on a mission of mercy-- to prevent human beings from being incarcerated, and yet right before my eyes, I have the power to free this creature?!"

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(pause)

Now, You might have heard that Rosh Hashana is the birthday of the world, and marks the anniversary of when G-d created Adam, the first human being who contained all souls. Or that the Torah calls our Jewish new year *Yom T'ruah*, which means the day of shouting. But did you know that our Jewish new year also marks Yosef's release from prison after 12 years behind bars? Or, that Rosh Hashana is the anniversary of when our ancestors stopped laboring as slaves in Egypt? On that day they began to wait for the moment they could leave Egypt and be fully free, which ultimately took place half a year later on Pesach. Our ancestors experienced redemption and renewal from *both* prison and from slavery on our Jewish new year. Which makes me want to know, how can we reclaim Rosh Hashana as a day that shouts for liberation, a day for us to work towards freeing people who are incarcerated?

This past summer, I was humbled and blessed to serve as a chaplain for incarcerated youth in a prison facility, and also to fathers who had been released from prison within the last 6 months. The fathers I worked with had been incarcerated for anywhere between a few months to 31 years-- and all of them are trying so hard to create new lives for themselves now that they are outside. Unlike our ancestor Yosef, who was released from prison and immediately given a significant position in society, the fathers I worked with are rebuilding their lives from scratch. They struggle with estrangement from friends and family, and the shock of seeing their old neighborhoods transformed by gentrification. They feel the stigma of society, which makes it difficult for them to find housing, jobs, and new love. Many of them are learning how to use cell phones and computers for the first time, because they had no access to technology while inside.

Some of the fathers I spent time with had worked jobs in prison that only paid 10 cents an hour, or two dollars per month, and now they are facing the reality of debt or financial responsibilities that seem impossible. Many of them are sitting with traumatic memories from prison-- which haunt their social lives and fuel mental health issues that they are fighting so so hard to overcome. They repeatedly called prison a war zone, and identify themselves as survivors who are still surviving their memories, and who are now trying to integrate into a society which does not welcome them. Many told me how they want their stories to be shared, because they believe that most people in the United States don't know what goes on inside of prisons.

In my role as chaplain, I witnessed just how much poverty is fueling the prison industrial complex-- whether it be the reason a person was incarcerated, or that someone couldn't afford to be bailed out of jail *even* before a conviction.

The story I opened this drasha with is from my grandfather's book printed in 1944, where I found an entire chapter dedicated to miracle stories about Hasidic Rebbes trying to bail Jews out of prison because they couldn't afford to pay their way out. The connection between poverty, discrimination, and incarceration is not new, and is a relatable experience for Ashkenazi Jews just a few generations ago in Eastern Europe.

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So, let's return to Reb Zusha. Are you wondering what he did when he saw Motl's bird frantically flapping her wings against the cage? Was he able to raise enough bail funds to save the family from indefinite incarceration?

Before he knew it, Reb Zusha's hands unhinged the locked door that bound the bird to her cage, and the bird swiftly flew away. When Motl returned to his home, he listened to Reb Zusha tell of the family facing incarceration because they were poor, about the bird's protest against her cage, and her yearning for freedom. Reb Zusha quoted psalms and said, "מעשיו כל ורחמיו על, לכל טוב" — The Creator is good to *all*; tender mercies are over *all* of G-d's creations". Motl respected his rebbe's wisdom-- he had no clue that his bird was unhappy in her cage, and he was grateful to Reb Zusha for noticing her discomfort and taking action to free her. Without hesitation, Motl gave Reb Zusha the exact amount of funds needed to release the family facing incarceration, and the family gained their freedom that very day.

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Like Reb Zusha and Motl, many of the fathers I worked with had a powerful connection to faith, spirituality and G-d. The fathers I worked with named how G-d, and their dedication to Islam, Christianity, Ifa, or American Indian tradition gave them important sustenance that helped bring them through. They said that art, music, and poetry helped them let go of their feelings of rage over injustice, which gave them the fuel to continue surviving. I was floored by each person's resilience. Also, I have to admit-- I did not expect the fathers I worked with to be as hilarious as they were-- and to laugh as much as I did! They cracked so many jokes! They must have known the famous Yiddish saying,

לאַכן איז געזונט, דאָקוירים הייסן לאַכן. Laughing is healthy; doctors prescribe laughter!

I think they knew instinctively that laughter is a medicine in its own right, and that it is also part of survival. Laughing releases feelings when tears and crying might be too heavy and too much to release.

(pause)

As someone who has not personally experienced incarceration, it has been helpful finding stories in my own tradition that show struggle on both sides of the metal bars. Reb Zusha and Motl were working outside of prison trying to support people on the inside, and Yosef's story in the Torah came up many times as a way to learn from someone who experienced multiple versions of captivity and freedom. He was sold into slavery, incarcerated behind bars, rose to power, and then after all that he went through, he forgave his brothers for what they had done to him.

Right before he was sold into slavery, Yosef approached his brothers in the field, and they stripped him of his coat, of everything he had. His own brothers threw him into an empty pit that had no water, and *then*, they sat down to break bread and have a meal. So here was Yosef, lying in an empty pit, and listening to his brothers enjoy a meal up on level ground while he was stuck down in a pit, alone on a hot day without water or sustenance.

My chaplaincy training brought Yosef's experience to my class' attention so that we could notice when the people we were present with might be in their own pits, feeling alone and isolated, while listening to others outside of their pit enjoying life. As chaplains, we were taught that we weren't there to pull people out of pits, or to attempt to fix problems. Instead, we were taught to climb on down into the pit with people, to witness, listen, and affirm. As chaplains, we ask questions and are present with people to support their confidence and inner wisdom so they may climb out of the pit themselves.

One time I was sitting down and studying psalms with a previously incarcerated father, and he said, "the Bible talks about leaving slavery and leaving Egypt, but today there are many other versions of Egypt. People are continually being redeemed and also finding themselves in situations of slavery." I was curious to learn more, so I asked if he could give some examples. He told me that when he was locked up, he decided to read the constitution, and he said, "I noticed that the 13th amendment abolished slavery for all people, except for people convicted of a crime. After slavery, they rounded up Black people, accused them of crimes they didn't commit, and brought them to plantation owners to be re-enslaved--and today, we still have prisons acting in similar ways. You know, I wonder if the U.S ever apologized for slavery." So, we decided to google "Has the United States apologized for slavery". We learned that in 2008, congress issued an apology to Black Americans for slavery, jim crow laws, and the US's history of discrimination. He said, "This is an empty apology! They didnt even change the 13th amendment or pay reparations!

I responded, "So what do you think---Does it do more harm than good for congress to apologize for slavery and not take any action?"

He said, "Sometimes empty apologies are worse-- when you pacify people, it does more harm than good.

(pause)

"I hear that. It's like I'm kicking your leg, and then apologize, but keep doing it", I said.

He said, "Yeah, or it's like you stop kicking me and continue hitting me in a different way."

I asked him if he thought healing and repair was possible, and he said,

I think there just needs to be more unity-- unity across different communities of people who all join together and pressure politicians to address the specific issue of prison and slavery. To address that slavery is still happening in a different way. And if one politician doesn't agree, then we need to find another who is willing to focus on accomplishing abolition so it goes mainstream. People get hidden into slavery in prison, and we just need to yell and yell about it until people hear us.

His powerful words ring true especially today on Rosh Hashana, when we recall Yosef's release from prison and how our ancestors stopped working as slaves in Egypt.

This summer, I was excited to discover a *tekhine*, a Yiddish women's prayer, from 1916 meant to be sung on Rosh Hashana all about Yosef and incarceration. Not only does it celebrate the anniversary of Yosef's release from prison, but it also explicitly prays that ALL people should be released from prison ON THIS VERY DAY of Rosh Hashana.

I'd love to teach the whole song, but Reb Victor and I thought that handing out papers to this large room seemed tricky. I will teach you all the refrain, sing sections of the song by myself, and then please join me in the refrain again! The refrain means (READ ENGLISH) and repeat the yiddish after me so we get the words right. (teach refrain). Ok, before we sing the whole song, I will read the translation so you know what we are singing.

Unlock Their Shackles * Oyfbinden Zeyer Shlos* אויפבינדן זייער שלאס

<p>Remember us, beloved G-d, by the merit of Yoysef the righteous (X2) On this very day (Rosh Hashana) you pulled him out from his incarceration and you exalted him to be a leader of Egypt, so too, Creator of the Universe, through his merit Please exalt our destiny so that we are not framed by false accusation, G-d forbid!, and wallow in prison. And You shall summon ALL of the captive prisoners towards freedom, and You shall unlock ALL of their shackles immediately, on this very day.</p>	<p>Gedeynk unz, liber got, dem zkhush fun yoysef hatsadik (X2) dos in dem tog hostu im oysgetsoygn fun zayn tfise un host im derhoybn tsu zayn a moyshl af dem land mitzrayim (X2) azoy riboyno shel oylem, in zayn zkhush zolstu derhoybn unzer unzer mazl mir zoln kholile kayn bilbul nisht hobn, dos mir zoln in tfise zitsn. (X2) Un zolst rufn tsu di gefangene frayhayt un zolst oyfbindn zeyer shlos hayntikhn tog (X2)</p>	<p>געדיינק אונז, ליבער גאָט, דעם זכות פֿון יוסף הצדיק (X2) דאָס אין דעם טאָג האָסטו אים אויסגעצויגן, פֿון זיין תּפֿיסה און האָסט אים דערהויבן, צו זיין אַ מושל אויף דעם לאַנד מצרים (X2) אזוי רבונו של עולם, אין זיין זכות זאָלסטו דערהויבן, אונזער מזל מיר זאָלן חלילה קיין בילבול נישט האָבן, דאָס מיר זאָלן אין תּפֿיסה זיצן (X2) און זאָלסט רופֿן צו די געפֿאָנגענע פֿרייהייט, און זאָלסט אויפֿבינדן זייער שלאָס היינטיקן טאָג (X2)</p>
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So many incredible people are locked behind bars-- and I pray that we feel just how much our communities are lacking because of prisons. That we feel the human beings missing from our homes, communities, places of worship, schools, and jobs. That if and when they come home, we welcome them warmly, and support their healing. On this day of Yom T'ruah, Day of Shouting, I pray that we yell and yell in solidarity with people surviving inside of prisons, and also with previously incarcerated people who are still surviving and resisting, and that we take action with them. Our shouting can happen in so many different ways— We can pressure politicians and unify with different communities working to decrease and end mass incarceration. We can learn more about what is happening inside of prisons, and donate to organizations such as the Massachusetts Bail Fund, like Reb Zusha and Motl. We can sing songs, write poetry, and pray prayers about freeing captive prisoners. We can write letters to people who are incarcerated to let them know that we haven't forgotten them. We can seek out community members who experienced incarceration, be loving towards them, learn from their wisdom, and get in the pit with them to hear their stories.

This Rosh Hashana, as we celebrate the anniversary of Yosef's release from prison and the Israelites cessation of slavery, I invite us to imagine and create a world that acts out of awareness, true justice, mercy, wholeness, courage and redemption for each and every person who is held captive against their will.

From the smallest bird cage to mega prison facilities and detention centers, may our shofar this Rosh Hashana blast through the metal bars and summon the captive prisoners towards freedom. May we unlock all of their shackles immediately, on this very day, on this very birthday of the world and ancient anniversary of liberation.