

The Ten Plagues of Modern Day Slavery

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Source: Rabbi Joshua Lesser

During Passover we remember our ancient story of our people's journey from bondage to liberation. Moving from metaphor to reality, we bring awareness to the ways slavery is still present and plagues all of us. Our interconnectedness as people binds all of us and keeps us from being truly free when slavery still exists.

“During the Seder, some Jews have the custom of going around the table and imagining themselves as Hebrew slaves in Egypt during the Exodus. They describe their respective slave jobs – bricklayer, house slave, mortar mixer – and how they feel about their impending freedom. [This] illuminates the Seder’s insistence that had God not redeemed us from Egypt, the Jewish people might still be enslaved.

But when I think of what it would mean to be a slave today, I don’t need to look to the past for examples. Going around the Seder table, I think: I could be a farm hand, a nanny or a home health care worker, a child picking cocoa or a man laboring on a fishing boat, someone forced into prostitution or doing menial work at a hotel. More than 3,000 years after the Exodus, and 150 years after the Civil War, slavery and human trafficking continue to flourish around the world.

Estimates of modern slavery range from 12 million to 27 million people. Human trafficking has been found in more than 90 cities in the United States... Slavery is the extreme end of an abusive employment continuum filled with low-wage, dangerous jobs.”

-Rabbi Rachel Kahn Troster from Rabbis of Human Rights

Human Slavery continues to plague us today. These ten plagues are reminders of how present modern day slavery affects our society:

1. Greed – When the drive for money without a standard of ethics rules business, it creates a climate where people are seen only as a means to an end. Greed transforms living souls into commodities for sale or to be harnessed for another’s gain. Even as consumers, our desire for the cheapest product out there often comes at too high of a moral cost.
2. Poverty – At least 80% of humanity lives on less than \$10 a day. In 2010, nearly 50 million Americans reported living in poverty. Over 15 million were children. Poverty is the main cause of global hunger. With the disparity growing between those who have and those who don’t, it creates an atmosphere of desperation and exploitation.
3. Trafficking – Up to 25 million people are victims of modern slavery. Trafficking is the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons, by means of threats, of force and coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power, of a position of vulnerability. It also frequently involves the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve control over another person for the purpose of exploitation.
4. Unsafe Working Conditions – On farms, in factories, and in mills, some of the lowest paying jobs also come with great physical risks. Pesticides, toxic chemicals, unregulated machinery, and lack of appropriate work gear and training cause serious injury, illness, and death.

5. Assault – In addition to desperation, use of force and coercion is how many people enter modern day slavery. The threat of violence, or actual acts of violence, are used to control people and crush their will. In addition, women and children are often physically and sexually harassed.
6. Peonage – In many communities that depend on slave labor, a deliberate cycle of poverty is created. Rents and resources are priced just out of reach and often delivered by employers, ensuring a constant and endless wheel of debt.
7. False Promises – Many people are lured into slavery with the promise of “help” or a “better” life, only to discover that they have worsened their situation. Their freedom and will are sold through deception.
8. Exploitation of the Vulnerable – Slavery targets those most in need, because they are incredibly vulnerable. In the worst cases, where force is employed, women and children become the easiest targets to dominate and exploit.
9. Xenophobia – Seeing the foreigner as other has allowed people to devalue and dehumanize in order to more easily exploit. It also has made it easier for others to turn a blind eye to the slavery that occurs in our communities and our country.
10. Hopelessness – Too often, the end result of modern day slavery is the corruption of spirit and a resignation that life will never get better. This kind of hopelessness and despair breaks people’s will to live or advocate for their brighter future.

"We remain steadfast in our resolve to see that all men, women, and children have the opportunity to realize this greatest of gifts. Yet millions around the world – including here in the United States – toil under the boot of modern slavery.

"Mothers and fathers are forced to work in fields and factories against their will or in service to debts that can never be repaid. Sons and daughters are sold for sex, abducted as child soldiers, or coerced into involuntary labor. In dark corners of our world, and hidden in plain sight in our own communities, human beings are exploited for financial gain and subjected to unspeakable cruelty.

"[Slavery] remains the affront to human dignity and stain on our collective conscience that it has always been... The United States is committed to eradicating trafficking in persons." – President Barack Obama

With awareness, education, advocacy and informed choices, we can work to turn the vision of freedom into a reality separating the words of modern day from slavery forever.