



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Re'eh 5768

By Rabbi Dorothy A. Richman

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“When your brother, Hebrew man or woman, is sold to you, he shall serve you six years, and in the seventh year you shall set him free.”¹

It disappoints me every year. Approaching the edge of the Promised Land in *Parshat Re'eh*, Moses outlines the possibilities and responsibilities for impending self-rule and national freedom. Inside this list of laws come instructions for being a slaveholder. How can the Torah condone slavery? How can the people who have worked to regain their freedom come into Israel and enslave their brothers?!

There is a part of me that yearns to read a flat-out prohibition of slavery, a Thou-Shalt-Not. I'd like to see an unambiguous ban, such as the one found in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, passed in 1948: “No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.”² Amen.

Of course, writing this doesn't make it so. Despite the U.N. ban, slavery persists in our contemporary global society in several pernicious forms: chattel slavery, debt bondage, sex slavery and forced labor. Twenty-seven million people remain enslaved today.³

The Torah, though it doesn't abolish it, limits slavery. Even if my absolutist sensibilities desire an outright ban, there is a pragmatic part of me that understands the value of regulating, rather than abolishing, the institution. Slavery was a fact of the biblical era and Israelite legislation made it a more humane condition. In fact, the Talmud describes the many restrictions governing slaveholders as so burdensome as to equal a form of slavery itself: “One who buys a slave is as if they bought themselves a master.”⁴

Biblical laws regulating slavery, and the economic and social inequalities that lead to it, can be useful today. These laws create categories that help us use our own economic power in imperfect and vastly unjust conditions. Instead of utopian dreams, the Torah offers laws to temper existing inequality and injustice.

For example, in *Parshat Re'eh*, one law ensures a slave will not enter into freedom “empty-handed.” Instead, she is provided with the means to sustain her own livelihood.⁵ In biblical terms, this meant livestock, food and wine.⁶ Recognizing the humanity of the slave, the Torah obligates the slave owner to contribute the raw materials the freed slave will need to ensure her own sustainable liberty. The slave owner is assigned the responsibility to aid in the slave's successful reintegration into the community.

¹ Dvarim 15:12

² <http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html>

³ http://www.iabolish.org/modern_slavery101

⁴ Talmud Bavli, Kiddushin 20a

⁵ Dvarim 15:13-14

⁶ Talmud Bavli, Kiddushin 17a

This law is relevant today. With slavery still a reality, we are obligated to support the empowerment of the enslaved in practical and material ways. An AJWS grantee, Friends of Orphans (FRO), updates this biblical imperative into a contemporary global context. Winner of the Free the Slaves Harriet Tubman Award, FRO helps children who have been forced to serve as slaves and soldiers in northern Uganda. Founded by six former child soldiers, FRO offers these children tools to heal and thrive.

What are today's equivalents of the biblically mandated livestock, food and wine? FRO pays school fees, runs vocational programs, offers counseling, provides arts and cultural programming and offers health care, especially for HIV/AIDS (most of the child soldiers return HIV positive).⁷ Friends of Orphans empowers freed child slaves and soldiers with the support they need to create and sustain their freedom.⁸

Bertha Pappenheim, a Jewish social activist and fighter of slavery in 20th century Germany, wrote, "You feel oppressed by your Judaism only as long as you do not take pride in it."⁹ The presence of slavery legislation in the Torah can be a blemish in our textual history, or it can be a call to our collective responsibility for the vulnerable among us. Though we aren't slaveholders today, we have the opportunity to be *mativ asurim*—freeing the enslaved.

One of the most powerful places I have visited was located on a sunny beach in Ghana. Elmina Castle has a deceptively beautiful exterior. Inside, it was a place of torture and bondage. Hundreds of thousands of Africans passed into slave ships headed to America through its famous "Door of No Return." Strikingly, in this place of horror, words of healing and responsibility are inscribed on the wall:

In Everlasting Memory of the anguish of our ancestors: May those who died rest in peace. May those who return find their roots. May humanity never again perpetrate such injustice against humanity. We, the living, vow to uphold this.¹⁰

May we, the living and the free, descendants of slaves and slaveowners, accept our responsibility to actively support the elimination of slavery and to support its survivors toward sustainable freedom.



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⁷ <http://www.frouganda.org/news2.html>

⁸ http://www.ajws.org/who_we_are/news/archives/features/ajws_grantees_win_prestigious_international_recognition.html

⁹ Loentz, Elizabeth. *Let Me Continue to Speak the Truth*. Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2007. p. 114

¹⁰ <http://www.blackhistorysociety.ca/Elmina.htm>

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