

“JAILS WE CANNOT SEE”

The Midrash tells the story of a group of gangsters imprisoned by the King. They flee through a tunnel one prisoner remains behind. The warden says “Why did you not escape with the others?”

The point of the midrash, according to commentators, is that some prisoners don't realize they are in jail. Sometimes the metal bars simply seem part of the landscape. Many people in dangerous or abusive relationships do not realize they are in prison. Domestic violence is a real issue, not among the mythical 'others' but in our own lives and in our own communities.

Rabbi Meir of Rothenberg wrote one thousand years ago: “One deserves greater punishment for striking his wife than for striking another person, for he is enjoined to respect her.” We are commanded to act lovingly toward those who are closest to us. And for those of us who are outside the prison, who see others in pain or caught, we are commanded to help.

In the Talmud Rabbi Johanan is a famous healer who helps others who are in pain. When he himself is sick, The Talmud explains why he cannot heal himself: “The prisoner cannot free himself from jail.” The honesty and compassion of someone outside can sometimes help those who are trapped. Each human being is created in God's image, and to degrade a person is an affront to the Creator of us all.