

Human Rights Themes for Divrei Torah:

Slavery and Parshat Vayeshev, Genesis 37:1-40:23 (December 11-12)

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This week's *parsha* is framed by Joseph's experience as a slave. He is sold by members of his own family, resold to traders who take him to Egypt, and ends up as a favored house slave of an important government minister. But like anyone whose freedom belongs to another, Joseph's position in the household is tenuous, dependant on the whims of those who own his very personhood. Accused falsely of a crime, Joseph winds up in prison, with no legal recourse for his release. Foreshadowing the later, uncertain position of the Israelites in Egypt, Joseph is a stranger in a strange land, with no external structure for support.

Joseph's brothers choose slavery as a preferable alternative to his death, but they substitute one horrific fate for another. Joseph's life is spared but he loses control over his destiny. His sale price—20 pieces of silver—was typical for a male slave of his time. His destination in Egypt was the site of an international slave trade, sending human chattel around the region.

Slavery is a rampant modern problem—more than 27 million people around the world are enslaved in forms of debt bondage, sex work, slave labor, and domestic servitude. Compared to the value of Joseph, a human life today is cheap: about \$90. In comparison, the cost of a slave in the United States prior to the Civil War was nearly \$40,000 in adjusted dollars. When human life is worth so little, it becomes easy for slaves to be mistreated, as it is cheaper to replace them than to feed them properly or provide them with medical care.

Like Joseph, many modern slaves (especially children) are sold by their own families, who may or may not realize the life they are condemning them to. Lured by the promise of a better life, remittances for the family back home, and the potential for an education, many parents do not realize until it is too late that their child is enslaved in sex work, in a factory until horrific conditions, or in back-breaking domestic servitude. Even worse, some families knowingly sell their children into slavery, hoping that the price received will keep the rest of the family from poverty or starvation.

Slavery today is fueled by the population explosion, displacement to urban centers, poverty and desperation, and government corruption or inaction. It is not just something that happens in another places. The *US State Department* estimates that 14,500 to 17,500 foreign nationals are trafficked into the U.S. annually; some advocacy groups put the number at several times that. Victims – both foreign nationals and U.S. citizens – have been indentified in cities, suburbs, and rural areas in all 50 states as well as in Washington, DC. Trafficked individuals work in homes, factories, restaurants, agriculture, and more, many of them right under our very noses. (*Free the Slaves* and UC Berkeley documented cases in more than 90 U.S. cities.)

Human trafficking, according to the *Polaris Project*, is the second largest and fastest growing criminal industry in the world. Worldwide, most slaves are forced to work in agriculture, mining, and prostitution. **Certain products that are very much a part of our American lives, such as coffee, chocolate, cars, may be traceable to slave labor.** In September, the U.S. Department of Labor released a list of 122 goods made in more than 58 countries that are the products of child or forced labor, many of which end up in the United States.

Education, wealth, age, or social standing does not guarantee invulnerability to becoming a human trafficking victim. Traffickers prey on people who are yearning for a better life, have little or no employment opportunities, have an unstable or harmful home life, or have survived sexual abuse – conditions present in all socioeconomic strata.

(For more information on modern slavery, please see Ron Soodalter's article *A Blight on the Nation: Slavery in Today's America*, which is available on RHR-NA's website at: <http://www.rhr-na.org/files/Slavery-in-America.pdf>)

Jewish tradition teaches us that every human being is created in God's image. To degrade and enslave another human life is the ultimate denial of that reality. A prohibition against slavery is a key component of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 4 reads: No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms. Like many of the articles of the UDHR, this is an aspiration rather than a reality. But slavery can be ended in our lifetime, if we have the courage to act. This Human Rights Shabbat, we can pledge to do the following:

- Lobby our elected officials to include anti-slavery measures in our trade efforts, and strengthen legislation (on every level of government) to ensure that victims of slavery and trafficking are identified and aided by authorities.
- Purchase fair trade goods and other products that guarantee their workers an equitable wage. In the search of the lowest possible price, it is any wonder that employers might try to pay their labor nothing?
- Learn how to identify victims of trafficking in our communities and what steps can be taken to help them. Often, slaves are freed because a courageous individual took action. You can be that person.

(For more advocacy steps, visit: XXXXXX)

Joseph ultimately came to see his enslavement as a divine measure intended to save his family from starvation during the famine (Genesis 45:6). Modern slaves are not so lucky. AS we celebrate universal human rights, we should remember those whose rights are denied, whose freedom is curtailed, and be inspired to action.