

We have all, in the past month, been thinking about safety. I know for some it has been jarring to see the locked synagogue door, but it is considered a common-sense safety protocol for Jewish communities nowadays. Some of us probably have mixed feelings about fulfilling the mitzvah of putting our hanukkiyot in our windows and publicizing our Jewish identities when Hanukkah begins on Sunday evening.

So I considered our parashah, our Torah portion, wondering what it might have to teach us about safety.

Our parashah, Vayeshev, chronicles Joseph's journey from favored son to slave and prisoner in Egypt. Joseph is the first-born son of Jacob's favorite wife, Rachel. In the first verses of the parashah, his father visibly favors him over his brothers, even making him a "*kutonet passim*," which Andrew Lloyd Webber famously translated as "amazing technicolor dream-coat." His brother are so jealous of Joseph's place in their father's affection that they are unable even to speak with him.

And yet, Joseph is somehow unaware of his brother's feelings, or at least insensitive to them. He shares with his brothers the dreams he has of his dominion over them, which even our commentators who understand him to be wholly righteous cannot quite defend. As Sforno says, "this was an unwise move. Had he been more mature, he would have kept them to himself." And yet there is an arrogance, and insensitivity that comes with being the privileged son. And the plain text tells us that after these dreams, the brothers hated him even more. Thus his family, ideally a safe space, becomes the source of great violence.

Joseph winds up stripped of his coat, sold into slavery by his brothers and brought to Egypt, where he ascends to some measure of power as the head of the household of Potiphar, an Egyptian noble. The text in Genesis 39, verse 6, tells us that he was very good looking. Commentator Rashi posits that as soon as he found himself in power, he began to eat and drink and curl his hair. . .” And thus follows the next verse. Potiphar’s wife casts her eyes against Joseph, and when he refuses have intercourse with her, saying, “how could I do this thing and sin before God?” she accuses him of attempted rape.

The Torah assumes Joseph’s innocence of the charge brought by Potiphar’s wife, a problem for the #MeToo era that Rabbi Daniel Plotkin pointed out in a dvar Torah published this week: “So what do we do with this story of Joseph? We have a woman accusing a man of sexual assault. While the narrative tells us that this is not a fair accusation, we also know that the narrative was written or at least edited later exclusively by men. When we are in a time in which we are finally believing women, how do we dismiss the charge of Potiphar’s wife and consider Joseph fully innocent?”

Joseph’s story does indeed play into the he said/she said model, where we know that too often the default is to believe him. And yet, other power dynamics are at play too, Joseph is a foreigner and a slave. Commentator Nechama Liebowitz points out that when Potiphar’s wife reports against him, first to Potiphar’s guard, also slaves, and then to Potiphar himself, her use of language is telling. When speaking to the guards, “she says, ‘look how my husband has brought a Hebrew to dally with us!’” When speaking to Potiphar, she says, “the Hebrew slave whom you brought into my house came to dally with me!”

When reporting to the guards, she invokes Joseph's foreignness, when reporting to Potiphar, she invokes both his foreignness and his status as slave. This, too, is a trope that continues to this day. In fact, the coalition Portland United Against Hate recently published a comprehensive guide to understanding warning signs of hate incitement, and one of their listed "red flags," was "Assertion of Attack on Women/Girls," defined as: "Suggesting that women or girls of the audience's group have been threatened, harassed, or defiled by members of a target group. In many cases, the purity of a group's women is symbolic of the purity of the group itself, or of its identity or way of life." Potiphar's wife may be the first woman of an elite class to deploy herself against the perception of a menacing foreign "other" man, but we know she will not be the last.

This, too, speaks to me of the allusive problem of safety. Potiphar sends Joseph to prison. In throwing Joseph in jail, Potiphar displays a common manifestation of the quest for safety. Indeed, he is keeping his wife safe from the advances of the menacing Hebrew. He is protecting against the putative threat of a frightening "other."

Who among us has not been tempted to secure safety for ourselves and throw we love at whatever cost, no matter who gets thrown under the bus? And yet, from the vantage point of the readers, we know that there is no real safety there, because the danger was created by Potiphar's wife in the first place.

Joseph himself, failing to find safety at home, sought to find it by becoming powerful in Potiphar's house. But the safety of a slave who pleases the master, too, proves to be an illusion, for the master's allegiance is never secure. I can't help but think of the "court Jews" throughout history who have made themselves

useful to the lords and kings as money lenders and text collectors – and then made convenient scapegoats for those same rulers to direct populist anger. We cannot, Joseph’s journey reminds us, find safety by allying with the power elite, who have proven again and again no real incentive to protect us – or anyone who is vulnerable.

Ultimately, where Joseph’s journey begins to turn around is in prison, where he does a favor by interpreting dreams for two fellow prisoners, disfavored servants of Pharaoh, with no promise of any benefit accruing to him in return. Stripped of his illusions of grandeur, he first assures them that he can do nothing for them, but the power to reveal the meaning of dreams can only come from God. It is only in that humility that he plants the seed for his own redemption, and to secure the safety in future chapters, for his family fleeing famine in Canaan.

Of course, Egypt is not the safe haven forever, as the Israelites will eventually all become enslaved others there, too, and require another redemption.

And perhaps that is the most important lesson. Safety is not something that can be achieved once, and then checked off the list. Safety cannot be guaranteed in our own homes and families, much less anywhere else. But it can be cultivated, moment by moment, through our connections with each other, through our sensitivity to the needs and feelings of those around us, through our refusal be incited into seeing our fellow humans as “other” and through our willingness to meet and help each other even when the benefit is not immediately clear.

I hope we all have a meaningful, joyful, courageous, and to the extent possible, safe Hanukkah. Shabbat shalom.