



## Human Rights Shabbat

*Rabbi Rachel Kahn-Troster*

## Slavery

Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Preamble

“Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world”

Pirkei Avot 3:14:

Beloved is all humankind for they were made *b'tzelem Elohim* (in the image of God). Doubly beloved are they, for they were told that they were made in the image of God. As it says: "In the image of God was humankind made."  
(Genesis 9:6)

Rabbis for Human Rights - North America  
[www.rhr-na.org](http://www.rhr-na.org)

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Some of you may be familiar with the story of Honi the Circle Maker, who was kind of a Jewish Rip Van Winkle. Described in the Talmud as a rain maker, one day Honi was walking down the road when he saw an elderly man planting a carob tree.<sup>1</sup> Because carob trees take seventy years to bear fruit, Honi teased the man for taking an action that he would not see the results of in his lifetime—he would never eat the fruit of the tree! The man replied that just as his ancestors planted carob trees so that he could eat their fruit generations later, so he was planting to provide for his children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. God caused Honi to fall into a deep sleep for seventy years. When he awoke, he saw the tree in bloom. He asked a man standing next to it, “Who planted this tree?” The man replied, “That was my grandfather. He planted the tree in the hopes that it would provide for me, long after he was gone.”

When we seek to repair the world, sometimes our work is like Honi. The problems we attempt to heal—well, maybe they aren’t unsolvable, but we worry that we may never see the results of our organizing and action. It takes a lot of faith to plant a tree of justice, with the hopes that it will create a better world for descendants that we will never know.

This weekend is Human Rights Shabbat. More than 100 communities around the world are coming together to celebrate the connections between Jewish values and human rights. There are many rights contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, based on the tremendous idea that “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” The UDHR is a statement of shared global values. Its articles are messianic ideals, endowed with the hope that some day—maybe today, maybe in 70 years—they will all be realized.

Today, I would like to highlight one ideal that is a tremendous problem in our world today.

Article 4 of the UDHR reads: “No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.” That seems pretty simple, right? After all, slavery has been illegal here in the United States for nearly 150 years, and similar laws exist in most other countries.

But it is not so simple. According to experts, more people are enslaved today than at any other point in history. It may be illegal and against the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but it happens everywhere. The commonly used number is 27 million people currently enslaved; this estimate is assumed to be extremely conservative, and I have heard numbers of 50 million or higher. Modern slavery includes child slaves, child soldiers, forced sex work, and debt bondage. By far the largest group of modern slaves is labor slaves. Slave labor and child labor are found in the supply chains of many industries, including carpets from India, chocolate from the Ivory Coast, iron from Brazil, and cotton from Uzbekistan. Many of us are consumers of slave made goods or invest in companies that have slavery in their supply chains.

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<sup>1</sup> Babylonian Talmud Ta’anit 23a.

And lest we think that slavery is a problem that happens somewhere else, slavery has been found in more than 90 cities in the United States, with the number rising. Tens of thousands of foreign nationals are trafficked into the United States and many Americans, including children and teenagers, are also at risk of being trafficked domestically. Slavery has been found in businesses, in agriculture (including slavery in the Florida tomato industry), and among domestic workers. They are invisible, until you know what to look for.

The Jewish value at the heart of human rights is the idea that every human being is created *b'tzelem elohim*, in the image of God, and that a respect for *k'vod habriot*, human dignity, can take precedence even over parts of Jewish law. A slave is not treated as though they are created in the divine image, a precious vessel of human life, but as an object, a cheap item easy to throw away. And indeed, today human life is very cheap. Whereas a slave in the United States prior to the Civil War cost thousands of dollars adjusted, today you can buy a person for as little as \$50-100. When people come that cheaply, why worry about feeding them or giving them medical care? It is just easier to buy someone else.

\$50-\$100. You can buy a person for less than the cost of an iPhone. At a price that low, they are not being treated as a spark of the divine image.

The slaves in our midst are the most vulnerable members of our society. The Torah implores us to protect the strangers in our midst, because we were strangers in the land of Egypt. Indeed, the Talmud teaches us that the injunction to love the stranger occurs in the Torah more times than the laws of Shabbat or of keeping kosher. We understand the misery of being slaves because we were slaves as well, a slavery that lasted for generations. At Passover, we imagine ourselves as though we, too, were slaves in Egypt. But today, as we celebrate universal human rights, I ask you to imagine yourself as one of today's slaves.<sup>2</sup> This is not just the story of the distant past.

It doesn't need to be this way. We can't end slavery tomorrow, with the signing of a bill or shipment of aid, but we can plant seeds to end this atrocity in a foreseeable time frame.

Recently, I was on a panel about religious cooperation and the fight to end modern day slavery. The moderator said he could close his eyes and envision a day 25 years from now when slavery would be ended. Another panelist challenged him on this, saying that the problem was too entrenched to disappear that quickly. With the global economic outlook precarious, more people than ever on the move, and human beings seen as cheap and expendable, my co-

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<sup>2</sup> If you would like to include stories of modern slavery in your sermon, please consult any of the following books: *The Slave Next Door* and *Disposable People*, by Kevin Bales, *Not for Sale*, by David Batstone, and *A Crime So Monstrous*, by E. Benjamin Skinner. The introduction to the 2010 Trafficking in Persons Report also contains short narratives of modern slavery at home and abroad.

panelist gloomily predicted that the problem of human trafficking was going to get worse before it got better. But, he added, that did not mean that there was not room for hope. If we thought longer term—more like 70 years than 25—we could set in motion the processes that would end slavery.

According to Kevin Bales of *Free the Slaves*, this includes:

- Slowing population growth and ending extreme poverty, factors that lead populations vulnerable to human trafficking. “Education and social protection against poverty in old age and illness are also the best guard against enslavement.”<sup>3</sup>
- Corporations taking responsibility for their supply chains and a restoration of corporate social responsibility. In today’s globalized market, with the relentless pursuit of the cheapest product, there is often little incentive to find goods made ethically. Any of us might be consumers of slave-made products, since slavery is so ubiquitous in modern supply chains. Corporations must ensure that their supply chains are free of slavery and we must insist on purchasing slavery-free goods. Those corporations (and there are many) that are taking strides to clean up their supply chains should be supported. We must also be willing to fund organizations that make visible the invisible, researching where goods come from and where they are going.
- Fight government corruption. Governments often turn a blind eye to slavery in their midst or profit from the trade in human life. They must be held accountable for being complicit in light of this degradation of the value of human life.
- Provide rehabilitative services to those who are the victims of modern slavery, so that they can provide a life for their family and are less vulnerable to trafficking.

These goals, too, seem far away and beyond our grasp. They are as messianic as the overriding goal of ending slavery. It is not going to be easy. The foundations of slavery are deeply entrenched. As Bales wrote in his book *Ending Slavery*:

When we look at all the elements that support slavery around the world, things seem a little discouraging. Apparently all we have to do is end world poverty, eradicate corruption, keep people from being greedy, slow the population explosion, halt environmental destruction and armed conflicts that impoverish countries, convince the big lenders to cancel international debts, and get governments to keep the promises they make every time they pass a law. How tough is that?

The good news is that we don’t have to do all these things at once, and we don’t have to solve all of these problems before we can end slavery. There are millions of slaves who can be freed today; we just have to change the situation in their lives and communities.

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<sup>3</sup> Bales, Kevin. *Disposable People*, pg. 234.

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We cannot be paralyzed like Honi, who could not envision the small steps necessary to reach a larger goal. We can:

- Support legislation aimed at improving the lives of victims of human trafficking. This year, the Trafficking Victims Protection Act will be up for re-authorization. This important bill provides many services, including counseling and rehabilitation for victims of human trafficking here in the United States. Learn more about what you can do to help pass this bill.
- Support companies that do not use slave-made goods. [Free2Work.org](http://Free2Work.org) rates companies based on the transparency of their supply chain. The [Interfaith Center for Corporate Responsibility](http://InterfaithCenterforCorporateResponsibility.org) uses investor advocacy and socially responsible investing to fight slavery.
- When possible, buy Fair Trade products, like coffee and chocolate, which give producers a living wage and decrease the conditions that make people vulnerable to human trafficking.
- Learn about local organizations in your community that help trafficking victims.

For more information on slavery and human trafficking, please visit:

[www.rhr-na.org](http://www.rhr-na.org) (including a fact sheet on modern slavery)

[www.humantrafficking.change.org](http://www.humantrafficking.change.org)

[www.polarisproject.org](http://www.polarisproject.org)

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