

MODERN SLAVERY – Rabbi Suzanne Singer
Erev Shabbat, January 27, 2012

We are fully in the book of Shemot – Exodus – the story of the Israelites' bondage in Egypt. Aside from its historical significance, what can this story tell us about our world today? After all, slavery is a thing of the past, isn't it? The truth is that slavery is still with us, in a variety of different guises. You will remember that at Rosh Hashanah, I spoke of little boys, as young as four years of age, being sold as slaves to fishermen in Ghana.

Another example of a form of modern-day slavery: All the wonderful electronic devices we own – cell phones, smart phones, iPads and the like – all contain small chips that are manufactured in, you guessed it, China. Last week, on Jon Stewart's show, he presented a profile of one of the companies that makes those chips. Foxconn employs several hundred thousand workers who live in dormitories, 8-10 to a room, make 35 cents an hour, and don't get paid overtime. They can be sentenced to 12 years in prison for trying to unionize. Some workers commit suicide because of these conditions, so the company has taken to installing netting under the windows in case anyone jumps. Stewart concluded that Foxconn's business practices saves American consumers 23% on electronics.

But we don't need to go all the way to Africa or Asia to see modern-day slavery. In September, I traveled to Immokalee, Florida, to visit with tomato pickers and to learn of their plight with the group, Rabbis for Human Rights. The Florida tomato industry has been called "ground zero" for modern slavery by one federal prosecutor. Some workers have become debt slaves – charged so much by their employers for transportation and living accommodations, that they cannot pay off their debts for many, many years. In the meantime, they are forced to remain in the employers' fields under armed guards. Actual slavery is the extreme end of the continuum in the tomato fields. Like textile workers at the turn of the last century, Florida tomato harvesters are still paid by the piece. The average piece rate today is 50 cents for every 32-lbs of tomatoes they pick, a rate that has remained virtually unchanged since 1980.

As a result, a worker today must pick more than 2 and a quarter tons of tomatoes to earn minimum wage in a typical 10-hour workday – **nearly twice the amount a worker had to pick to earn minimum wage thirty years ago**. Most farmworkers today earn less than \$12,000 a year. Underpayment of wages, sexual harassment, and exposure to pesticides are further indignities preventing workers from living in a decent, dignified, and independent way.

So what do these forms of modern slavery have in common, and what do they have to do with us? Well, we are part of a global economic system that maximizes profits for corporations and the very wealthy few, while leaving the rest of us, the 99 percent, to survive as best we can. And there are fewer and fewer of us who are surviving. We have been hearing and reading about the great disparities in wealth that have grown by

leaps and bounds in the last 30 years. Members of the middle class have been thrown into poverty, unable to afford their homes, health insurance, food. The term “working poor” has become a fairly common description of folks who, just a few years ago, were making ends meet and then some.

According to the New York Times, one in three – yes, one in three – that is, 100 million Americans are either poor or very close to it. Over 49 million Americans are below the poverty line which is \$24, 343 for a family of four. And another 51 million are in the “near poor category” meaning they have incomes that are less than \$36,000 a year . According to the Census Bureau, over half of the near poor fell into that group from higher income levels because they were sapped by medical bills, taxes, and other unavoidable outlays.

At a time when millions of Americans are trying to hang on to their homes and their jobs, corporate executives are often being paid MORE than what they were getting BEFORE the recession hit. The median pay for top executives at 200 major corporations was 9.6 million dollars last year – a 12 percent increase over 2009.¹ And profits at American businesses are increasing at a rate of nearly 30 percent, the fastest growth in more than 60 years.

Tax and economic policies are largely to blame for this gross disparity and for the fact that basic necessities such as health and child care, housing and education are increasingly out of reach for the poor and near poor.² For example, as you know, capital gains on investments are taxed at 15 percent – and capital gains are the source of half the income of the top 0.1 percent of Americans. Additionally, a chunk of what fund managers are paid is also taxed at the 15 percent rate.³ The result, according to economist Paul Krugman, is that the middle class’ income has risen by 21 percent between 1979 and 2005, while the income of the richest one thousandth of Americans has risen by 400 percent.⁴

The result of the impoverishment of most Americans is a constant scramble to keep up with bills, to scratch a living in order to barely survive. What does that mean for our children? Aside from poor nutrition, lousy housing conditions, limited opportunities for advancement, here is a shocking example from last week’s *New York Times* about how many of our children are living: Day care centers are beginning to stay open around the clock because parents are now working two or three jobs, in addition to working late and off hours. Today about 40 percent of the labor force works non-standard hours,

¹ Daniel Costelli, “The Drought Is Over (At Least for CEO’s),” *The New York Times, Sunday Business*, April 10, 2011, p. 1.

² *The NY Times* Editorial 11-24-2011.

³ Nicholas D. Kristof, “Taxes and Billionaires,” *The NY Times*, 7-7-11, p. A21.

⁴ Paul Krugman, *The NY Times*, 11-25-2011.

with that number growing as the service industry expands. Though overnight care is still pretty rare, evening hours are no longer unusual at day care. According to the publisher of Exchange Magazine, this is “the wave of the future.”

In Ohio, the number of centers offering nighttime hours is up more than 50 percent in the last decade, and centers with overnight hours have doubled. Here are some examples provided by the New York Times:

On a recent day, a grandmother dropped off a first grader at 4:30 am on the way to her early morning shift at Burger King. A mother picked up her 3-year-old at 11:30 pm after getting off work at a nursing home. Another mother came for her 2-year-old twins at 1:30 am, after her shift as a cleaner in her gym. For some children, the center’s staff members act almost as surrogate parents – feeding them dinner, helping them with homework, brushing their teeth and putting them to sleep until their parents come to fetch them.⁵

Is this the kind of society we want to create?

I believe that campaign financing is at the heart of the problem. It costs so much money to run a campaign that politicians are indebted to contributors with deep pockets – and they are the corporations and the super wealthy. As a result, it is those with money who set the agenda for the nation.

The Talmud tells us⁶:

Anyone for whom it is possible to protest against [something wrong that] members of his family [are doing] and does not protest, is seized on account of the [wrongdoing of] the members of his family.

[Anyone for whom it is possible to protest against something wrong that] people of his city [are doing] and does not protest, is seized on account of the [wrongdoing of] the people of his city.

[Anyone for whom it is possible to protest against wrongdoing] in the whole world and does not protest, is seized on account of the [wrongdoing of] the whole world.

⁵ Sabrina Tavernise, “Day Care Centers Adapt to Round-the-Clock Demand,” *The NY Times*, January 16, 2012, p. A11.

⁶ *Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 54b*

So it is not only our duty to protest what is going on in our country, it is also in our self-interest – because we are all vulnerable, and we are leaving our children an appalling state of affairs. We really need to think about what kind of society we want to live in and what kind of society we want to bequeath to our children and our grandchildren. We cannot throw up our hands and say that we are powerless to do anything. We need to support legislation and legislators who want to do limit the power that money has become in our political process. We need to speak up and organize, and put our own money where our mouth is. For example, if you have investments in the stock market, and your money is going to multinationals that exploit their workers, or destroy our environment, you can take your money out and invest it in a socially responsible fund.

That is what I am in the process of doing. Or if you have an account with a bank that will not work with homeowners to modify their loans but would prefer to foreclose on them, you can take your money out of that bank and open an account with a community bank or a credit union. I just sent a letter to Chase asking them to close my account and I also sent a letter to the CEO of JPMorgan Chase protesting that bank's choice of profits over a commitment to our community. I would be happy to discuss this further with you. For a final inspiration, I would like us to read the prayer, Social Action, by Jack Riemer.

Social Action

We cannot merely pray to God to end war;
For the world was made in such a way
That we must find our own path of peace
Within ourselves and with our neighbor.

We cannot merely pray to God to root out prejudice;
For we already have eyes
With which to see the good in all people
If we would only use them rightly.

We cannot merely pray to God to end starvation;
For we already have the resources
With which to feed the entire world
If we would only use them wisely.

We cannot merely pray to God to end despair;
For we already have the power
To clear away slums and to give hope
If we would only use our power justly.

We cannot merely pray to God to end disease;
For we already have great minds
With which to search out cures and healings
If we would only use them constructively.

Therefore we pray instead
For strength, determination, and will power,
To *do* instead of merely to pray
To *become* instead of merely to wish;
That our world may be safe,
And that our lives may be blessed.