

**Moral Superiority**  
***Parashat Behar-Behukkotai***  
**May 12, 2007**  
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Sometimes, when we read the Bible, it's easy to feel morally superior. This week's *parashah* is a case in point. At the beginning of the *parashah*, we read about slavery, as if it's a common practice in society. Now, it's true that it's not the forcible kidnapping and enslavement of people against their will that comes to mind when we hear the word, 'slavery;' it's more a form of indentured servitude to pay off a debt. But nonetheless, how much more primitive, we may ask, can you get? Slavery was abolished in this country in 1865! It's as far from our reality today as any other crime against another person.

That alienation is only reinforced by one of the significant features of the Biblical institution of slavery, as presented in our *parashah*, namely that native-born Israelites were treated differently from foreigners. Unlike foreigners, native-born Israelites, according to our *parashah*, couldn't be enslaved at all. That distinction seems offensive to the universalistic tendencies we find elsewhere in the Bible and certainly to our own universalistic tendencies. After all, we've today even gone beyond the Declaration of Independence's famous assertion that "all men are created equal" to understand it to refer to women as well as men. The notion that we would deem some people to be less worthy of basic human rights because of their nationality offends our sensibility.

And yet, when we look closely at our society, we can see that maybe we haven't progressed as much as we might have thought.

First of all, believe it or not, there **is** slavery in this country.

Just the other day, together with all the other unsolicited mail that I brought in from the mailbox was a glossy magazine entitled, *Metrowest Magazine*. Like an airplane magazine, you don't expect it to have any disturbing stories in it, but, lo and behold, in this issue there was a story entitled, "Modern Day Slavery."

You can read there about Michelline Slattery, a 30 year old nurse in Framingham who was enslaved for 13 years, first in Haiti, and then in Connecticut.



Or Naseem Siraj, a 39 year old Indian woman who was held against her will as a full-time domestic worker by an Omani couple, an engineer and a pediatrician, in Brookline.

Or Vasantha Gedar, who was rescued by police in Quincy. She was essentially enslaved by a Kuwaiti couple, who had hired her to care for their son.

So slavery exists. In fact, according to Charles Jacob, the co-founder and President of the American Anti-Slavery Group, “human trafficking”—modern-day slavery—is “the 21st century’s most urgent humanitarian crisis.”

But it’s easy to dismiss this. After all, the bulk of it takes place elsewhere. Defeating slavery in our country is now merely an issue of enforcement. We have laws prohibiting this conduct. More important, we, as a society wholeheartedly condemn it.

So though we should, of course, support the American Anti-Slavery Group, we probably don’t feel ourselves personally challenged by the fact that, even in our society, such a problem still exists.

But what about the way we relate to foreigners? Are we really more universal than our ancestors? Do we really believe that foreigners should be treated the same as Americans when it comes to human rights?

Let’s look at three examples. Each of us can draw our own conclusions.

First, consider the working conditions of workers abroad whose labor we rely upon to clothe ourselves and to provide for our needs. They are not nearly the same as the working conditions that a century of labor law here in this country has produced. The wages of foreign workers are lower, their benefits are fewer, and their rights are hardly comparable.

And yet we are willing to buy products made in such places; we’re willing to eat food harvested by workers in such places. Apparently, we aren’t willing to pay the price of exporting our consciences beyond the borders of the USA. We’d rather continue to benefit from cheap goods, even though the price paid by the workers who produce them may be very high indeed.

Consider the way we treat foreigners here in the United States. Consider our immigration policy. On the one hand, we have allowed hundreds of thousands of

undocumented aliens to stream across our borders. We employ them throughout our economy; and yet, how do we treat them?

A few years ago, an article in *The New Yorker* magazine documented the conditions faced by tomato pickers—most of whom are undocumented aliens—in Immokalee, Florida. According to the article, they are paid as little as forty cents per bucket. A filled bucket weighs thirty-two pounds. To earn fifty dollars a day, a picker must harvest two tons of tomatoes, or 125 buckets. The article goes on to describe the workers' near absolute dependency on unscrupulous labor contractors.

As we've seen recently, even here in Massachusetts, undocumented aliens are quite vulnerable. They don't, by any means, possess the same rights as American citizens.

What about those stirring words from the supposedly primitive book of Leviticus that remind us that we are not to oppress the stranger (*lo tonu et hager*) for we ourselves were strangers in the Land of Egypt?

The Book of Leviticus instructs us to apply the same laws to the stranger as to ourselves: *mishpat echad lager v'laezrach*.

We are even bidden, by this 3,000 year old text from a supposedly primitive age, to love the stranger: *V'ohavta et hager!*

How many of us can say we do?

Finally, if we need a reminder that U. S. citizenship remains an extremely important criterion for the determination of basic human rights that we, as a society, are prepared to offer someone, we need look no further than Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. The other day, I took a look at the directive that set up the Detention Center at Guantanamo Bay. It's readily available on the Internet. The document is revealingly entitled, "Detention, Treatment and Trial of *Certain Non-Citizens* in the War Against Terrorism," by George W. Bush, President of the U. S. (italics mine). I encourage everyone to read that document.

In every war that the U. S. has fought, prisoners have been taken. Prisoners have been held in detention. But the situation at Guantanamo Bay is truly unique, for a determination was made, early on, that not only would prisoners there be denied the rights of U. S. citizens; they would also be denied the rights afforded prisoners of war by the Geneva Conventions. The date on that document setting up the

detention center is November 2001. Some of the prisoners held there today have been there since then.

We may feel superior, but we still have far to go to reach the peak of moral development—even the stage of moral development in the 3,000 year old document we read this morning.

We're not there yet.

We might have good excuses to explain our unwillingness, or our failure, to treat foreigners decently and fairly, both here and abroad, but can we justify it?

Notwithstanding the ancient cultural conditions in which the Bible was written, it raises for us some challenges. This is as it should be. The fact that, in some respects, the society the Bible reflects was more primitive than our own is no reason to dismiss the truly revolutionary challenges it raises.

We should not be smug; we should not be complacent. Instead, we should continue to strive to extend the ideals that our tradition teaches us in this book and elsewhere, into the society in which we live.

Shabbat Shalom.