

IDENTITY

Avadim Hayinu

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Source: Jews United for Justice

As all good term papers do, we start with the main idea:

עֲבָדִים הָיִינוּ הָיִינוּ. עַתָּה בְּנֵי חוֹרֵין

Avadim hayinu hayinu. Ata b'nei chorin.

We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt. Now we are free.

We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and God took us from there with a strong hand and outstretched arm. Had God not brought our ancestors out of Egypt, then even today we and our children and our grandchildren would still be slaves. Even if we were all wise, knowledgeable scholars and Torah experts, we would still be obligated to tell the story of the exodus from Egypt.

More than just ritual observance, we are directed to feel in our own bodies what it might have been like to escape from slavery to freedom. The Exodus story asserts unapologetically that oppression and injustice can and must end, and it lays the foundation for the Jewish vision of a just society. This yearly reminder is a central tenet of Jewish history and culture. For many of our brothers and sisters, however, there is no need for a reminder of the story they carry. Many Black Americans feel the lasting effects of American slavery in their lives today. Whether they know their family's histories or whether, tragically, that history has been lost over the generations, the enslavement of African-heritage people in America needs no annual reminder.

We read responsively:

Reader: Avadim Hayinu – We were slaves in Egypt

All: We remember our histories, we acknowledge our pasts.

Reader: Atah b'nei horin – Now we are free people

All: How will we use our freedom?

For white-skinned Jews, it is important to remember that today in America we are racially privileged. That privilege, as well as our communal story, should propel us forward into the fight for the full equality and humanity of our Black brothers and sisters, especially when they call on us for solidarity.