

THE DIGNITY OF WORK AND THE INDIGNITY OF SLAVERY

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For a complete transcript of the session, please visit:

<http://www.rhr-na.org/resource/2008-conference-transcript-dignity-of-work-and-indignity>

Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Article 4: **No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.**

Slavery and servitude, both words are used which suggests they're not the same thing. Servitude can have a positive valance in our tradition, describing our relationship to God. We often invoke imagery describing ourselves as servants of the Holy One. But there is a difference between service to humans and service to God. One contains a dignity not found in the other.

To fully understand the dignity of labor, you must also understand the indignity of slavery, and vice versa.

Talmud Berakhot 8a

Rabbi Hiyya bar Ami said in the name of Ulla: One who earns by the efforts of his own hands stands even higher than one who is completely God-fearing. For of the God-fearer, it is written, "Happy (*Ashrei*) is the one who fears the Lord", and of the one who earns by his own efforts, it is written, "You shall enjoy the fruits of your labors, you shall be happy (*Ashrekha*) and you shall prosper." That is, you shall be happy in this world, and you shall prosper in the future world. And notice that of the God-fearer it does not say "you shall prosper."

What value does this text place on human labor? What value does it bring that simply being God-fearing does not?

Talmud Pesachim 118a

Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said: When the Holy and Blessed One told Adam, "Thorns and thistles shall it sprout for you, but your food shall be the grasses of the field", Adam began to well up with tears. "Master of the Universe, shall my ass and I both eat at the same trough??" But as soon as God said to him [immediately following]: "By the sweat of your brow shall you get bread to eat", his spirits were soothed.

The statement in Genesis commanding Adam to work for his food is often interpreted as a punishment. How does this text understand this commandment? Why is Adam soothed?

Avot de-Rabbi Natan, Version B, Chapter 21

Rabbi Eliezer also used to say: Great is work, for just as Israel was commanded with respect to [ceasing work on] Shabbat, so was it commanded with respect to doing work; for it is written: “Six days shall you work, and on the seventh day you shall cease.”

How does this text sanctify work? Why might it be important to see labor as holy like rest on Shabbat?

Is dignified work part of the dignity of being human, part of God’s plan for us? What does that say about slavery?

From Bondage to Freedom (Passover Haggadah with Commentary by Rabbi Abraham Twerski, Shaar Press, 1995, pg. 110)

A man was once sentenced to twenty-five years of hard labor, and was shackled to a huge wheel fixed in the wall, which he had to crank during all his waking hours. As he turned the heavy wheel, he would often try to imagine what he might be achieving through his backbreaking work. Perhaps he was turning a millstone that was grinding grain into flour, or perhaps he was bringing water up from a deep well to irrigate a field.

When the long sentence came to an end and the shackles were removed, the first thing this man did, broken in both body and spirit, was to go to the other side of the wall to see just what he had been accomplishing for twenty-five years. How shocked he was to discover that there was nothing there! Just a wheel in the wall, not attached to anything. At this point he broke down in tears. “Twenty-five years of hard work, all for nothing.” The awareness that all his work was of no avail was far worse than the hard labor itself. The Egyptians knew this, and this is how they tortured their slaves.

What does it mean to do work that is futile? Can that work be likened to torture? If torture is dehumanizing, denying the divine spark in each person, is slavery also dehumanizing?

Talmud, Bava Metzia 10a

Rav Nahman and Rav Hisda both said the following: If one picks up a lost object on someone else’s behalf, that other person does not thereby acquire it. What’s the reason for this? It is analogous to seizing property on another creditor’s behalf, when there are yet other creditors. In such a case, the seizure does not effect an acquisition, since others would be disadvantaged thereby.

But Rava raised the following objection to Rav Nahman: [We have learned that] if a hired worker finds something while working, it belongs to him only in a case when the employer hired him with the words “do weeding for me today” or “do hoeing for me today”. If, however, he said “work for me today”, that which he finds on the job belongs to the employer.

Rav Nahman answered that in the case of the employer, it is different, since an employee's hand is a surrogate for the employer's hand.

But, asked Rava, didn't Rav already teach that an employee can quit his job even in the middle of the day?

Rav Nahman answered: As long as he hasn't quit, his hand is a surrogate for the employer's hand. And the fact that he is allowed to quit is based on an entirely separate reason, to wit: It is written (Lev. 25:55): "It is to Me that the Israelites are servants; they are My servants". That is, they are not to be servants to servants!

Can human beings be servants to anyone but God? What rights of ownership do workers have, and what implications does that have for our understanding of slavery? Why is it important that workers always have the right to quit, even in the middle of a job?

The Bible clearly supports some institutions of slavery, including differentiating between Jews and non-Jews. Can we place those texts in the contexts of their times? Would Judaism today be seen to support slavery? What Jewish values can you think of that might lead us to fight slavery?

Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer, Chapter 5

At the beginning of day three, the earth was as flat as a board, with the waters covering it entirely. But when the word came forth from on high, mountains and hills arose from the sides of the earth, and the waters were scattered about, as valleys were formed and the waters flowed into the valleys. The waters immediately attempted to rise up again and cover the earth once more, at which God rebuked them, and secured them under the divine feet.....and thus there are deep waters beneath the surface of the earth, on which the earth rides just as a boat rides on the waters of the sea.

God then opened a channel to the Garden of Eden, from which all sorts of plant life began to sprout over the surface of the earth, including all kinds of fruit bearing trees. In this way, God set a table for the animal world even before they were created. And fountains also arise out of the deep in order to provide water for all creatures. Rabbi Joshua said that the depth of the earth is a distance of sixty years' walk. And there is one fountain that sits immediately over Gehinnom, which flows from there, producing [warm] waters that provide pleasure for human beings.

One might read this text as rehabilitating Gehinnom, but the rabbis were reminding us to be aware of the fact that the pleasures of many of our paradises are often situated right above somebody else's hell, and are made possible by those hells. This is one of the truths of slavery today: slave labor is present in the supply chains of many items we take for granted, and the demand for endless cheap goods enables wages to be pushed ever lower and working conditions made even more intolerable.

Where might there be Gehinnom for the workers in the products that you buy or the services that you use? What do you know about what makes your personal paradise possible? What does your synagogue know about the products it buys? How might it find out? Should a synagogue be required to ask those kinds of questions?

From the Website of the American Anti-Slavery Group (www.iabolish.org)

Contrary to popular belief, slavery didn't end with Abraham Lincoln in 1865. Experts estimate that today there are **27 million people** enslaved around the world. It's happening in countries on all six inhabited continents. And yes, that includes the United States. The CIA estimates **14,500 to 17,000 victims** are trafficked into the "Land of the Free" every year.

Slavery cannot be dismissed as an isolated problem in remote villages; it is a global issue, which profoundly yet quietly affects our daily lives. Many goods produced with slave labor are exported directly to North America and Europe, and consumers often purchase these slave-made products while unaware of their tainted origins. In addition, although production of certain consumer goods may not explicitly use slave labor, they may still use slave-made components. As an example, Kevin Bales cites slave-produced charcoal that is essential to making steel in Brazil. Much of this steel then becomes car parts and other metal goods that make up a quarter of all of Brazil's exports.

Among the more prominent slave-made goods from India are oriental carpets. In recent years, the carpet export industry has become one of India's largest - and is believed to "employ" more child slaves than any other industry. Between April of 1995 and March of 1996, Indian carpet exports earned \$656 million, with the largest portion (\$225 million) coming directly from the United States. In 1998, the majority of US carpet imports originated in India, with income for India amounting to approximately \$282 million. Indeed, the carpet industry proves to be extremely valuable for the Indian economy, earning large amounts of foreign exchange and providing further entry into the global market.

For loom owners, children are accessible, easily exploited, and very cheap (if not free). According to Anti-Slavery International and the Bonded Liberation Front, India's hand-knotted carpet-making industry accounts for roughly 300,000 child slaves. Slavery is also rampant in the carpet industries of several neighboring countries. Pakistan has at least 300,000 child slaves working on its looms, and Nepal has anywhere from 100,000 to 200,000 child slaves making carpets. In fact, within these three countries alone, there are likely to be at least one million children producing two-thirds of the world's supply of carpets.

Are you shocked to hear that there are more slaves today than at any other point in history? How would you even know if your carpet was the product of child slavery? What do you think are the causes of slavery today? Can we truly address slavery without addressing global poverty? Or would a model based on ethical consumption be enough to end slavery?

Slavery is not just something that happens to people overseas. There are thousands of people being held as slaves in the United States, including many citizens. They might be working in the

sex trade, picking produce in Florida, or serving as a domestic servant. There are probably people being held as slaves in your neighborhood. Modern slavery is invisible.

From the Atzum Web Site (www.atzum.org)

Human trafficking is modern-day slavery. It is among the fastest growing criminal activities in the world. It is estimated that 600,000 - 800,000 people, mostly women and children, are trafficked across borders worldwide every year.

Trafficked women, in general, come from desperately impoverished areas, both rural and urban. Many of them have little or no education at all. A high percentage of victims come from a background of physical and sexual abuse. Most of them are single or single mothers. The average age of trafficked women in Israel is estimated to be 23.

Victims are often physically caged in brothels with guards there to prevent their escape. Most victims have been forbidden to leave by their pimps and traffickers - dangerous criminals who threaten the lives of the victims and their families. Victims also feel that they have nowhere to turn. Most believe that they will be prosecuted as illegal aliens and put in prison if they turn to the police.

No one would consent to becoming a slave of their own free will. Victims will sometimes “consent” to the initial stage of trafficking because they were misled or deceived by traffickers; other times abject poverty or psychological coercion leads victims to consent. Any “consent”, however, is not really voluntary. That's why countries around the world, including Israel, have agreed that “consent” of the victim does not justify the traffickers' actions.

Due to the highly clandestine nature of human trafficking, it is impossible to know how many victims are in the country at any given time. Government sources indicate that over 3,000 women have been trafficked into Israel while most NGOs give a much higher estimate.

Hotels, newspapers, drivers and internet services are guilty of providing services to pimps and brothels, thereby enabling the exploitation of women.

Without clients, there would be no market for the exploitation of victims.

Atzum does tremendous work in Israel to end sex trafficking. It has done comprehensive research on the clients of sex workers, which is often overlooked in the focus on victims and traffickers. Yet the sex trade is driven by demand. Atzum also fights the myth that the sex trade in Israel is largely fueled by immigrants and foreign workers. Israelis from all walks of life, secular and religious, create the demand for sex trafficking. Israel is a major destination for sex traffickers.

Are you shocked by the idea that the Jewish state is a major destination for sex trafficking? What can we living abroad do to end it? If this is true about Israel, is the Jewish community in the United States also complicit in trafficking, both for labor and for sex?