

Slavery in Our Time

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By David Arnow Slavery in Our Time: A fifth question: Why is this night no different from all other nights? From the 2002 New Israel Fund Haggadah supplement, "From Darkness to Light" When you've finished reading the Four Questions at your Seder, ask a participant to read the Biblical verses that follow, the Fifth Question, and the vignette about slavery as practiced in Pakistan. Then either summarize or lead a short discussion on the information that follows. (Much of this has been taken from Kevin Bales' Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy, © 1999 The Regents of the University of California.) Copy and distribute the section called "Four Things You Can Do to Help End Slavery." Urge your guests to get involved with the issue! We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt ... The Egyptians ruthlessly compelled the Israelites to toil with rigor ... Ruthlessly, they made life bitter for them with harsh labor at mortar and bricks... (Deuteronomy 6:21 and Exodus 1:13-14). A Fifth Question Why is this night no different from all other nights? Because on this night millions of human beings around the world still remain enslaved, just as they do on all other nights. As we celebrate our freedom tonight, we remember those who remain enslaved. Brick Making in Pakistan: A Vignette Since the 1960s, an estimated 750,000 landless Muslim peasants have hand molded hundreds of millions of mud bricks each year in Pakistan. The bricks are fired in some 7,000 vast but primitive kilns spread throughout the country. With no other hope for sustenance, desperate families drift to kilns where they borrow money to buy food and tools from the owners. On a good day, a family will mold about fourteen hundred bricks for which they are paid two dollars. But their debts keep growing because kiln owners undercount the number of bricks produced, inflate the debt, and charge exorbitant prices for food and clothing. Impoverished families, including young children, work as a unit. Without putting their children to work, these families would sink even deeper in debt. Even so, most families incur debts they will never earn enough to repay. If kiln owners suspect that a family may be planning to run away, they take a child to another location as a hostage. According to one former kiln owner, "to intimidate brick makers, the owner just comes along and smashes all the freshly made raw bricks, a whole day's work, for no reason. If a young worker lifts his head or causes trouble, they will put his leg in the kiln oven for a second to burn it. This is common and brick makers are forced to watch." When a parent dies, the children inherit their mother's or father's debts, assuring another generation of bonded brick makers. Now either briefly summarize the information that follows or describe the three current forms of slavery and lead a discussion asking participants to define slavery, estimate how many slaves there are in the world today, what factors allow slavery to persist, etc. Current Forms of Slavery •Slavery--a definition: the total control of one person by another for the purpose of economic exploitation. Slaves are controlled by violence and denied all of their personal freedom in order to make money or provide labor for someone else. •Chattel slavery: closest to slavery as practiced during the transatlantic slave trade. A person is captured, born or sold into permanent servitude. Ownership is often asserted. Represents a small percentage of slaves, practiced in northern and western Africa and some Arab countries. • Debt bondage: the most common form of slavery. A person pledges him- or herself against a loan of money, but the length and nature of the service are not defined and the labor does not reduce the original debt. Ownership is not normally asserted, but there is complete physical control over the bonded laborer. Most common in India and Pakistan. •Contract slavery: the most rapidly growing form of slavery. Contracts are offered that guarantee employment, perhaps in a workshop or factory, but when the workers are taken to their place of work they find themselves enslaved. Most often found in Southeast Asia, Brazil, some Arab states and parts of the Indian subcontinent. How many slaves are there? According to conservative estimates, there are twenty-seven million slaves. This number is more than all the slaves shipped from Africa during the transatlantic slave trade. What kind of work do slaves do? Simple, non-technological and traditional labor. Most slaves work in agriculture, but many also work in mining, quarrying, prostitution and the manufacture of everything from charcoal and cloth to chocolate. What

factors allow slavery to persist? The world's population explosion, which has produced a reservoir of poor and vulnerable people. The modernization of agriculture, which results in huge numbers of dispossessed farmers. Greed, corruption and violence created by economic change in much of the developing world, and a breakdown of the social norms that protected potential slaves. Widespread ignorance about slavery. The kind of slavery most of us learned about in school was abolished in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Many are unaware of the ways in which new forms of slavery have evolved. Powerful nations often fear that taking a strong stand against slavery will jeopardize economic or military interests deemed to be more compelling national interests. Food for thought or discussion When he accepted the Nobel Peace Prize, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said: "The sovereignty of states must no longer be used as a shield for gross violations of human rights." Do you agree? How high a priority should the United States make the protection of human rights in foreign countries? Imagine that one thousand Jews were enslaved in a foreign country. What would you do to help them? What would you expect America or Israel to do? [Abolish: American Anti-Slavery Group - <http://www.iabolish.org/passover/>]