

We Were Slaves. Now We Are Free. How Will We Free Slaves Today?

Rabbi Van Lanckton

Temple B'nai Shalom, Braintree

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First Day of Pesach

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Pesach. Our festival of freedom. We are celebrating the end of our slavery.

We recite at our seders, “Avadim hayinu. Ata, b'nei chorin”

“We were slaves. Now we are free.”

Our ancestors escaped from slavery in Egypt thousands of years ago.

Abolitionists ended the trans-Atlantic slave trade two hundred years ago.

Slavery, however, has not been abolished. Slavery remains a brutal and ugly fact of life today.

Millions of people suffer in slavery. Millions. At least 12 million. Maybe as many as 27 million. Twenty-seven million slaves.

Slavery has other names. Euphemisms hide the fact that we are talking about slavery. Slavery is called human trafficking, or sex trafficking. Slavery is called bonded labor, or forced labor. All of that is simply slavery.

Slavery takes many forms.

Slaves work as field hands, harvesting crops. Slaves work as seamstresses in back-alley sweatshops. Slaves work as kidnapped fishermen, and as abducted child soldiers. Slaves work as common laborers so deeply in debt that their obligations can never be repaid.

The tragic story I am going to tell you appeared on the front page of The New York Times two days ago.

Residents of a wealthy neighborhood in New Delhi heard brittle and desperate cries of a girl. They looked up. The girl was on an upstairs balcony. The girl was screaming for help.

She was thirteen years old. She worked as a maid for the couple who owned the apartment. They had gone on vacation to Thailand. They left the girl locked inside their apartment.

Firefighters came and rescued her. She then described to the authorities her life of slavery.

Her uncle sold her to a placement agency to work as a maid. The agency sold her to the couple.

This child's owners are doctors. They have plenty of money.

But they barely fed their slave. They paid her nothing for her work. They beat her if her work did not meet their expectations. They used closed-circuit cameras to make sure she did not take extra food.

The story of this impoverished, trapped girl is one of millions of stories of slavery happening today.

India has more child slaves than any other country. Desperately poor families sell their children. Some are then forced into unpaid manual labor or prostitution.

According to the International Labor Organization, India has nearly thirteen million workers between the ages of five and fourteen. Between the ages of five and fourteen. Other groups claim the actual number is 45 million or even higher.

Slavery happens not only in countries remote from us, like India. Slavery is happening right here. Including, for example, in Quincy.

This is so according to a report by Paul Taylor to WGBH. Paul was an investigator with the Massachusetts licensing division. His job was to monitor businesses engaged in physical therapy and related services.

During a routine investigation, he saw evidence of women being held against their will. Being held as slaves. This happened in Quincy.

WGBH included Paul's report in a series it broadcast called "Sexual and Human Trafficking in the Boston Area."

This is what Paul saw:

I was watching a physical therapy location we had complaints against. Next door was a nail salon.

A white van pulled up. The women who were working in the nail salon were all escorted out into the van by an older woman, who was working there, and two men, who were already in the van. They loaded all the women into the van and closed the doors.

Paul followed the vehicle. The van's windows were tinted, preventing anyone from seeing inside.

Paul continued his account:

The van drove to Quincy. The two men got out. They opened the side doors. The women stepped out. During the ride, they had all changed their clothes. Now the women were wearing either very short shorts or very short skirts. They went into a place in Quincy. It was a massage parlor. Then other women got into the van from the massage parlor. Different women. And the van left.

Now Paul was truly concerned about what was going on. He followed. Here's what happened next:

The van then went to a house in Dorchester. The women were escorted out of the van into the house. The house had a fence around it and a 'beware of dog' sign. The windows were all covered up. There was a security fence.

Paul reported the incident to local police and, later, to federal authorities. Federal agencies have been closely monitoring wellness centers, massage parlors, and similar venues, in Quincy and elsewhere, for the unmistakable signs of human trafficking like the ones that Paul Taylor spotted.

The WGBH report does not say whether Paul's information resulted in any convictions. But human trafficking does go on in Boston and its suburbs.

Last month I attended a meeting that opened my eyes to this horrendous exploitation.

My dear friend and rabbinical school classmate, Rabbi Suzanne Offit, hosted that meeting in her Newton home.

The presenters were Lisa Goldblatt Grace and Audrey Porter.

Lisa directs a national project based in Boston called “My Life My Choice.”

Audrey is the Assistant Director. She is also the Coordinator of Survivor Services.

“Survivor Services.” My Life My Choice provides survivor services to children the project has rescued from prostitution. They are the survivors. Audrey and other mentors like her are all former prostitutes. They help guide the survivors to a better life.

Lisa founded My Life My Choice a decade ago. She was determined to rescue girls who were being sexually commercially exploited. That’s the term for children trapped in the sex slave trade. “Sexually commercially exploited children.”

My Life My Choice saved Audrey nine years ago. She was the first survivor to begin mentoring exploited girls in Massachusetts. She draws on her personal experience to help vulnerable girls avoid prostitution or leave exploitation behind them.

Here is what I learned from Lisa and Audrey that evening at Rabbi Offit’s home.

The number of children who are estimated to be at risk for commercial sexual exploitation in this country each year ranges from 240,000 to 325,000.

The most frequent ages for girls recruited into prostitution are between 12 and 15 years old. That’s right. Between twelve years old and fifteen years old. Those are the ages of the girls most frequently recruited into prostitution.

If we have a mental image of prostitution and how it works, that image is very likely out of date. This business is no longer primarily conducted on street corners by women propositioning men. Prostitution happens instead primarily through the internet. Pimps place advertisements on websites geared to that purpose.

One such website has received a great deal of attention, as well as much well-deserved condemnation, in recent weeks. The site is called Backpage. Shockingly, it is owned by the Village Voice company, the one that publishes the liberal Greenwich Village newspaper.

The Village Voice is making money from child prostitution arranged and supported by the website that it controls. How much money? The group monitoring such matters found that Backpage makes 22 million dollars every year by selling ads for prostitution.

The Village Voice knows this is happening, but insists on its right to publish the ads. Here, in the Twenty-first Century, the Village Voice is in the slave trade and profiting handsomely from it.

When the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt, one person rose up to challenge Pharaoh and lead the slaves to freedom. Today it is up to us to be like Moses and rise up to free the slaves ourselves.

Here are three specific ways we can join the fight to abolish slavery.

The first is to pressure our Congress to pass a federal law called The Trafficking Victims Protection Act.

Twelve years ago, Congress passed that law. Under it, the federal government increased its efforts to protect victims of trafficking. The law strengthened efforts to prosecute traffickers. It allowed for increased prevention measures. The law provides funding for programs that help victims of trafficking, including shelter and legal services.

The law expires unless Congress reauthorizes it. This happened three times before: in 2003, 2005 and 2008. All three times, Congress routinely reauthorized the law before it expired.

Last summer a bill was introduced to do the same again. The bill had wide bi-partisan support. The introducing Senators included both of our Senators from Massachusetts.

But the bill has not passed. It is caught in the ongoing legislative stalemate of our Congress.

The Trafficking Victims Protection Act has expired. It must be renewed.

Early next week I will send this sermon to the congregation. I will include guidance on how we can urge our Congress to act now.

The second way we can help is to sign a petition directed to the Village Voice demanding that Backpage stop taking ads from the pimps who are sexually exploiting children. Last week, three New York City Council Members, 20 faith leaders, and 75 others marched to the offices of the Village Voice. They delivered nearly a quarter of a million signatures on a petition calling on the Village Voice to shut down the adult section of Backpage.

That effort continues. We can join the effort by signing that petition, as Alice and I have done. Next week I'll send information on how to do that.

The third way we can help is to engage with any of the organizations that, thankfully, are fighting slavery today. They include organizations called "CAST" (the Coalition to Abolish Slavery & Trafficking), "ECPAT" (End Child Prostitution and Trafficking), "Free the Slaves," "My Life My Choice," the "Not for Sale Campaign," "Safe Horizon" and the "Vital Voices Global Partnership." Information about these and other such groups can be found at the website for The Alliance to End Slavery and Trafficking.

All of these ways to fight slavery will be included in my email to the congregation.

I hope you saw the email I sent on Thursday on this topic. It included a suggested ritual for the seder created by another classmate, Rabbi Aaron Fine. The ritual includes adding an empty seder plate to the table. Empty because those who are in slavery are not free to come and eat at our festival of freedom.

Rabbi Fine pointed out that, when Moses was in the wilderness, Moses left the path where he was walking. He looked at the flames of a bush on fire.

In that moment, God spoke to Moses. God told Moses to free the Israelite slaves. And Moses listened, and then acted, despite doubts about his ability to lead.

If Moses had not turned to look, we would not be free today. If he had not listened, and then acted, even though he felt inadequate for the task, we would not be here today.

We must turn to look, as Moses did. We must see, and hear, that which calls out to our souls to pay attention. We must listen to the voice of God that yet speaks today. We, like Moses, must respond to that voice.

At our seders we tell the story of our redemption. We do this story in order to remember what it means to be enslaved and what it means to be free.

Avadim hayinu. Ata b'nei chorin.

To remember our story is to remember who we are as Jews. We are a people obligated by our experience to help others. We remember that we were slaves and now we are free.

Avadim hayinu. Ata b'nei chorin.

With that memory now so fresh in our minds, we cannot stand by as others are enslaved today.

Our story serves for many others as a metaphor, providing the basis for hopeful narratives of oppression that end in freedom.

But slavery today is no metaphor. Slavery today is no symbol. Rather, slavery today is a grim reality.

I hope that we will do all that we can to change that reality from one of oppression to one of freedom. And let us say, Amen.