

SLAVERY THEN AND NOW

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The Torah, in Leviticus 25:55, has God saying “The children of Israel are My servants”, and the rabbinic tradition afterwards added the following gloss to that biblical verse: “My servants – and not servants to servants.” In this way, our sages told us that we are meant to be servants of God – a service freely chosen. And conversely, we are not ever to be the chattel slaves, or even the unwilling servants, of other human beings. This is one of the most ringing, enduring, and inspiring lessons of the Hebrew Bible and the Jewish tradition.

I have known that all my life, and have taken pride in the fact that my tradition and faith gave this gift to the world. In addition, I have always taken, and still do take, enormous pride in being an American, believing that the country of my birth and citizenship has brought to the world manifold gifts of that same magnitude. And because of all this, it was an especially searing experience, when I was in Ghana with American Jewish World Service (AJWS) in early February, to have visited one of the truly accursed places on earth, the Slave Castle at Cape Coast, on the Atlantic shore of Ghana. It is one of many places at which the trans-Atlantic slave trade was centered from the 15th to the 19th centuries. The various castles were built and controlled at various times by a number of European powers: the Portuguese, the Spanish, the Swedes, the Dutch, and the British. This particular castle was entirely British, and it was a place of commerce for certain people and a place of horror for millions of others for about a century and a half.

Approaching it, I had the same sensation that I had about 15 years ago, when I was in Berlin, and I took a commuter train to Wannsee, because I was curious to see where it was that the ultimate evil to befall our own people had been plotted. (It was at a January 1942 conference in Wannsee, a suburb of Berlin, that the “Final Solution” was planned out). It was extremely painful to walk through the idyllic streets, past well manicured properties and beautiful homes – a place of delight, to be sure. It is the place the Berliners will today tell you to go for some pleasant respite on a hot summer day (much as New Yorkers might tell you to go to Jones Beach). But you look across the lake, and there is a palace, looking stately, and trying in vain to hide from the eyes of those who know what happened there. Approaching Cape Coast is like that. The Ghanaian shore line is beautiful, the hills are pretty, and the local color of the fishing villages – which are not, of course, as prosperous as is a Berlin suburb -- is charming. But if you know something about our history, you know that the castle up ahead is one of those epicenters of unfathomable wickedness, an affront to God and humanity alike.

We toured that castle. It is the place to which men and women were taken in chains from their homes by neighboring enemy tribal chiefs of their own land. The castle is where agents of European trading companies bickered over them, bargained for them, measured them precisely as what they were – merchandise for the creation of wealth -- and then, of course, branded them so that they could not be misappropriated by another company. We saw the dungeons in which they were then kept. As many as a thousand men and 300 women were kept there, in separate dungeons, in the lowest part of the castle.

Those sorry and cruel spaces had the tiniest little slits for light and ventilation. The lucky ones were shipped off quickly. The less lucky? They languished in the dungeons for as much as 6 weeks, until the trading ships came in from Europe.

There was also The Cell. This was where those who had the audacity to put up a fight for their God-given freedom were locked in with no ventilation and no light, and left to starve and/or suffocate.

A tunnel led to the Door of No Return, so labeled by the British owners of the castle. At this door, the Africans left their homeland forever, and next found themselves on ships bound for the Caribbean and the Americas. When you stand in the courtyard, in the daylight above the dark tunnel, you see that there is a small door that opens to give a supervisor above a view of the slaves making their way in shackles to the Door of No Return. They were counted in this way, to make sure that none of this human merchandise was missing. I immediately knew that I would never read Unetaneh Tokef the same way again on Rosh Hashanah. You know what I mean -- the line about God counting us one by one as a shepherd counts his sheep. How could I ever read it the same way again? One of the things you learn at places and moments such as that is how the cherished image of the one legitimate Master and Sovereign considering those made in the divine image can be twisted and perverted into the ultimate blasphemy against that image and its Creator.

It was particularly poignant to see a word that we Jews use of ourselves all the time so prominently displayed and used all over such places. It is the word "Diaspora". The "African Diaspora" refers to the millions upon millions of descendants of people who were uprooted from their homeland and who are now scattered throughout the world. Some of them perhaps are living comfortable lives in many cases, but they are still part of a community, a collective, that remembers its roots. The Door of No Return goes out to the sea. But when you pass through it and turn around, you find that 10 years ago, the reverse side of the door, which you face with the sea at your back, was given a new name – the "Door of Return". It was through that door of return that the bones of an African American and an African Jamaican were returned in 1998, and reinterred at the place where the slaves had their last bath before being shackled in the castle. This, too, ranks with the human commonalities that one discovers even in far-off places, and it was deeply moving, standing at that door and learning of this return home, to think of the bones of Joseph that were carried home from Egypt, the place of oppression, back to be buried in the original homeland, in the very place from which he had been stolen, the city of Shechem (modern Nablus).

At the entrance to the castle are the following words:

"In everlasting memory of the anguish of our ancestors
May those who died rest in peace
May those who returned find their roots
May humanity never again perpetrate
Such injustice against humanity

We the living vow to uphold this.”

It is the kind of inscription that one could see in so many sad sites of Jewish “pilgrimage” in Europe and elsewhere, but here were those same words connecting us to an entirely different segment of our common human race.

Moreover, as I looked at the guest book, I saw that several lines above me an American woman had signed in, and under the column labeled “Remarks”, she simply wrote, “I finally returned after 500 years.” I read that, closed my eyes, and asked myself, “Am I in Ghana, or in the Land of Israel?” And which Diaspora’s memories, and hopes, and dreams was I hearing at that moment? The truth is, it all merged together.

The day of the visit to the Cape Coast castle could have been considered just a touring day, with little to do with American Jewish World Service and its current work. But that was not the case, because we were accompanied on this journey by a most extraordinary young man, named James Kofi Annan. He is the director of a project called Challenging Heights, which was being considered as a possible recipient of AJWS grant monies.

James’s story began in a way that is also familiar from the Torah. Exodus 21:7 -- “should a man sells his daughter as a maidservant...”. Why would someone do that to his daughter? The answer is sad and simple: too many mouths to feed. And so it was with James, the twelfth child in his family, not in ancient times, but in the 1980s. And he told us his own story as we drove towards the ugly history of the Cape Coast castle.

At age six, James was sold into indentured bondage, working involuntarily in Ghana’s Volta region’s fishing villages. He worked as much as 17 hours a day. Food and shelter were scant. Abuse was constant. And as he grew in age and was somewhat stronger, the tasks became more back-breaking and more perilous. He would routinely be sent diving down into the river beds to free fishing nets that had gotten caught below. The dangers included bites from lethal water snakes, or encounters with other very vicious and treacherous fish. Worst of all was the very real possibility (it often happened to other children) of getting caught in the nets and never making it to the surface. In his early teens, James decided to escape, and he succeeded.

James couldn’t read or write, like every other member of his family. But he decided that he needed to learn English, so he borrowed books from young children in school so he could begin to teach himself to read. He worked in order to pay for his own schooling, more than ten years too late. But he proved that the illiteracy in his family, as in so many others, is usually not a matter of ability, but of economic circumstance. In an astonishingly short period of time, he broke national records for scores on standardized exams. He went to college and graduated. He came to the attention of Barclays Bank, where he rose to a managerial level, again with lightning speed.

But after using half of his pay to start the organization “Challenging Heights”, he eventually quit his coveted job, for which he had worked so hard, because he understood within himself that he

was not put on earth to be a bank manager, but rather to save others from the experiences that he had had.

Challenging Heights empowers children through education. Dozens of former child slaves study together with children who are vulnerable to trafficking. Former child slaves take refuge and begin to heal. And by working with the families of the other children, they, in turn, are much less likely to be trafficked themselves.

People such as James are truly unusual, extraordinary people, who exemplify what we all aspire to be in our better moments: people with clarity as to why we're here, and with a sense of destiny that goes beyond personal gain, to service. Service that is freely chosen. The playwright Edward Albee wrote this line in his play "The Zoo Story": "Sometimes a person has to go a very long distance out of his way to come back a short distance correctly." James was a guide on that journey, and a model to us all.

What an extraordinary day that was, in which past met present, and in which my Jewish and American roots connected in a most unexpected way with brothers and sisters I never knew.

There is a rabbinic text that became even more vivid for me on that powerful day on the Ghanaian coast. It comes from what is probably a ninth-century compilation of *midrashim* entitled "Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer". In chapter five of that work, there is a fantastic embellishment of what the Torah says happened on the third day of creation, when the waters were pushed aside and down to the deep, in order to make dry land and the sustenance of life on earth possible.

Here is part of what it imagines:

"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.....and.....there are deep waters beneath the surface of the earth, on which the earth rides. 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 (i.e. a fiery hell), which flows from there, producing [warm] waters that provide pleasure for human beings.

My first reaction when I first encountered this text a few years ago was to say, "Wow, they found a way to rehabilitate the reputation of Gehinnom, hell; at least it provides some pleasure after all!" And then I realized that this was not at all what Rabbi Joshua and his colleagues were trying to tell us. This was no idle speculation and word play. And they were not rehabilitating Gehinnom. In fact, they were doing the exact opposite – they were reminding us to be aware of the fact that the pleasures of many of our paradises are often situated right above somebody else's hell, and are made possible by those hells.

That's how it was in the slave castle, where the commander's and ship captain's quarters were beautifully apportioned spaces, appointed in a most lovely way on the upper floor, literally right over the dungeons and the tunnels. Delicacies were served above, sea breezes came in through

the windows, views of the inland hills abounded, and the Gehinnom, the hell, of thousands of human beings at any moment – and millions of them over time -- were kept out of sight.

The beloved Christian hymn “Amazing Grace”, I learned, was written by John Newton, who was once a captain of one of these slave ships. No doubt he took many meals and slept soundly on the upper floors of one of these castles on the African Atlantic coast, right over the dungeons. And that’s what he meant, years later, when he awoke to what he did in his “wretched” year and wrote in this hymn: “was blind, but now I see.” It is a Jewish idea, this business of awakening to that to which we were blind. We would have written the hymn a little differently, though. In Jewish vocabulary, it would not be “grace” that opens our eyes, but rather responsibility.

Rabbi Joshua noted drily that it’s sixty year’s walk down into the depths. What he no doubt meant was that we’d like to think so. And it might as well be for all we think about it. But it’s not true. James’s hell and those of others like him cannot possibly be unconnected in this global world and economy from my and your pleasures and privileges. It is not sixty year’s walk any more, and it never really was. Perhaps my biggest lesson was the responsibility to open the eyes. The clothes that we buy cheaply because of sweat shops overseas, the carpets that are made by indentured child laborers in India, the ways in which we arrogantly consume so much of the world’s resources and insist that we have a right to low energy costs – these and multiple other phenomena (which we can, and should, think of) are the ways in which our pleasures flow from hells elsewhere.

You might protest, correctly, that the same interconnection that makes this true also prevents us from being completely pure in our lives. How could we possibly eliminate all hellish taint from the things that we acquire to live and the investments that we make? The answer is: we can’t be 100% pure. But there is something that we can do, and indeed have a responsibility to do. We can be open-eyed, and compassionate, and caring, and not insular. We can reject the temptation to say of any suffering in the world that it’s not our fault and thus none of our responsibility. We may not be able to avoid all harm in the world. But since it is always distinctly possible that the fires of suffering anywhere are warming the springs in which we luxuriate, we must pay attention to the ways in which we can help alleviate the suffering, even if it lessens our own pleasures. We can do no less as members of the human race made in God’s image.

That’s the ultimate answer to the question posed in the Torah, and in the Passover Haggadah: “What is the meaning of this service that you do?” Why would a Jewish organization do the kind of service that AJWS does in the places where it does it? The answer is because we Jews need to know that while we have suffered, we are not the only ones who suffer. And it is because we need to acknowledge that we, like all human beings blessed with freedom and prosperity, can unwittingly be part of others’ suffering. And it is because, like James, we need to remember that we can also be part of their redemption, their coming home, and it is only in that way that we truly become willing, and voluntary servants of God.