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Sermon on Slavery, Rosh Hashanah, 2008

[Dvar Torah Rabbi David Stern Rosh Hashanah Slavery trafficking](#)

The following sermon on slavery was delivered by Rabbi David Stern during the 2008 High Holidays. If you would like to read a version that contains citations, please download the PDF version from the bottom of the page.

From Zora Neale Hurston's *Moses, Man of the Mountain*:

"Have mercy! Lord, have mercy on my poor soul!" Women gave birth and whispered cries like this in caves and out-of-the-way places that humans didn't usually use for birthplaces. Moses hadn't come yet, and these were the years when Israel first made tears ... A ruler great in his newness and new in his greatness had arisen in Egypt and he had said, "This is law. Hebrew boys shall not be born..."

The sign of the new order towered over work, and fear was given body and wings. Then came more decrees:

1. Israel, you are slaves from now on ...
 - a. No sleeping after dawn. Fifty lashes for being late to work.
 - b. Fifty lashes for working slow.
 - c. One hundred lashes for being absent ...
 - d. Death for hitting a foreman.

2. Babies take notice: Positively no more boy babies allowed among Hebrews. Infants defying this law shall be drowned in the Nile. Hebrews were disarmed and prevented from becoming citizens of Egypt, they found out they were aliens, and from one new decree to the next they sank lower and lower. So they had no comfort left but to beat their breasts to crush the agony inside. Israel had learned to weep.

"Israel had learned to weep" - and Hurston, the great writer of the Harlem Renaissance, had masterfully learned to read and tell Israel's story through the lens of the African American slave experience, with the fascists' crisply numbered acts of oppression. Israel had learned to weep - but not just once, and not just for ourselves. Because we have learned that ours is a slavery story remarkably free to migrate through peoples and centuries and space.

From Exodus Chapter 13: "Now when Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the Philistines, although it was nearer; for God said, 'The people may have a change of heart when they see war, and return to Egypt.' Vayasev Elohim et ha-am derech hamidbar yam suf - So God led the people roundabout, by way of the wilderness at the Sea of Reeds." (Ex. 13:17-18a)

When God led us out of Egypt, the way of the land of the Philistines was too near: too near to the possibility of a panicked return to Egypt; too near to the violence we would confront along the way; too near to our

own self-defeating fears. When it comes to leading humanity out of slavery, the near path is not available. Instead, vayasev elohim et ha-am - humanity takes a roundabout path to redemption - the circular route, curving out and curling back.

At our seders each year, the haggadah tells a Passover story that moves mei avdut l'cherut - from slavery to freedom. But when it comes to humanity and the reality of slavery today, in defiance of what we proclaim at our seders, we seem to move mei-avdut l'avdut l'avdut: from slavery to slavery to slavery again; from the wilderness into the wilderness again.

From the slaveries Israel escaped to the slaveries we supported to the slaveries we humanized to the slaveries we decried, ours is a centuries-old Jewish story of what one statesman called the attempt to "narrow the gap between the promise of our ideals and the reality of our time."

But why speak of slavery on Rosh Hashanah, a day of creation and celebration proclaimed by the sounding of the shofar? Because the shofar we will hear tomorrow calls us to moral account. Because the whole premise of these ten days - and of Judaism itself - is that freedom and free will carry with them profound responsibilities. Because we can understand teshuvah as the renewal of commitment to face challenges not easily conquered. Because the shackles are everywhere - in far off lands, in our own nation, in our own lives. Mei-avdut l'avdut l'avdut: because slavery still floats free.

Using one conventional and clear definition of slavery - forced labor for no pay under the threat of violence - the State Department estimates that 27 million people live as slaves worldwide today. Most do not fit our Gone With The Wind image of plantation slavery in the antebellum South. According to the American Anti-Slavery Group, most of today's slaves suffer in debt bondage, where poverty forces families to put their children's labor up as collateral for loans. That is why the world's poorest countries, places like Cameroon and Mauritania, have the highest levels of slavery - though the correspondence isn't perfect because those slaves are then trafficked into the world's wealthier nations.

Many others of the 27 million are sex slaves, women and children who are forced into prostitution to ostensibly pay off fees for immigration papers and transportation costs; or migrant workers who are told that all their wages are to be kept by their employers for mystery debts accrued for food and immigration and housing.

Curving out and curling back: to Mission, TX, where in 2005 a couple smuggled two undocumented immigrant women from Mexico with the promise of employment. Instead, they kept them as slaves in the daycare center the couple ran and in the couple's home. The two women worked for 1300 hours with no pay, and under threat of violence. The couple was charged with involuntary servitude.

Curving out and curling back: to El Monte, California, where in 1995 American authorities liberated a slave workshop. Dozens of illegal Thai immigrants, most of them bused straight from the airport, were locked up and guarded by night, and forced to sew garments by day. Factory owners informed them that their wages would be withheld until they were able to work off their debts for transportation. The wages would accrue at the rate of \$1.60 per hour. Somehow, the day of full repayment never arrived.

Curving out and curling back: to the women and children who are coerced or abducted into prostitution. Author and activist Kevin Bales tells the harrowing story of Reina :

At the age of fifteen, Reina was slipped across the border from Mexico by human traffickers, lured by the promise of a job. The traffickers brought her to Oceanside, California, about thirty miles north of San Diego, where fruit fields bordered by golden reeds conceal an ugly business. There on the ground amidst the tall reeds, Reina became one of the teenage girls forced to lie down before the farm workers who prowl the paths.

Reina's story is one among many. Closer to home, Texas has one of the highest human trafficking rates in the country. Charged inflated prices for empty promises, victims are robbed first of their money in the immigration scams that bring them here, and then of the dignity of their bodies.

From coerced domestic servants to smuggled factory workers to the teenage girls in the fields north of San Diego, slavery is not history. It is a bitter and alarming reality, hiding in plain sight abroad and at home - a fundamental issue of women's rights, of children's rights, of workers' rights, of human rights. The CIA estimates that between fourteen and seventeen thousand victims are trafficked into the United States of America - land of the free - every year.

Seventeen thousand victims of trafficking in the US every year - 27 million slaves worldwide. Those are big numbers - and yet that official definition of slavery only describes one portion of the world's population that faces elemental struggles each day - with hunger, with poverty, with the violence perpetrated in ethnic and international strife.

The refugees in camps in Darfur and Chad are not slaves, but their lives are just as tenuous and radically constrained. Their Pharaohs are many - the Janjaweed; the Sudanese President; the Chinese government, a key supplier of small arms and huge oil revenues to Sudan. As the crisis deepens each year, there are no villages left to burn in Darfur, so the Janjaweed attack aid workers and refugee camps. And for us, most chillingly, genocide becomes normalized - the cries of the victims reduced to background noise, if we hear them at all.

On the roundabout way, we are all at risk - the bodies of the victims, the souls of the bystanders. The American Jewish abolitionist and early feminist Ernestine Rose put it simply: "Slavery deprives us of ourselves." We stand by, or we turn away, or we remain willfully or innocently ignorant, or we feel for them but say there's nothing we can do. There are so many Pharaohs, so many slaveries out there. Because poverty is slavery and homelessness is slavery, and racism is slavery, and any system or circumstance that denies the spark of dignity in another human being - those are slavery too.

And we are the reluctant Moses at the burning bush, protesting - *Mi anokhi ki aylech el Par-oh* - Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh? It takes all I can do to support my family, to be present for my kids, to take care of my parents, to hold onto my health as I grow old, to do my job. My own garden demands all the tending I can give. And sometimes we are right.

Or we say that we are tired and even a little annoyed at a Judaism of

demands. Give me the spirituality of personal fulfillment and the soul's tranquility. Sometimes I just need to close my eyes and listen to the beautiful music in the sanctuary. And sometimes we are right.

Or we suffer from the most recently coined disease of our culture - compassion fatigue. We're just hurricaned out, and genocided out, and solicited out. We don't deny the problems, but their magnitude paralyzes us. In a world where the smoke and fire of the Holocaust shattered all our easy confidences in God or humanity, we have substituted an equally easy skepticism about our own capacity to do any good at all.

Mi anachnu - Who are we that we should go to Pharaoh?

We are Jews, bearers of a proud legacy of protest. We belong to a people whose identity was fired and formed in the passage from Pharaoh's oppression to God's freedom. The One who overthrew the Pharaoh of heartless power is the One who invited us into covenant at Mt. Sinai.

The God who wants us to be partners rather than subjects says to us: Here is your freedom, and here is your truth - to be free means to be responsible. Here is your world, with all its need, because the Exodus that freed you from slavery did not eliminate evil - it did not even eliminate slavery. Here is your community, with its poor and hungry and ill. Here is your family, with all its blotches and blemishes.

You are incomplete human beings, God says, and I give you an incomplete world. You will call the process of making it whole tikkun olam, striving for healing and repair, redeeming sparks of holiness wherever they hide. The task of tikkun means that your world comes not tied up neatly in a bow, but with a big label on it containing the two words that every Jewish father dreads most the night before Chanukah: "Assembly Required."

Assembly required: to feed the hungry, and educate the illiterate, and assert the dignity of those whom society vilifies. Assembly required to provide opportunity for people to lift themselves beyond their own circumstances, and for people to share of their good circumstances with others. Assembly required for society at every level - from citizen to congregation to community to government - to share responsibility not just for the middle class, whose votes politicians chase at every turn, but for every person regardless of class.

Assembly required in our homes and our lives - where our own surprising slaveries cry out for redemption. Because in homes where one spouse renders another without power or dignity, there is slavery. When we find ourselves addicted to behaviors that diminish the spark of God in ourselves or in others, there is slavery. When we treat other human beings as mere instruments on our own paths to success or gratification; when we pursue our careers to the benefit of our pocketbooks or our egos but to the neglect of those we love -- there is slavery. Our sages taught that the worst part of our bondage in Egypt was that we became so inured to it we stopped hoping for something better. We, like our ancestors, sometimes don't even recognize the shackles any more, cloaked as they are in the trappings of status and busy-ness and achievement.

Assembly required: that is the task on the roundabout path from slavery

to redemption. It is a path that runs through the messiness of the world and not around it. A path we follow with grand dreams but necessarily small and imperfect steps. The tools are before us: to raise consciousness about human trafficking; to learn more through organizations like Free the Slaves and the American Anti-Slavery Group; to continue to engage with American Jewish World Service and other organizations in the fight for life and dignity in Darfur.

And one of the most exciting tools of all: tomorrow, Rabbi Knight will speak to us about the power of Temple's participation in a Reform Movement project called Just Congregations. Just Congregations is a national initiative in Congregation-Based Community Organizing, and has already begun to transform our work in Temple's great tradition of social justice. Through Just Congregations, we will share with one another the concerns of our homes and our hearts and our lives: from educating our children to caring for our parents, from affordable housing to the impact of the current economic crisis. From our conversations with one another, we will move to join with dozens of other faith communities in Dallas dedicated to the vital work of bringing justice to our city. Just Congregations offers us an opportunity to work for redemption in new ways, with new spirit.

And what of the roundabout path of the human heart - the reach towards redemption in our own lives? The late great Texan Barbara Jordan reminded us that the transformation begins within: "If the inner landscape of the soul does not change," she said, "the outer landscape of the world does not change either."

The change of the inner landscape may be hardest of all. To find new strength and new encouragement in battling all the seemingly insuperable obstacles. To genuinely embrace the life-altering promise that our paths can be different in the year ahead; that we have the power to make different choices; that we are not always shackled to circumstance. Resignation is by far the easier path - to say, like a slave: "This is who I am and what I am destined to be." But Rosh Hashanah warns us that resignation is the path of return to Egypt. The words of freedom are harder. To say: "Whatever my circumstance, I have the potential to be less angry and more generous; less judgmental and more empathic; to be more present for those who need me; more devoted to causes beyond my own comfort." These days and our tradition are emphatic - we are not to be resigned - to the world or our choices within it. We are not powerless subjects cowering before a divine despot, but the partners the Holy One desperately needs for the task of mending.

We are not powerless, and we are not alone. When Moses asked, *Mi Anokhi* - Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh? God replied: *Ki ehyeh imach* - I will be with you. Not "I will do it for you," not "Just say the right incantation, and all will be well." But "I will be with you" - as you accept your own freedom, and as you join in common cause to bring freedom to others.

On the roundabout path towards redemption, Moses - and we - will not be alone. *Ki ehyeh imach* - God's strength and God's challenge will be with us. God's horizon of decency will be before us. God's gifts of moral outrage and humane compassion will accompany us on our way.

As absurd as our noble ideas might sometimes seem in a fractured world, we are the heirs to a promise that someday God's creation and

God's name, will be one - that even when goodness seems eclipsed, goodness remains the fundamental direction of God's world. On the roundabout path, the words of Martin Luther King ring with hope: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice."

That arc towards justice is the calling of our lives. We have known bondage and liberation, sea and desert and the mountain's promise -- and they all call us to stand vigil - ready to move back towards the wilderness, back towards anyone in need, anyone still in bondage -- to walk with them, to learn from them, to lift and be lifted by them.

That's what makes the long way sacred. We are here to circle back to responsibility, back and forward and always, to hope.

According to the midrash, when the Israelites finished building the Tabernacle that would accompany them on their journeys, Moses blessed them with these words: "May God's presence live in the work of your hands."

The hope of an ancient blessing for the sacred and inspiring call of a new year:

May God's presence live in the work of our hands -- in a world, we pray, that will be whole and free someday. Amen.

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