

The Dignity of Work and the Indignity of Slavery

Rabbi Gordon Tucker

In this presentation:

Rabbi Gordon Tucker teaches a session on the dignity of work and the indignity of slavery. In so doing, he draws on an article from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Talmud, the rabbinic text Avot de-Rabbi Natan, a haggadah called *From Bondage to Freedom*, and the websites of the American Anti-Slavery Group and Atzum, and the rabbinic text Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer. He explores questions of work, what makes work worthwhile, serving human masters vs. serving God, slavery in antiquity and slavery today, and what it means to recognize that in our daily lives we all profit from someone else's degradation.

Questions:

What differences does Rabbi Tucker articulate between slavery and servitude?

How does the text from Talmud Berakhot 8a valorize work? Is that surprising to you?

What do you make of the story of the man in prison turning the wheel? Does that resonate for you?

What is your response to learning about modern-day slavery? How does the material from the abolish.org and the atzum.org websites make you feel?

What is your response to the story with which Rabbi Tucker closes the session, the text from Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer about the spring flowing from directly over Gehinnom?

How do you think that in your own life you might profit from the invisible servitude of others? What steps might you be able to take to right that wrong?

I was asked to lead some *limmud* on one or another article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and I don't remember exactly, how this fell out in my conversation with Brian Walt, but we decided that we would focus on the poor; you'll see that I'm going to hand out something in a moment which says, very simply, "no one shall be held

in slavery or servitude; slavery and servitude shall be prohibited in all their forms." Pretty terse article. One of the things that's interesting to me -- I'm not going to go into it particularly, but just to comment -- slavery and servitude, both words are used here which I guess indicates that they're not the same thing. I think it's noteworthy that servitude, of course, can have a positive valance. This word ayin/bet/daled, which can mean slave in the most negative sense can mean servant in a very positive sense. It's part of a very common play on words. It's what in many ways the old passover Haggadah was based on: the idea that *avadim hayyinu*, that we were a certain kind of *eved*, and then jumping ahead to the next version of the telling, now God has made us God's *avadim*, which gives us a very different kind of status in which dignity is not destroyed but upheld. To be called *eved Adonai* -- Moses and David are called that in the Bible, it's a very high title.

So it's interesting to me, just throwing this out as an aside for you to pick up in terms of the ways in which the religious notion of service may give a different spin to this, here slavery and servitude are not taken as identical but as close enough that they are both absolutely prohibited by article 4. And when we are talking about servitude to human forces, I'll remind you of Bob Dylan who says "you're going to have to serve somebody, maybe the Devil and maybe the Lord."

This is going to be based on that article. The disclaimer I begin with is, I'm a rabbi, I'm a *darshan*, I am not a social and economic and other kind of researcher, so I don't come to you armed with all kinds of mountains of facts about slavery in the world today. I did essentially what any of you would do, and probably there are some of you here who've gone into greater depth on this, I went into some of the resources available on the web to learn a little more about the extent to which this is still a problem in the world. We'll look at a couple of those things later.

All of this for me is going to be leading up to one text. I'm sharing and walking through a number of texts here but it's all leading up to one text at the end, which I came across two or three years ago while innocently doing my Wednesday morning study with my local colleagues. It was a good example, I think, of why study in general and certainly studying Torah is such a good investment. You never now when a phrase is suddenly going to strike you with such power that you can't stop thinking about it, and that was the case with this for me. I freely admit that I haven't done even the most infinitesimal amount to try to live up to the challenge of this text yet, but that doesn't mean it's not worth it to spread the challenge around.

So with that as an introduction, we'll pass these texts around.

I've given you "The Dignity of Work and the Indignity of Slavery" to understand one I think you have to understand a little bit about the other. The way we construct opposites is always a bit dependent on the structure we have in our heads; what is the opposite of slavery? Perhaps if one were in slavery one might think exactly this way, fantasize about a life of complete leisure. But of course another way of thinking about the opposite of slavery is to flip over the indignity part of it and the oppression part of it and the pain part of it and have work be a very kind experience. It's important that we get perspective on that first before turning to the other side.

I gave you Article 4, which I read very simply; it's a very terse comment, and the purpose of this is to unpack it a little in terms of Jewish sources. This is, as the seating arrangement suggests, not entirely a frontal thing; you should feel free to have whatever "aha" moments you want to have and share that with us.

Let's look at Talmud, the very first tractate of Talmud, Berakhot.

Talmud Berakhot 8a

Rabbi Hiyya bar Ami said in the name of Ulla: One who earns by the efforts of his own hands stands even higher than one who is completely God-fearing.

It's not meant to contrast those two, of course; you can be God-fearing and supported by the efforts of your own hands. But being a yireh Elohim is, surprisingly, at least in this text, not necessarily to be on the highest rung.

For of the God-fearer, it is written, "Happy (Ashrei) is the one who fears the Lord,"

-- this is from Psalm 112.

and of the one who earns by his own efforts,

-- and this is written in Psalm 128,

it is written, "You shall enjoy the fruits of your labors, you shall be happy (Ashrekha) and you shall prosper." That is, you shall be happy in this

world, and you shall prosper in the future world. And notice that of the God-fearer it does not say "you shall prosper."

This is Ulla's comment. This is quite interesting in all sorts of ways, and I'm sure you all understand you have to take a text like this with a grain of salt. You always have to ask, what is the rhetorical aim? You can't take it as a truth that is meant to be independent of context. The darshan here is trying to emphasize a certain point that he obviously feels is sometimes overlooked or underemphasized.

Since "the future world" is that which we typically associate with being God-fearing -- that's God's secret, whatever the future world might be, the world that is yet to come -- and the one who toils with his own hands is very *olam hazeh*-like, this flips that over in a way that gets your attention. You want to do good, to prosper, to go beyond happiness in this world into prosperity, which is some future gift in the world yet to be -- it's not what you expect. Go to any person who knows a little about Judaism, Christianity, and lay out the matrix: how do you get both of these, by being a good worker or by being God-fearing? They'll never guess the right answer, unless they suspect you of asking a trick question.

So it's noteworthy that there's a concern for the dignity of work. Which is treated in a different way, somewhat different but similar, in this passage from *Pesachim*, in the name of R' Yehoshua ben Levi:

Talmud Pesachim 118a

Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said: When the Holy and Blessed One told Adam, "Thorns and thistles shall it sprout for you, but your food shall be the grasses of the field," Adam began to well up with tears. "Master of the Universe, shall my ass and I both eat at the same trough??" But as soon as God said to him [immediately following] "By the sweat of your brow shall you get bread to eat," his spirits were soothed.

Grasses of the field: raw, natural, unprocessed food. What animals eat. (Or progressive people!) But as soon as God said to him, in the very next verse, "by the sweat of your brow shall you get bread to eat," his spirits were soothed. This idea that we take, again, the average person and say "tell me what the *pshat* / contextual meaning is here," that this is a continuation of a curse, it's only by the sweat of your brow that you'll get any bread -- it's flipped over in this text to become kind of a consolation for what's come before. If you are willing to put in some elbow grease, you'll have bread. And Adam is

happy with that. If he gets to work he'll see the fruits of his labor. This is an element of dignity.

Here in the next text, Avot de-Rabbi Natan which probably dates from about the 5th century, and this is maybe a little bit earlier; it's an expansion of, I think, kind of a flowering expansion of Pirkei Avot. It actually exists in 2 versions. Solomon Schechter published this version B. But there are other parallels to this in rabbinic literature.

Avot de-Rabbi Natan, Version B, Chapter 21

Rabbi Eliezer also used to say: Great is work, for just as Israel was commanded with respect to [ceasing work on] Shabbat, so was it commanded with respect to doing work; for it is written, "Six days shall you work, and on the seventh day you shall cease."

Rabbi Eliezer was one of the sages around the turn of the 2nd century, around the year 100. The quote here is Exodus 24, not the Ten Commandments. You could take that as, six days you may work but on the seventh you may not. It's being read here -- no options are being left. There aren't options on the other 6 days either. We understand there aren't options on Shabbat, you've got to cease. The normal reading would be, on the six days, you want to work, you can work, as long as you observe the strictures of Shabbat. But now it's being read that we don't really have options on any of these days! You're commanded to work on the six days just as you're commanded to cease on Shabbat.

I should hasten to add, some of you may already be thinking this, this can't be the whole story. It never is. There are some texts that are -- I don't love them so much, but they're there -- sometimes when the Torah talks about Shabbat it's *sheshet yamim te'aseh malacha*, on six days work *may* be done. It's in the passive. Not that it's spelled any differently in Hebrew, but the Masoretic tradition has it vocalized not as *ta'aseh* but as *te'aseh*, the tradition going back to Talmudic times. And sometimes it says *sheshet yamim ta'aseh*. One famous thing that appears in a number of places asks, how come sometimes it talks about work on the six days in the active form and sometimes talks about work in the passive form? And the answer that's given is, *bizman sheYisrael osin rtzono shel Makom*, when Israel does God's will, *melachtam na'seit al'yedi acherin*, their work gets done by others. It's only if you're not really in line with God's will that you've got to do it yourself.

I'll leave it to you to spin out all of the applications to a hundred yeshivot around the land of Israel -- their work, their defense, their contribution to the GNP, their this that and the other thing is done by others because they're doing God's will. I'm not being

vacuously facetious here. These passages are actually cited when issues like that come up.

There is, to some extent, an opposing view, that work is not such a great thing. It's necessary in the world but wouldn't it be nice if it were done by itself -- *te'aseh melacha*. But it's important to note that there is also an entrenched tradition that understands that work, and how work is done, is part of the dignity of being human. And that, I think, sets up an important contribution with what in addition to all of the physical pain and torture and other things that may accompany slavery, the dehumanizing aspect of the way that work is done becomes very important.

- the first in particular draws an interesting contrast between those who accomplish things by getting others to do them, and those who do things themselves. That seems relevant in terms of slavery and servitude -- the idea that people become enslaved in service to others -- "by your own hands," that's labor that you do yourself, whereas pretty much most of us have jobs that are not about doing physical labor ourselves, though they may be about getting other people to do physical labor. So it sets up the same power dynamic as in servitude, getting other people to do work that we don't want to do. And we never say that we're not guilty of that.

We're going to get back to this saying we're not guilty in a bigger and perhaps more terrifying way in the end. But what you're identifying here was a very important ideology in early Zionism and also to this day; a great deal of social critique in modern Israel has to do with the foreign workers, their conditions which are an issue in and of themselves, but that there's a need and demand for foreign workers to begin with is taken by many people to be a betrayal of many of the things that were part of Zionist ideology. I think it's an important part of our autonomy.

- right; if you talk about trying to implement this Article 4, one of the big problems in eliminating slavery is identifying it in conversation.

You're anticipating the end, so I'm going to let you hold that; we'll get back to it.

There was something that was noted in this Passover haggadah, a commentary by Rabbi Abraham Twerski. Many of you probably know who he is, he's a medical doctor and psychiatrist, done a lot of work with recovering addicts. He also is a rabbi, and he produced a haggadah with a very interesting commentary that in many ways draws on his clinical experience. He makes a comment there that he doesn't completely footnote; I wasn't able to track it down completely but I was able to gather that he was quoting something real, that among the many legends that we have about what slavery in Egypt

was like, and you probably know some of them, it's not, again, just the lash and the physical pain and degradation but the kinds of psychological torture. The rabbis imagined this; it's not in the text of the Torah. But one that we'll get back to in a little bit in another context: that they would give young people the kind of work that would be more suitable for old people, and give old people the kind of work that would be more suitable for young people. And they spun out all kinds of fantasies about the various kinds of perversions of not matching people with the kind of work that they're meant to be doing.

There was among these kinds of fantasies that the Egyptians also had them building with these endless quarries of bricks, they would have them building things in places where the Egyptians knew it was kind of marshy. So they'd finish building and go on to another project, and imagine the slaves coming back to admire what they had built -- they were slaves but they still wanted to admire what they had built -- and it had sunk into the swamp, so there was nothing even to admire. He cites that, and then tells the following story, which he also doesn't footnote; I don't know whether he made it up or not, but it's a powerful story about the dignity of work. That even in a condition of servitude there can still be, unless even that is taken away from you, so great is the dignity of work that even in a condition of servitude that there may be something of a lift from seeing something that you've accomplished, and the ultimate degradation is for that to be taken away from you. Here's the story he gives:

From Bondage to Freedom (Passover Haggadah with Commentary by Rabbi Abraham Twerski), Shaar Press, 1994, pg. 110

A man was once sentenced to twenty-five years of hard labor, and was shackled to a huge wheel fixed in the wall, which had to crank during all his waking hours. As he turned the heavy wheel, he would often try to imagine what he might be achieving through his backbreaking work. Perhaps he was turning a millstone that was grinding grain into flour, or perhaps he was bringing water up from a deep well to irrigate a field.

When the long sentence came to an end and the shackles were removed, the first thing the man did, broken in both body and spirit, was to go to the other side of the wall to see just what he had been accomplishing for twenty-five years. How shocked he was to discover that there was nothing there! Just a wheel in the wall, not attached to anything. At this point he broke down in tears. "Twenty-five years of hard work, all for nothing." The awareness that all his work was of no avail was far worse than the hard labor itself. The Egyptians knew this, and this is how they tortured their slaves.

So, clearly this is not a historical verdict on the Egyptians; it is not a straightforward reading of Torah. But it's letting the imagination go, as far as, to what depths of depravity can control over another human being go? When you think that the worst thing is to have someone in bondage, and to be able to beat them at will -- that's horrible, it doesn't have to get any worse. And yet there are parts of the human psyche, human dignity, that can still be hanging by a thread. I think that's the power of that story.

I'd like now to move over from this idea of the dignity of work, and how that can hang by a thread in the most dire of circumstances, to deal with the issue of slavery in one of the most central and classic sources that we have on this, which as is typical in Talmudic literature comes kind of *en passant*. Here it is:

Talmud, Bava Metzia 10a

Rav Nahman and Rav Hisda both said the following: If one picks up a lost object on someone else's behalf, that other person does not thereby acquire it.

-- A lost object; there are all kinds of rules about when you're entitled to consider an object lost, when you're allowed to say finder's keepers. We're assuming that this is legitimately a lost object. I pick it up, and I'm not interested in it, but I know that my friend would be interested in it, so I pick it up and I take it for him. It is not a valid acquisition.

What is the reason for this? It is analagous to seizing property on another creditor's behalf, when there are yet other creditors. In such a case, the seizure does not affect an acquisition, since others would be disadvantaged thereby.

-- When someone owes me money and nothing has worked, I may be entitled to seize his property to satisfy the debt. You're not entitled to seize it in armed robbery! There are procedures even for that.

I'm entitled to give someone else an advantage. But if there are other creditors, and I rely on disadvantaging them -- this in a silly way reminds me of handing out candy to kids on Simchat Torah. Someone will inevitably come up and say, "Can I have another one for my friend?" And I say no, tell your friend to come over here himself and get in line with everyone else.

This is how Talmud works; we're going to get to the punchline, but you have to understand where this is coming from and how it gets there. Finding an object is analogized to, I'm entitled to take it just as a creditor is entitled to seize the property, but there are other people who may come along, and I can't take the lost object on behalf of someone who's miles away because I'm depriving other people of the opportunity of finding it and picking it up.

But Rava raised the following objection to Rav Nahman: [We have learned that] if a hired worker finds something while working, it belongs to him only in a case when the employer hired him with the words "do weeding for me today" or "do hoeing for me today." If, however, he said "work for me today," that which he finds on the job belongs to the employer.

-- If you are hired for a specific task, and this is incidental to that task but you're getting the task done, then you're entitled to keep the thing. But if he said "work for me today," "I'm buying all of your time today," anything that he produces in that kind of arrangement belongs to the employer. What is the objection? In the second case, when he is hired "work for me today," if he finds something on the job he's acquiring it for the employer. But how can he do that? He's acquiring it for someone else, which is just what Rav Nahman and Rav Hisda said you couldn't do with a lost object! How could he be acquiring it for his employer?

Rav Nahman answered that in the case of the employer, it is different, since an employee's hand is a surrogate for the employer's hand.

-- The first case, the person I'm thinking of didn't know I was going to find anything; he didn't appoint me an agent to find lost objects on his accord. But when I have an employee relationship, I am the shaliach, the surrogate, the agent of the employer. So it's not acquiring it for someone else, it's acquiring it directly.

But, asked Rava, didn't Rav already teach that an employee can quit his job even in the middle of the day?

-- He cannot be held to contracted service. Rava taught that. So how can you say he is the employer's surrogate if he has that kind of independence, to be able to quit during the day?

Rav Nahman answered: As long as he hasn't quit, his hand is a surrogate for the employer's hand. And the fact that he is allowed to quit is based on an entirely separate reason, to wit: It is written (Lev. 25:55) "It is to me that the Israelites are servants; they are My servants." That is, they are not to be servants to servants!

All human beings are supposed to be in a condition of positive servitude to God, *avdei Adonai*. And that's a station of dignity. To be a servant to a servant, not a station of dignity. That's a degradation. That's not what human beings were created to be. Which is why you can't be forced to complete a contract of service. You can assert *midday* -- you won't get the rest of your wages; you might be sued for disadvantaging your employer; but you can't be forced to complete the service.

This is one of these great terse statements of how the tradition sees the human condition.

- So one of the issues is, when do these texts address Jews only and when do they address...looking outwards? This one seems to imply all human beings.

The text says *ki li bnei Yisrael avadim*. It is speaking of Israel. The Talmud is giving here some rules having to do with Jews being employers of other Jews; that's what the legal system is addressing.

- A category that's typical might be *kiddush haShem*, referring lost property is something that we would do in order for *kiddush haShem*, even though we're not required -- the sort of category where we're immediately, even in Talmudic times, is likely to be extended.

Probably the most cited story on that is the story of Shimon ben Shetlach, told in the Yerushalmi, where his students go out to buy him a mule to do whatever work he was doing; if he had a car it would be easier to do whatever he's doing! So they go out to buy him a mule, they buy it from some pagan harem, and they find that as they're leading him back, they noticed around the neck and looked closer and saw that it was a precious jewel. Which they now realized the owner had probably tied there as a place of putting it down. And they said, "yippee," and came back and said, we thought we were helping you out, but now you'll never have to work again, you can sell this and live on the money. And he said, the response that the Yerushalmi gives is a phenomenal one: he says to them, "Do you think I'm a barbarian?" That's literally the word he uses, *barbarya*. "I know that legally I'm entitled to keep it! But I would rather be the cause of this pagan saying 'blessed being the God of the Jews' than have all the jewels in the world."

I'm a little bit ambivalent about these *darkhei shalom* texts. They seem to be suggesting, well, we don't really have to do it, but it would be good for us. Not exactly the attitude I think we ought to be trying to cultivate. Certainly not in the world we live in. I don't want to promote judgementalism about times that we haven't experienced. That is, Shimon bar Yochai, some centuries later, author of one of the worst statements that you'll find anywhere in the Talmud, which is "You, Israel, are called humans; but these pagans are not really called humans." -- I don't know what I would have said if I had lived through the Hadrianic persecutions; I don't know what I would have said if I'd lived through the Crusades. The danger is in saying, well, Shimon bar Yochai said it, therefore it's eternally and context-less-ly true. Unfortunately there are people who do things like that with these kinds of texts. I don't want to judge Shimon bar Yochai or Shimon ben Shetach or anyone in these texts; I do want to judge myself based on how I use them.

- There's a set of these *darkhei shalom*, *darkhei noam*, *kiddush hashem* devices which extend Jewish laws to non-Jews; the question is always whether they're excuses or public relations gimmicks --

Primarily what we would call enlightened self-interest. It may be enlightened but it's still self-interest. One of the variations is "to prevent hatred." "To prevent hatred and to keep them from starting pogroms, we will be nice to them.

- But it seems like a jewel on the neck of a donkey is so preposterous that the story as written in order to be a teaching opportunity. It's not as if anybody ever found a jewel on the neck of a donkey.

Right. Although I have left things in the darnedest places!

- Transforming the Israel declaration of independence. Normally I take your take of *mipnei darkhei shalom*, that is, okay, we'll do it for prudential reasons. But it occurs to me, maybe the rabbis of the time, unable to be good to non-Jews, were seizing elements of the tradition which you could manipulate. People who continue to be opposed to any kind of sympathy, you could say -- so maybe they were doing something better here. If you get in the habit of being humane to everybody.

So having looked at that bold, ringing declaration of *lo avadim b'avadim* -- I've known this text practically my whole life; the first time I heard it, when I was a little kid, was studying *parashat Mishpatim*. Which is itself a kind of melancholy kind of thing, right after the 10 commandments, they've just left Egypt, they're at Mount Sinai, and they're

given laws and the very first thing is about slavery. Your eyes pop out, you're saying, what is going on here? I'm not going to get into all the things that have been said about that, but one of the things that comes up in the very beginning is the person who says, 'I don't want to go free after 6 years,' so his ear gets bored into the doorway, presumably putting a drop of blood on the doorway which symbolizes that the house owns this slave now. One of the things that is asked by the rabbinic tradition was, why do they have to pierce his ear? They say, the ear that heard on Mount Sinai *ki li bnei Israel, v'lo avadim b'avadim* obviously didn't get it. That he's willing to make himself a slave to a servant. And so that ear deserves to be disfigured a little bit because it didn't do its job; the ear was supposed to get it, *lo avadim b'avadim*. I've known it all my life and I can never read it without feeling a little bit of a lift, a tingle.

Let's turn from that to the next page, which will begin to get us into some of the unfortunate reality, and then we'll turn to our last text.

I've got things from two different websites here, both of which I think are very useful, though certainly not the only sources for learning something about this. One is iabolish.org, the American Anti-Slavery Group, and the second is Atzum.org, Avodat Tzedek u-Mishpat, and they deal with a number of issues in Israel, very prominently the trafficking issue. I chose these paragraphs for a particular reason.

**From the Website of the American Anti-Slavery Group
(www.iabolish.org)**

Contrary to popular belief, slavery didn't end with Abraham Lincoln in 1865. Experts estimate that today there are 27 million people enslaved around the world. It's happening in countries on all six inhabited continents. And yes, that includes the United States. The CIA estimates 14,500 to 17,000 victims are trafficked into the "Land of the Free" every year.

Slavery cannot be dismissed as an isolated problem in remote villages; it is a global issue, which profoundly yet quietly affects our daily lives. Many goods produced with slave labor are exported directly to North America and Europe, and consumers often purchase these slave-made products while unaware of their tainted origins. In addition, although production of certain consumer goods may not explicitly use slave labor, they may still use slave-made components. As an example, Kevin Bales cites slave-produced charcoal that is essential to making steel in Brazil. Much of this steel then becomes car parts and other metal goods that make up a quarter of all of Brazil's exports.

Among the more prominent slave-made goods from India are oriental carpets. In recent years, the carpet export industry has become one of India's largest - and is believed to "employ" more child slaves than any other industry. Between April of 1995 and March of 1996, Indian carpet exports earned \$656 million, with the largest portion (\$225 million) coming directly from the United States. In 1998, the majority of US carpet imports originated in India, with income for India amounting to approximately \$282 million. Indeed, the carpet industry proves to be extremely valuable for the Indian economy, earning large amounts of foreign exchange and providing further entry into the global market.

For loom owners, children are accessible, easily exploited, and very cheap (if not free). According to Anti-Slavery International and the Bonded Liberation Front, India's hand-knotted carpet-making industry accounts for roughly 300,000 child slaves. Slavery is also rampant in the carpet industries of several neighboring countries. Pakistan has at least 300,000 child slaves working on its looms, and Nepal has anywhere from 100,000 to 200,000 child slaves making carpets. In fact, within these three countries alone, there are likely to be at least one million children producing two-thirds of the world's supply of carpets.

And this is just one industry and one example of this. Atzum is an important organization:

From the Atzum Web Site (www.atzum.org)

Human trafficking is modern-day slavery. It is among the fastest growing criminal activities in the world. It is estimated that 600,000 - 800,000 people, mostly women and children, are trafficked across borders worldwide every year.

Trafficked women, in general, come from desperately impoverished areas, both rural and urban. Many of them have little or no education at all. A high percentage of victims come from a background of physical and sexual abuse. Most of them are single or single mothers. The average age of trafficked women in Israel is estimated to be 23.

Victims are often physically caged in brothels with guards there to prevent their escape. Most victims have been forbidden to leave by their pimps

and traffickers - dangerous criminals who threaten the lives of the victims and their families.

An example not so long ago of the brutality -- there is this underworld there, where there are indeed dangerous criminals.

Victims also feel that they have nowhere to turn. Most believe that they will be prosecuted as illegal aliens and put in prison if they turn to the police.

No one would consent to becoming a slave of their own free will. Victims will sometimes "consent" to the initial stage of trafficking because they were misled or deceived by traffickers; other times abject poverty or psychological coercion leads victims to consent. Any "consent," however, is not really voluntary. That's why countries around the world, including Israel, have agreed that "consent" of the victim does not justify the traffickers' actions.

Due to the highly clandestine nature of human trafficking, it is impossible to know how many victims are in the country at any given time. Government sources indicate that over 3,000 women have been trafficked into Israel while most NGOs give a much higher estimate.

Hotels, newspapers, drivers and internet services are guilty of providing services to pimps and brothels thereby enabling the exploitation of women.

Without clients, there would be no market for the exploitation of victims.

I want also to read you something that came from Rabbi Jill Jacobs at Jewish Funds for Justice; she wrote about sweeping issues in terms of labor issues. It brings the following example -- by the way, getting back to this idea of the Egyptian taskmasters, she brings the example of a plastics factory in Patterson, NJ, with a manager who purposely assigned the company's oldest employee, a woman of 73, to the heaviest machines. And other younger workers there begged him to let them trade places with the elderly woman only to meet with the manager's insistence that they continue their own less strenuous work. So it turns out that these things aren't just fantasies about the Egyptians.

But one of the things that she says in this piece is that when she was doing some community organizing she found the following. She encountered a nursing home in New Jersey filled with Filipino nurses who were brought to the United States illegally and forced to work as indentured servants to pay off their transportation costs. The nurses lived in the nursing home and were on-call 24 hours a day. Without documentation, the nurses could not take the risk of leaving the home.

- That's fairly common in Israel where they bring in Filipino women to serve -- not in nursing homes, but --

Lots of cases of foreign workers who come in and their employers will take whatever documents they have; they may even have passports, but they never see them again. So it does become this kind of avadim l'avadim.

- to go one step further: we need to know they're nurses! Were they ever trained?

It sounds as if they had some training in that and that's why they were brought, but now... once you have the upper hand, the temptations and the possibilities of engaging in this kind of terrible exploitation is almost unpreventable. It depends on conscience.

- that's a lot of collusion of government authorities, everywhere

So here's the text I wanted you to see. From Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer, which is late -- what does "late" mean? Ninth century. It quotes a lot of the earlier authorities; Rabbi Eliezer in the title is the one we saw before. But this is not contemporaneous with Rabbi Eliezer, it's much later. It's an important and a rich work, though it sort of peters out at the end. At the beginning it is spinning out various kinds of tales and fantasies about creation, and this is one of them:

Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer, Chapter 5

At the beginning of day three, the earth was as flat as a board, with the waters covering it entirely. But when the word came forth from on high, mountains and hills arose from the sides of the earth, and the waters were scattered about, as valleys were formed and the waters flowed into the valleys.

-- This is almost a direct reflection of psalm 104: the mountains come up, the valleys go down, and that's how the waters are tamed. Water, in a text like this, is a stand-in or symbol for chaotic forces, things which destroy civilization. A water world is uninhabitable, uncivilized.

The waters immediately attempted to rise up again and cover the earth once more, at which God rebuked them, and secured them under the divine feet... and thus there are deep waters beneath the surface of the earth, on which the earth rides just as a boat rides on the waters of the sea.

-- That's an early-medieval cosmology.

God then opened a channel to the Garden of Eden, from which all sorts of plant life began to sprout over the surface of the earth, including all kinds of fruit bearing trees. In this way, God set a table for the animal world even before they were created.

-- The word here is *briyot*; it clearly means the animal world, not humans.

And fountains also arise out of the deep in order to provide water for all creatures. Rabbi Joshua said that the depth of the earth is a distance of sixty years' walk. And there is one fountain that sits immediately over Gehinnom, which flows from there, producing [warm] waters that provide pleasure for human beings.

Remember what the deep is. The deep is the waters that God had to press down with the divine feet to get them under control because these are the forces of chaos that destroy civilization. And one of these finds its way right over Gehinnom, and it's warmed up there, to provide warm waters which provide pleasure for human beings.

Those of you who have ever been up Masada with a tour guide know how the tour guides love to take you to the steam bath that was unearthed there, and will explain to you how it worked. You can see some reconstructions of the hollow pipes that were beyond the plaster walls, and they describe to you how the floors and walls were filled with these hollow pipes. You would come in there and it would groan, and there were slaves underneath the floor and outside who were constantly stoking a fire and using bellows to force this hot air into these channels so that the walls and the floor would get very hot and you would pour water on it and it would produce steam.

You have to think of this split-screen. Pleasure for human beings, that's all we see. What you don't see, because it's sixty years' walk away -- or it might as well be; I'd like to think that's what Rabbi Joshua is saying, why he suddenly throws it in here -- it's sixty years' walk away, but it's actually right beneath you. There's slavery going on underneath, that's why you're enjoying yourself.

This spring, which is made of the waters that want to destroy civilization but have allegedly been tamed, finds a way to destroy civilization in its own way. It gets warmed up by hell. And that's what produces the hot springs of Teverya; that's what they actually said, that Teverya sits on top of hell, that's why there are hot springs there. But you have to go beyond this text to understand what it's saying. You don't know what pleasures you and I are enjoying that somewhere, you think, sixty years' walk away (but maybe closer than we think) is happening because of someone else's hell.

This is what I said at the beginning, this is the text that I encountered three years ago and I can't get it out of my mind and I haven't even begun to scratch the surface of rising to the challenge that this represents. If you think about the kids in India or Nepal or walk on the carpets or wear the clothes from -- is the Gap still a problem? If it's not, some other place is a problem -- whatever it is, if you think about that, you realize as the iAbolish website said, how are you reasonably going to know that the machine that you buy has some part in it that wasn't produced with charcoal that was the result of slave labor? You can't, really. That may in effect be sixty years' walk away. But I guess that the very least, what we have to realize is that whatever we see of poverty and degradation anywhere in the world, we have to at least entertain the possibility that that poverty and degradation may be a small measure of my comfort. And if that's the case, if that's a possibility, then it gives us some measure of responsibility for that. You can't look at poverty and degradation in different parts of the world we live in in the same way once you understand what Rabbi Joshua is telling us about the springs that are warmed up by Gehinnom.

- is the text, do you think that's what it's about? Is there any sense of what else it means?

I don't know what else it's about, unless it's just idle speculation. But I tend to give the ancient rabbis more credit than that, that they had something in mind. I don't know what else it could be about. By the way, the world I described at Masada was their world; they knew that pleasures came from slavery and degradation. They knew it better than we know it. I don't know what else he could have been driving at.

- there's a beautiful Japanese anime movie, I forget the animator, but he did a movie called Spirited Away --

- Hayao Miyazake.

- Yes, exactly. The movie was about the baths. The whole movie is exactly what you're talking about, this story of the degradation that took place around a Japanese bathhouse. The only speculation I have about this, I didn't expect your argument, but I wonder about the piece for the rabbis about all the sins that would happen in the Roman bathhouse; could that be what they're talking about, that the pleasures of the bathhouse were sexual pleasures...?

They understood that a lot of the -- there's famous texts at the beginning of tractate Avodah Zarah where Shimon bar Yochai is quoted as denouncing all of the so-called achievements and progress of Roman civilization as all being part of a way of exercising power over the powerless. What looks to you like great progress is actually something very different from the point of view of empire.

But look, we also have a scene of Rabban Gamaliel sitting in the bath of Aphrodite and having a great time! And someone says to him, look, what are you doing, Aphrodite, you're Rabban Gamaliel! And the response is, well, she came into my territory; I didn't go into hers. This is the land of Israel, so. Like everything, you should never expect any culture to be univocal on these things. There is obviously a certain amount of ambivalence. As we do! We have our moments, hopefully more than moments, of great, deep social conscience; but we also go through our dormant periods, if we're honest with ourselves, when we just sort of enjoy things and want to put it out of our minds. How many of us when we go on vacations are going to mar our vacation time by thinking about these things? Most of us go into dormancy.

What's such a kick about this, I mentioned to you before that for "creatures" that the word was *briyot*, but here, it's *bnei Adam*. God sets a table for the creatures, provides food for the creatures, *briyot*; but this fountain which flows from Gehinnom provides *ta'anug b'nei Adam*, provides pleasure for human beings. And one of the things that -- it's not just the image of hell producing pleasure, but the whole idea that it looks on the surface like this is a great advance of civilization! But it's actually the way the text is set up -- the waters represent, always in these texts, the forces that destroy civilization. These springs, so to speak, these mythical springs which seem to be the epitome of civilization, these wonderful places where people can have enjoyment, are an insidious way of bringing hell to the civilized world.

- I'm curious as to what in the time of the author of this text Gehinnom meant? What was he evoking?

Hellfire. That's Gehinnom in all of these texts.

- Almost in a medieval sense?

Oh yes. This is a medieval text. This Rabbi Joshua he's quoting, we have no idea of know what he said; certainly not when it's a text compiled almost 700 or more years after he lived. So I shouldn't state so quickly that Rabbi Joshua lived in that world. But people in the 9th century lived in a world where they understood that better than we do, and if there's even a possibility that this is preserving a real tradition, even more so. But that's what Gehinnom means: the fires of hell.

- is that a transposition from Catholic thought? How Jewish is that?

Very Jewish. They got it from us, not the other way around.

- Where are the texts on this, the fires?

Very early rabbinic literature; even earlier, apocalyptic literature that preceded the rabbinic stuff.

- I'm wondering whether you thought this is an exhortation to boycott these places or to recognize that they should be abolished, because it's not really clear whether it's saying don't partake in this -- I was noticing for the first time that the first line from the Declaration of Human Rights is passive, as you were pointing out: "No one shall be held..." So the level of action that we're exhorted to is up for grabs.

It's up for grabs. Is it enough to passively ignore it or do you have to do something about it?

The strangest thing here is about the sixty years' walk. I ask myself, what's that doing here? I suppose it could mean, don't worry about it, it's sixty years' walk away, but I doubt that. What I think it means is, you think it's sixty years' walk away, and it may be

some remote village in Nepal, but it may be closer than you think because those waters actually warm you.