

Joseph and the Trauma of Human Trafficking

What We Can Learn from Joseph About Human Trafficking Today

We tell the story of Joseph being sold into slavery by his brothers. The details of his story seem unimaginable to many of us but actually reflect fundamental aspects of human trafficking in our own context- particularly across international borders. This text study presents excerpts of the biblical story coupled with contemporary understandings of the conditions, experience and psychology of human trafficking today for discussion.

Genesis 37:23-28: Joseph Sold into Slavery

When Joseph came up to his brothers, they stripped Joseph of his tunic, the ornamented tunic that he was wearing, and took him and cast him into the pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it. Then they sat down to a meal. Looking up, they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, their camels bearing gum, balm, and ladanum to be taken to Egypt. Then Judah said to his brothers, "What do we gain by killing our brother and covering up his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, but let us not do away with him ourselves. After all, he is our brother, our own flesh." His brothers agreed. When Midianite traders passed by, they pulled Joseph up out of the pit. They sold Joseph for twenty pieces of silver to the Ishmaelites, who brought Joseph to Egypt.

וַיְהִי כַּאֲשֶׁר-בָּא יוֹסֵף אֶל-אֶחָיו וַיַּפְשִׁיטוּ אֶת-יְוֹסֵף אֶת-כִּתְנֹתָיו
אֶת-כִּתְנֹת הַפָּסִים אֲשֶׁר עָלָיו:
וַיִּקְחֻהוּ וַיִּשְׁלְכוּ אֹתוֹ הַבֶּרֶה וְהַבּוֹר רֶק אֵין בּוֹ מַיִם:
וַיֵּשְׁבוּ לֶאֱכֹל-לֶחֶם וַיִּשְׂאוּ עֵינֵיהֶם וַיֵּרְאוּ וְהִנֵּה אֲרֶנֶת
יִשְׁמָעֵאלִים בָּאָה מִגִּלְעָד וּגְמָלֵיהֶם נֹשְׂאִים נָכָאֵל וְצָרִי וְלֹט
הוֹלְכִים לְהוֹרִיד מִצְרָיִמָּה:
וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוּדָה אֶל-אֶחָיו מִה-פָּצַע כִּי נִהְרַג אֶת-אֲחִינוּ וְכִסִּינוּ
אֶת-דָּמּוֹ:
לָמָּה וְנִמְכְּרֵנוּ לְיִשְׁמָעֵאלִים וְנִזְנֶנּוּ אֶל-תֶּהֱיִיבוּ כִּי-אֲחִינוּ כְּשֶׁהֲנּוּ
הָיָא וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ אֶחָיו:
וַיַּעֲבְרוּ אַנְשֵׁים מִדְּנִיָּים סְתָרִים וַיִּמְשְׁכוּ וַיַּעֲלוּ אֶת-יְוֹסֵף מִן-
הַבּוֹר וַיִּמְכְּרוּ אֶת-יְוֹסֵף לְיִשְׁמָעֵאלִים בְּעֶשְׂרִים כֶּסֶף וַיָּבִיאוּ אֶת-
יְוֹסֵף מִצְרָיִמָּה:

"Joseph- Human Trafficking Survivor"

Roger Seth on tearfund.org

Like so many victims of trafficking today, Joseph was sold by his own family. The fact that the Midianite caravan was ready to buy a slave to sell in Egypt (Genesis 37:26–28) tells us that the trade in people was already happening in the region at that time. Today, we are told, trafficking happens in every nation on earth, with many men and women involved in buying and selling fellow members of the human family. It is Judah who proposes that, rather than kill Joseph, his brothers sell him. Judah argues his point by saying, 'Let's not lay our hands on him; after all, he is our brother' (Genesis 37:27), showing his confused belief that the slave trade is more acceptable than murder. Yet the shock, loss of home, torture and abuse Joseph would have suffered as a result of being sold still caused him deep pain. Today, we often see people selling their own family members, just as Joseph's brothers did. These relatives may also explain their actions in ways similar to Judah.

Ending Human Trafficking Podcast

Episode 191 Dr. Sandie Morgan

One of the things I've noticed from a lot of survivors I've talked to is they have had dreams that have made them very vulnerable to being trafficked. We sometimes think that it's the weakest that become trafficking victims...what I saw with the 16, 17, 18 year old women was they had a mission. They wanted to make something of their lives, to be important in helping their families. So they would take risks because of those dreams. And if someone offered them a position or a job... they often took risks and were very courageous that ended very badly.

Genesis 39:11-20: Potiphar's Wife

One such day, he came into the house to do his work. None of the household being there inside, she caught hold of him by his garment and said, "Lie with me!" But he left his garment in her hand and got away and fled outside. When she saw that he had left it in her hand and had fled outside, she called out to her servants and said to them, "Look, he had to bring us a Hebrew to dally with us! This one came to lie with me; but I screamed loud. And when he heard me screaming at the top of my voice, he left his garment with me and got away and fled outside." She kept his garment beside her, until his master came home. Then she told him the same story, saying, "The Hebrew slave whom you brought into our house came to me to dally with me; but when I screamed at the top of my voice, he left his garment with me and fled outside." When his master heard the story that his wife told him, namely, "Thus and so your slave did to me," he was furious. So Joseph's master had him put in prison, where the king's prisoners were confined...

וַיְהִי כַּיּוֹם הַהוּא וַיָּבֹא הַיִּזְמָה לַעֲשׂוֹת מְלָאכְתּוֹ וְאִין אִישׁ
מֵאֲנָשֵׁי הַבַּיִת שָׁם בְּכִיתָ:
וַתִּתְפָּשֶׂהוּ בַּבִּגְדוֹ לֵאמֹר שְׁכַבָּה עִמִּי וַיַּעֲזֹב בְּגָדוֹ בְּיָדָהּ וַיָּנָס
וַיֵּצֵא הַחוּצָה:
וַיְהִי כִּי-רָאוּתָהּ כִּי-עָזַב בְּגָדוֹ בְּיָדָהּ וַיָּנָס הַחוּצָה:
וַתִּקְרָא לְאֲנָשֵׁי בֵּיתָהּ וַתֹּאמֶר לָהֶם לֵאמֹר רְאוּ תָבִיא לָנוּ אִישׁ
עִבְרִי לַצִּחֻק בְּנוּ בָּא אֵלַי לְשֹׁכֵב עִמִּי וְאֶקְרָא בְּקוֹל גָּדוֹל:
וַיְהִי כִשְׁמִעוֹ כִּי-הִרְיַמְתִּי קוֹלִי וְאֶקְרָא וַיַּעֲזֹב בְּגָדוֹ אֶצְלִי וַיָּנָס
וַיֵּצֵא הַחוּצָה:
וַתִּגַּח בְּגָדוֹ אֶצְלָהּ עַד-בּוֹא אֲדֹנָיו אֶל-בֵּיתוֹ:
וַתִּדְבֹּר אֵלָיו בְּדִבְרִים הָאֵלֶּה לֵאמֹר בָּא-אֵלַי הָעֶבֶד הָעִבְרִי
אֲשֶׁר-הֵבֵאתָ לָנוּ לַצִּחֻק בִּי:
וַיְהִי כִּהְרִימִי קוֹלִי וַיַּעֲקֹרֵב וַיַּעֲזֹב בְּגָדוֹ אֶצְלִי וַיָּנָס הַחוּצָה:
וַיְהִי כִשְׁמִיעַ אֲדֹנָיו אֶת-דִּבְרֵי אִשְׁתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר דִּבְרָה אֵלָיו לֵאמֹר
בְּדִבְרִים הָאֵלֶּה עָשָׂה לִי עֶבְדְּךָ וְהִנֵּה אֲפֹי:
וַיִּשְׁחַץ אֲדֹנָי יוֹסֵף אֹתוֹ וַיִּתְּנֵהוּ אֶל-בֵּית הַסֹּהֵר מְקוֹם אֲשֶׁר-
[אֲסִירִי] (אֲסוּרִי) הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲסוּרִים

Ending Human Trafficking Podcast

Episode 191 Dr. Sandie Morgan

Domestic servitude is the technical term... and sexual harassment is a common theme, whether we're talking about women or men... eventually the story line goes that he's accused of something that he didn't do and we have cases like that [today] too.

Genesis 43:29-30: Joseph's Emotional Trauma

Looking about, he saw his brother Benjamin, his mother's son, and asked, "Is this your youngest brother of whom you spoke to me?" And he went on, "May God be gracious to you, my boy."

With that, Joseph hurried out, for he was overcome with feeling toward his brother and was on the verge of tears; he went into a room and wept there.

וַיִּשָּׂא עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא אֶת-בְּנִימִין אָחִיו בֶּן-
אִמּוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר הִזֶּה אַחֲיֵכֶם הַקָּטָן אֲשֶׁר
אָמַרְתֶּם אֵלַי וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם יְהִנֵּה בְנִי:
וַיַּמְהַר יוֹסֵף כִּי-נִכְמְרוּ רַחֲמָיו אֶל-אָחִיו
וַיִּבְקֶשׁ לִבְכּוֹת וַיָּבֹא הַחֲדָרָה וַיִּבְכֶּה שָׁמָּה:

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[Even with all his success and power] He weeps when he sees his younger brother. It reminds us how years later, with lots of success, really we could call him a survivor now, he is still very, very susceptible to sorrow and grief over what he's experienced.

Compiled by Rabbi Sarah Bassin