

For RambaN, Yosef was generous to offer the people so much in circumstances where he could have taken everything.

The Slonimer Rebbe, a 20th century Hasidic rebbe in Jerusalem, teaches that Yosef was acting for a higher spiritual purpose. He tells a story of the Chernoblyr Magid, Rebbe Mordechai, who was a serious collector of *tzedakah*.

A very wealthy man in Rebbe Mordechai's community would not give even a penny to *tzedakah*. The rebbe was distressed. He decided to invite the man to come stay at his home. While he was there, the rebbe put great pressure on him to give him all of his property – and because the man held the rebbe in such esteem, he did. He gave Rebbe Mordechai everything, until he had nothing – his gold and silver, all his possessions, even his furniture. A little while later, the rebbe returned everything to the man. He told him: you are very lucky. All of your possessions had been taken by the *sitra achra*, the force of evil in the world, and the *sitra achra*, who owned all your things, prevented you from giving even one penny to *tzedakah*. But now that all of your things belong to you again and are under your control, you will be able to behave like a Jew and give *tzedakah*.

The Slonimer Rebbe teaches that this is exactly what Yosef did in Egypt to prepare Egypt for his father's arrival in the land. By acquiring all the land (and even the people) from the Egyptians, Yosef did an act of *tikkun*, of repair. He brought all the materials of Egypt back to their holy source and allowed for their purification.

Spiritualization of this disturbing passage offers some comfort, particularly for those who are accustomed to strictly hierarchical modes of human interaction. For those of us who are more constitutionally egalitarian, these readings are a struggle. Yosef certainly treated the Egyptians with kindness by saving their lives, but at a fundamental level, the passage is about our spiritual ancestor enslaving an entire people on behalf of its totalitarian government.

Yosef could have behaved differently. When the Egyptians came to him with their gold, their flocks, their land, and ultimately themselves, Yosef could have said to them, "As citizens of Egypt, this grain is rightfully yours. I've kept it for you these years, but it is you who grew it and so it is yours. Please take what you need." The Egyptian farmers, after all, grew the grain during the years of plenty and brought it to the storehouses to save the world from famine in the years of drought. The Egyptian people come to Yosef completely vulnerable. In that moment, Yosef could have chosen to empower them, acknowledging their own role in saving the land, but instead consolidates power with Pharaoh, enslaving the Egyptians who depend on him completely. Yosef's act is a profound abuse of power, continuing the violent cycle of his childhood rather than stopping it short.

This shabbat, Yosef's actions ring with particular poignancy. Yesterday was international human rights day, the 62nd anniversary of the ratification of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in the United Nations. Drafted in the horrifying wake of the Shoah, this document became our global articulation of shared aspirations for what it means to be human in this world. It is framed in the very Jewish language of inherent human dignity and comprises the civil, political, economic and social rights that are the foundation of a just society. No country in the world yet lives up to this document in its full expression.

The Universal Declaration states clearly and succinctly: No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.

This week, I was honored to participate in the third Rabbis for Human Rights conference. Rabbis for Human Rights in North America has taken up the issue of slavery in the present day, inspired by the core teaching of our tradition: *לֹא יִדְבַק עָמָל עִירְךָ וְעָמָל עַמְּךָ וְעָמָל אֶרֶץ עִירְךָ וְעָמָל אֶרֶץ עַמְּךָ* you shall not oppress the stranger, for you know the soul of the stranger, yourselves having been strangers in the land of Egypt. We who became a people in the forge of slavery have an obligation to work for the liberation of all people.

Ron Soodalter, author of *The Slave Next Door: Human Trafficking and Slavery in America Today*, and Nisha Varia, a senior researcher with Human Rights Watch, spoke at the conference on a panel to give us a picture of slavery today. I was startled by what I learned.

The news last week reported on two Indonesian domestic workers in Saudi Arabia abused and killed by their employers. In November, a sting operation revealed an extensive human trafficking ring in Minnesota that kidnapped and enslaved Somali girls. WGBH reported in the summer on nail salons in Boston that provided cover for human trafficking.

I learned this week that these seemingly isolated incidents are part of an increasingly lucrative and brutal global industry. Where in the 1850s in the United States, one could buy a person for \$1200 (today that would be about \$50,000), the high cost encouraging a slave owner to take care of their property, now a human being goes for as little as \$100. We have become, Soodalter said, affordable and disposable. Slavery is legal nowhere, he said, and yet is practiced everywhere, including in our neighborhoods.

About 20,000 people are trafficked into the United States each year. They come looking for honorable work to support their families, and end up enslaved in the whole range of our industries: domestic work, agriculture, the production of clothing, food and electronics, and all too commonly, prostitution. Varia pointed out that our nation's guest worker programs have inadvertently enslaved thousands by tying employment in this country to the particular person who garnered the visa, creating an imbalance of power where guest workers cannot speak out against abusive employers without risking deportation and sometimes eternal debt to the traffickers who brought them to this country for fees they could never repay working in their countries of origin.

While 70% of the 17,000 yearly murders in the United States are solved, less than one percent of human trafficking cases are, said Soodalter, suggesting that even where there is political will to end human trafficking, law enforcement and private citizens are only starting to figure out what clues to look for. Freedom of person, so very basic to the expression of our fundamental human dignity, is under assault in our country and in the world, and it is hard to figure out how to repair that reality.

Parashat Vayigash, though, offers us a first step. When Yosef enslaves the Egyptian populace, taking their land for Pharaoh, no one speaks up. His abuse of power sets up a fundamental imbalance of power in Egyptian society going forward, paving the way for the Pharaoh we encounter in Shemot to enslave the Israelites along with the Egyptians. But at the beginning of

