

Pesach and Slavery

Every year at our *Seder* tables we recall our slavery in Egypt and it has become customary for many of us to use the opportunity to draw attention to modern day oppression. We often talk about those who are oppressed because of religion, colour, gender or sexual orientation. But how many of us realise that slavery itself is not just a part of history and religious imagination? - more people are slaves today than in any time in history.

Slavery has officially been abolished and it is illegal under international law. Article 4 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, "No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms." - but in many countries the law is not enforced and it is still a reality for millions of people around the world.

Once again Social Action would like to invite you to use the experience and celebration of *Pesach* to consider the continuing existence of slavery and how we might help to end it...

Bonded labour - millions of people across the world become bonded because their labour is demanded as means of repayment of a loan or money given in advance and are caught in a cycle of debt, forced to work in appalling conditions.

Forced labour - people are illegally recruited by governments, political parties or individuals and involuntarily forced to work under threat of violence or other penalty.

Child labour - tens of millions of children work full-time in exploitative or dangerous conditions at the expense of their education and social development.

Commercial sexual exploitation of children - children are exploited for their commercial value through prostitution, trafficking and pornography. They are often kidnapped, bought or forced to enter the sex market.

Early and forced marriage - women and girls who are married without choice and forced into a life of servitude and frequently physical violence.

Traditional or 'chattel' slavery - people are still bought and sold as commodities, often abducted from their homes, inherited or given as gifts.

... this year the Anti Slavery Campaign is focusing its attention on

Human trafficking

This is a rapidly growing global problem that affects countries and families on every continent. Those trafficked may be forced to work as domestics, in prostitution, as labourers and in many other jobs. Traffickers use violence, coercion and deception to take people away from their homes and families and force them to work against their will. People are trafficked both between countries, and within their own country. Statistics relating to trafficking are impossible to measure accurately but some reports estimate that at least 700,000 women and children are trafficked globally each year.

People put themselves or their children in the hands of traffickers to escape poverty and discrimination. They are promised well-paid jobs, better lifestyles, further education or marriage and many think they will be able to send money back to their families. In reality they are often deceived into conditions of slavery, servitude or forced labour. While trafficked people think they have nothing to lose, traffickers stand to make huge profits from enslaving them. The UN estimates that trafficking in "human cargo" generates around US\$7 billion per year.

Anti-Slavery's campaign

Anti-Slavery's campaign against human trafficking calls for policy changes that will penalise traffickers, protect trafficked people's rights and address the root causes. Trafficking is the fastest growing means by which people are forced into slavery across the world. .

Find details of what you can do to support Anti Slavery's campaign online: <http://www.antislavery.org/>.

Trafficking in Women a Rabbi Speaks Out

Excerpts from an address by Rabbi Ellen Lippmann

**“When a man sells his daughter as a slave,
she shall not be freed as male slaves are.”**

Exodus 21:7

Sometimes a line of Torah jumps out at you. What can it mean? When would a man sell his daughter as a slave? Why? I learn from the medieval commentator Rashi that this line refers to young girls, not yet exhibiting signs of puberty. Rabbi Gunther Plaut explains that this was probably a frequent practice among the poor. We know something about poor people selling their daughters into slavery because it happens everyday, today, across the world. In Nepal, in Africa, and in poor rural areas of southeast Asia.

Poor parents get an offer to take their daughter to work in a hotel in the city, where she will earn money to help them. Some of those parents believe, some need to believe, preferring believing to the truth - which is that their daughters, some as young as 10, are taken to be prostitutes. They earn almost nothing. They are, in fact, slaves. For some, the value of a girl child is so low that it matters little whether their daughter is farming in the village or having forced sex in the city.

Some of these girls seek to go themselves as this is the only way in which they can care for their parents. Even if they earn no money, they cease to be a burden on the family. They often cope by using drugs and frequently, when they are older, they have chronic gynaecological and psychiatric problems.

A *hasidic* commentary says that this selling of a daughter is actually the acquisition in marriage. But the commentator known as *Or HaHayim* notes that the word used is ‘sell’ and not ‘acquire’. The *Torah* therefore, actually permitted a man to sell his daughter into slavery.

How often did it happen then? We don’t know, but I can tell you how often it happens now. Between 700,000 and 2 million women and children are ‘trafficked’ each year - bought, sold and taken to other countries, used in the US, for example, for sweatshops, agricultural slave labour, and prostitution. And of course, there is a market. Generally, the men who purchase the sexual use of young girls are white, western businessmen from Germany, Australia, and the United States. Every year 50,000 women and girls are brought into the United States for prostitution.

It’s horrifying, unimaginable. I respond the way I responded to the line in the *Torah*. Why?

Hillel said, “in a place where there are no human beings, strive to be a human being.” That striving to be human beings, to create a humane society based on law and reason, that is the aim of the *Torah*. It’s a good aim but then a little line jumps out at you and grabs you in the heart.

I urge you - go with your heart. Contact ECPAT, a network of organisations and individuals working together for the elimination of child prostitution, child pornography and trafficking of children for sexual purposes. Find out how you can help. In a place where there are no human beings, a place where it is all too easy to speak of a young girl being sold into slavery, strive to be a human being. If not you, who will? If not now, when?

ECPATUK www.ecpat.org.uk

Ideas for The seder

When Jews retell the *Pesach* story, the point is to remind us that the same God that made possible the Exodus makes it possible at this very moment for the world to be transformed and liberated from all forms of oppression. So don't just read about the past, let your *Seder* table be filled with ideas, debate, and visions of what could be and what you personally will do to make it happen.

- Simply talk about the issue of slavery today at your *Seder*. Many people don't know about it.
- Leave an empty chair at your *Seder* table this year to recognise those who remain in bondage and say –
"We set aside this place to remember those men, women and children who are not free and thus unable to be with their families and friends. It is our hope that no seat will have to remain unfilled at our Seder next year."

Information and action

"To fight for human rights is to save our own souls." Rabbi Abraham Johua Heschel

- An overview of modern slavery can be found at www.infoplease.com/spot/slavery1.html
- Become a Fairtrade Synagogue, supporting producers who reject slave labour practices. www.fairtrade.org.uk
- Contact ECPAT working for the elimination of child prostitution, pornography and trafficking of children for sexual purposes. www.ecpat.net/eng/index.asp and see global research on violence against women by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine at <http://palin.lshtm.ac.uk/genderviolence/index.htm>
- Visit the USA anti slavery organisation's website www.iabolish.org
- **Join the UK campaign to abolish slavery – Anti Slavery International**, Thomas Clarkson House, The Stableyard, Broomgrove Road, London SW9 9TL. Tel 020 7501 8920 www.antislavery.org
Anti – Slavery International are at present focusing on trafficking and forced labour in the UK. They are asking supporters to write or e-mail the Prime Minister Tony Blair and to write to your MP. Contact details and a sample letter are on the next page.

The Background

The UK Government introduced a law in 2004 that makes trafficking for all forms of labour exploitation a criminal offence and in 2006 it established a UK Human Trafficking Centre which has a mandate to pursue trafficking for both labour as well as sexual exploitation. On 22 January 2007, after sustained pressure from human rights groups such as Anti-Slavery International, the Government announced that it will sign the Council of Europe Convention on trafficking.

Despite these positive initiatives there has not been a single successful prosecution brought for trafficking for labour exploitation to date. Nor is there any specialised assistance available to people who are trafficked for forced labour. The UK Government now needs to take all necessary steps to ratify and implement the Council of Europe Convention on trafficking, which would ensure that people trafficked into forced labour are provided with minimum standards of protection and support. Currently more than thirty other European countries have signed the Convention.

A Case History

Anti Slavery campaigns to raise awareness of UK human trafficking like this:

Two Vietnamese men in their twenties were recruited in Vietnam to work in a hotel in the UK. They paid the agent £18,000 to arrange the job and came to the UK under the work permit scheme with a promise to receive £4,95 per hour for their work. On arrival in the UK an agent met them at the airport and took their passports away. The men worked in a major hotel chain for two months without any pay. They attempted to organise a strike at the hotel but shortly after this their families in Vietnam received threats. The men eventually approached a Citizens Advice Bureau office via a Vietnamese speaking person they met on the street.

Sample letter to the Prime Minister

Dear Prime Minister

I welcome the progress made by the Government so far in tackling human trafficking, in particular the announcement that the Government will sign the Council of Europe Convention on trafficking. However there is a clear need to approach the issue of trafficking for forced labour from a human rights perspective. This focuses on the exploitation a person suffers, rather than considering it only as an immigration issue. I would urge the UK Government to take the following steps:

- Take all necessary steps to ratify and implement the Council of Europe *Convention on Action Against Trafficking in Human Beings*, 2005.
- Retain the 1998 rule relating to migrant domestic workers which gives them one year renewable visas and the right to change their employer.
- Establish an independent National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings in the UK, with a similar role to that of the Dutch National Rapporteur.

Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to your reply.

Yours sincerely,
(Your name)

Sign the Anti Slavery Declaration online

<http://www.antislavery.org/2007/actionsign.php>

Tens of thousands of ordinary people signed petitions as part of the campaign to abolish the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Today slavery affects millions of people around the world. By signing the Declaration you can be part of a new mass movement for change. We are collecting signatures to show support for the fight for freedom campaign.

I pledge to join the fight for freedom, to commemorate the Transatlantic Slave Trade and its abolition, address its legacies, and work for the eradication of all forms of slavery today, which affect at least 12 million people around the world.

I call for measures that will enable individuals, governments and the wider public to:

Understand the Transatlantic Slave Trade

Measures should be taken to ensure a greater understanding of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, its abolition and the impact it has had on three continents. These should include: making it a requirement to teach the Transatlantic Slave Trade in schools as a component of the National Curriculum; the establishment of an annual national slavery memorial day; and other commemorative activities.

Redress its legacies

Governments of countries which profited from the slave trade should support projects which target those countries and communities most affected by its legacies.

Eradicate modern slavery

Governments must prioritise action to eradicate all contemporary forms of slavery. Such action should include:

- Working for universal ratification and full implementation of international standards which prohibit slavery.
- Strengthening international mechanisms to investigate, report and resolve instances of contemporary forms of slavery around the world.

Recognising the close connection between contemporary forms of slavery, poverty and discrimination and ensuring that slavery issues are addressed in national and international poverty reduction strategies and programmes through the widest possible co-operation with statutory and voluntary agencies.

For further information or to obtain a hard copy of this document, please contact Liberal Judaism Social Action at socialaction@liberaljudaism.org