

## Slavery in 2016

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When we hear a section of Torah such as the one Perry read for us tonight, we may begin to understand how some Confederate clergy delivered thundering biblical defenses of slavery. The Torah does discuss slavery as a given: Laws are enunciated to regulate bonded servitude, not to forbid it.

At the same time, when we hear a passage like the beginning of Exodus 21, we may quickly recognize that ancient Israelite slavery bore little resemblance to the chattel slavery of the pre-Civil War American south. To state the most obvious example, southern slave holders were not required to offer manumission after seven years of service.

The situation contemplated in tonight's portion is of one Israelite in servitude to another. That kind of slavery was not unlike what early Americans called indentured servitude. An Israelite who became the servant of another was typically a person who had fallen on hard times. Having sold all of their land, impoverished Israelites could sell themselves into slavery in order to pay their debts, bankruptcy as we know it being a modern institution. Even debtors' prisons were unknown in biblical antiquity.

People would have to be desperate before they would sell themselves into bondage. That being said, they could do so knowing that laws required that even slaves be treated fairly. Tonight, we heard that slavery would not be permanent, except by the servant's choice, which is clearly discouraged. Other passages forbid a slave holder from cruelly mistreating a slave. An injury to such a servant was cause for immediate release from bondage.

No, slavery in the American south was nothing like Ancient Israelite bondage. American slavery was for life, and indeed longer, with a duration of unending generations. Parents could be sold away from children, or children from parents, husbands from wives and wives from husbands. As the property of the slaveholder, no different from a cart or a horse, the slaves could be and often were beaten, maimed, or worse. Many of the wounds have yet to heal.

The chattel slavery of the American south is thankfully a thing of the past, even as it continues to leave a scar across our nation. Tragically, though, slavery continues to be practiced here on Earth, even in 2016, even in the United States.

Four years ago, as our nation approached the sesquicentennial of the Emancipation Proclamation, my colleague, Rabbi Rachael Bregman, described an example of modern slavery in the *Atlanta Jewish Times*:

“An 11-year-old girl in five-point shackles is escorted into a courtroom. Her crime? She was caught in the back of a van with a 43-year-old man who had paid for 30 minutes of her time to do whatever he wanted to with her. Where was the man when the girl was in court? He’d already been released, fined \$50 for misdemeanor solicitation and set free. The little girl – because at 11, what else can we call her – belonged to a pimp who had three other girls in his possession. After she had run away from home, the pimp took her in, and now she was ‘paying him back’ for a roof over her head, her clothing and some food.”

Rabbi Bregman’s example is heart-wrenching. Worse, that little girl is but one of nearly 30 million people, over half of them women and girls, living in slavery today, according to the Borgen Project, a nonprofit organization that addresses global poverty and hunger. While most are enslaved for labor, nearly a quarter are held in bondage for sex. While most of the world’s slavery hot spots are in the Global South, the Borgen Project estimates that some 600,000 slaves are held in the United States, even now some 151 years after the end of the Civil War. To be sure, the U.S. is better than most of the world: The 2013 Walk Free Global Slavery Index places U.S. at 134th out of 162 countries; with Iceland, Ireland, and the United Kingdom tying for the bottom, or best, spot on that list of shame.

What makes the United Kingdom so different from the United States? Why does one country contain an estimated 4,000 slaves while another has over a half million? The United Kingdom has about one-fifth the population of the U.S., while our country has about 150 times the number of slaves! The U.K. has acted decisively to bring an end to the scourge of human trafficking, with Parliament adopting the Modern Slavery Act of 2015. Among other provisions, the Act establishes a network of victim advocates, headed by an Anti-Slavery Commissioner. It strengthens criminal penalties for those who hold slaves, while exonerating and freeing slaves like the little girl who are forced into petty crimes

themselves. The Act also provides for funds earned by slaveholders to be seized and directed to restitution and care for the victims.

Even the British law doesn't reach beyond the borders of England and Wales. Most importantly, it doesn't force British companies to assure that they are not profiting from human slavery in the developing world.

Admittedly, compared with England, the United States is at a disadvantage with regard to slavery. Our porous southern border is inviting to those who would target vulnerable would-be immigrants and enslave them. Some, called "coyotes" smuggle immigrants for unconscionably exorbitant fees. Even more unscrupulous are traffickers, who offer to bring the most desperate immigrants in return for their labor, supposedly for a fixed period of time. Vulnerable people in despair don't ask many questions. They may not know that such indentured servitude is illegal in the United States. They certainly wouldn't imagine that they could be held against their will indefinitely. Their worst fears wouldn't include the possibility of being pimped out for paid sexual abuse against their will.

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, does take human trafficking seriously, but it lacks resources. Even Texas adopted a 2015 law to make prosecuting the crimes of human trafficking and forced prostitution easier and to provide additional resources for children who are the victims of human trafficking.

Throughout history, slavery has taken many different forms. We have no reason to be proud of ancient Israelite slavery. True, the bondage described in Exodus 21 was not as dehumanizing as chattel slavery in the American south, or as today's human trafficking. Still, one person's owning another, even temporarily, is contrary to the most basic thrust of our faith: Every human being is equal, created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God. Modern slavery is in some ways even more insidious than that of Arkansas and our neighboring states in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century: Today's bondage takes place in the shadows, while most of the world doesn't know, or averts its eyes.

Let us open our eyes, and let us notice that eleven year old girl, hauled into court for prostitution, which she was forced to commit against her will, while her slaveholders go free. Let us insist that our great nation bring its considerable power to bear forcefully to end human bondage within our borders. Then, may the United States leverage its newfound moral authority in ways that even the

United Kingdom doesn't yet: Together, may two great nations and more insist that slavery has no place on Earth in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century or ever.

Amen.