

This Week In Torah Ki Teitse
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8.26.20

There is a lot of revisiting of slavery in our history. The 13th amendment was added to the Constitution in 1865 [which abolished slavery and involuntary servitude], but it did not rid America of racism. There are many who would argue that the enslavement of black Americans was replaced with Jim Crow laws, segregation, and a higher percentage of minority incarceration. Check out the documentary “13th” on Netflix. Worldwide—human trafficking is a tremendous problem that affects every continent in the world: women forced into the degrading and dangerous life of sex trafficking, Africans kidnapped to work in neighbor countries on plantations, Asians caught up into indentured servitude—just to name a few. These memories are more than just personal; they become communal as they are etched into the psyches of numerous people. We as Jews understand this—over and over again [including this *parasha*]; we are told in Torah to remember that we were slaves in Egypt.

It is true that Torah law does permit slavery; it is a travesty we need to acknowledge. Yet Torah law does have a remedy to it-- purchase price of one's freedom and emancipation in the Jubilee year as well as the ethics of the treatment of slaves that were introduced to ensure that they were created in the image of God was not forgotten. The morality and legality of slavery were argued through Jewish history and most poignantly, in the 19th century—prominent rabbis like David Einhorn spoke vehemently against it from his pulpit in Philadelphia and others like Rabbi Morris David Raphall spoke of its permissibility from his pulpit in New York City.

Our *sedra* includes this verse from Deuteronomy 23:16-17—“You shall not turn over to his master a slave who seeks refuge with you from his master.” An escaped slave can be granted safe haven. The challenge is this—in our section of Torah; a person is obligated to return property to its proper owner: “If you see another person's animal, you shall not hide from it; you must return it to the owner. If the owner is not known to you, then you should bring the object into your house, where it shall remain until the owner inquires after it, and you will return it to him. So shall you do for his donkey, his garment, or any lost article that you may find...” (Deut. 22:1-3). Which is it for a slave—safe haven or returned property? The traditional Biblical commentators separate out Israelite servitude from Canaanite servitude. RaSHI commented that these masters cited were not Israelite and therefore are not bound to Torah law. The Spanish scholar Ibn Ezra noted that it was not uncommon that in the turbulent times caused by wars, slaves showed up seeking protection. Italian sage Sforno noted that anyone who shows up within Israelite borders should be welcomed and invited to learn about God and not turned away. This is hardly satisfying to my 21st century mindset which sees slavery as just wrong.

A more palatable understanding was framed by the Hasidic rabbis in the 19th century. For them, every human being was created in the divine image. Every soul had the potential to unlock a level of *kedusha* [holiness] that can hasten redemption. While people may have financial misfortune and become indebted, they are not to be looked upon as anything other than people. Rabbi Menachem Mendel wrote: “A divine spark is in each soul. Do not forsake that. Encourage that spark to shine. To do so would hasten the coming of God’s kingdom.”

Many of us in the area are involved with the “21-day challenge to be an antiracist.” Each day, I get an email from the United Way about the complex web that racism has created in our society. Systematic racism has its toll in racial discrimination in how people perceive people of color, but it also affects access to education and health care and housing and equity in the judicial process... and... the list goes on and on. Author Michelle Alexander noted that it is next to impossible to compartmentalize racism in certain segments of American life because each factor is intertwined with another factor. Add to this that the scars of American slavery and continuation of discrimination and bigotry make racism an on-going issue. Slavery that started in 1619 in our country might have ended in 1865, but its aftermath still haunts America 155 years later.

And where does this leave us? The fight to eradicate slavery and to remedy its effects is tasks that we as Jews and Americans need to own. Remember the words from *Pirke Avot* in the Talmud which states that we are not obligated to complete the task, but that doesn’t mean we are exempt from doing our fair share. We are obligated to heed the words of Torah and not return a slave to his master by seeking to untangle the intricate web of racism and stand up to hatred in all forms.

Let me end by reminding you all to heed the words of Psalm 97... “O you who love God, hate what is evil... The light is sown for the righteous, radiance for the upright. O you righteous people rejoice in God and acclaim God’s holy name.”