

Pesach and Slavery, Then and Now

Contributed by [Truah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights](#).

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by Rabbi Gilah Langner

The Exodus story is fundamental to Judaism. The liberation from Egypt defines us as a people. As a touchstone for Jewish identity, it was our essential passage as we prepared for revelation. We do not reenact the Exodus story only once a year during Pesach. Our liturgy has us sing the great Song of the Sea every morning, to signal our daily redemption from slavery. Redeeming those who remain captive and preventing future enslavement must be our moral imperative every day.

Hoshech: The Plague of Not Seeing. The ninth plague – *hoshech*, or darkness, that covered the Egyptians' habitations must have been terrifying indeed. The Egyptians couldn't see; our tradition describes this darkness as so thick that you could touch it, feel it. And yet, long before the plague itself descended, the Egyptians had trouble seeing what was going on around them. They refused to see the humanity of the slaves who were building the legacy of Egypt with backbreaking unpaid labor; they ignored the institution of slavery that made possible the amassing of wealth in their society. A willful blindness had spread through the land even before the plague of darkness was unleashed.

We too, in our own days, often choose darkness when we do not want to see. We ignore the exploitation of domestic workers in our midst. We don't look past the cheap consumer goods we eagerly scoop up to pause and ask about how they are made, and by whom. We close our eyes to the fact that 27 million people live in conditions of slavery in our world today.

As we recount the plagues at our Seder tables this year, let us open our own eyes to the slavery that we too often fail to see.

Environmental Destruction and Slavery. For centuries, commentators on the Bible have tried to explain the plagues recounted in the Book of Exodus. Some modern scholars have theorized that a volcano on the Greek island of Santorini in the 16th century B.C.E. might have precipitated a chain reaction, complete with lightning and hailstorms, and an ash cloud that could have blotted out the light of the sun. Even if geology and archaeology were to yield "explanations" for the plagues, their meaning for us transcends such explanations. Perhaps with the recounting of the plagues, the Torah is pointing out a profound connection between slavery and environmental turmoil. The dramatic upheaval in the natural world that the plagues represented – an apparent reversal of the laws of nature – was needed to "wake the Egyptians up" to the abomination of slavery.

Present-day slavery also promotes the violation of the natural world. Greed and the drive for power fuel both the human slave trade and a profound disregard for the quality of our environment. As stewards of the earth, we must fight against slavery as well as the environmental destruction that is a by-product of throwaway human labor.

Moses. If you search the traditional Haggadah, you won't find the name of the man who led the Israelites out of Egypt. Moses is strangely absent, written out of the annual ritual of reenactment. The Torah tells us that Moses was the most humble of men, but surely this is taking humility too far! The message in Moses's silence, though, is clear: we cannot wait for a Moses before tackling the problem of modern slavery. We are not free to defer action until a prominent leader, celebrity or powerful politician leads the way. The fight against modern slavery and trafficking is in our hands.

B'farech. The Torah uses a curious word to refer to the enslavement of the Israelites: *Va-ya'avidu Mitzrayim*

et Bnei Yisrael b'farech. The Egyptians enslaved the Israelites with hard labor. An alternative reading of the term *b'farech* is *b'feh rakh* – “with soft words.” That is, the Egyptians deceived the Israelites about their intentions, using false promises and deceptions. By the time the truth was revealed, it was too late; we were already enslaved.

How often we see this today when modern slave owners speak with “soft words”. They might promise parents they will look after their children, but reduce those children to hideous servitude and prostitution. Slave owners in dozens of countries lure people into service by offering a loan to “help them out” in an emergency. The needy are then paid a pittance and charged high interest rates on the “loan”. These victims can never repay the loan, and may enslave their children as well as themselves on account of those “soft words”. *B'farech*.

Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart. For years I have been troubled by God's “hardening of the heart” of Pharaoh. Why did God continue to harden Pharaoh's heart, especially if God knew the eventual outcome of Israel's pleas for freedom? Did Pharaoh have any hope of changing his mind and embarking on a path of repentance? It seemed to me as though God was, as it were, bullying Pharaoh, or at least propping him up each time in order to land another punch.

But perhaps we are meant to understand by this phrase something about the true nature of slave ownership. Perhaps it requires a permanently hardened heart to perpetuate the monstrous institution of slavery. Look at slave owners around the world today for examples of the hardening of the human heart.

Core of Slavery. Our rabbis tell us that Israel underwent three critical experiences related to slavery: first, we were strangers in strange land (*gerut*); second, we were enslaved and forced to work (*avdut*); and third, we were afflicted (*inui*), which means subjected to harsh conditions and a loss of human dignity.

Although millennia have passed, these experiences are still at the core of modern slavery. Across the continents of Asia, Africa, and elsewhere, people are transported from their homes by the threat or use of violence, deception, or coercion, and turned into *gerim*, strangers in foreign lands. The loss of one's home and freedom of movement allows for enslavement (*avdut*) at the hands of ruthless slave owners, and results in a lifetime of poverty, hard labor, and forced servitude. Finally, the humiliation and loss of personal dignity that is *inui* is a daily experience for millions, particularly women and young girls.

Today it is we who must become the redeemers. Our freedom comes with the responsibility for liberating others who remain enslaved now, at Passover, and throughout the year, until every human being can enjoy the dignity of freedom.