



CHAG V'CHESED: HOLIDAY DVAR TZEDEK

Passover 5773

By Representative Debbie Wasserman Schultz

Every Passover, we gather with family and friends around the Seder table to read the inspiring foundational story of our people's liberation from slavery in Egypt. We tell and retell this story every year, and millennia later it informs who we are. There are many ways in which Judaism speaks so strongly to the themes of service and justice, but to me, there is none stronger than our own experience: *Once we were slaves in Egypt, and now we are free.* Distilled in this line, the sentiment is clear. Our tradition and history compel us to give back to our society, make the world a better place, and ensure freedom for all.

This intimate connection between Judaism and social justice is why throughout American history the Jewish community—our community—has been a vocal advocate for the values of freedom and equality that make the United States the great country that it is. As a Jewish woman and a member of the U.S. Congress, I strive to bring that connection to bear on my work every day. We are all obligated to make those connections in our own way.

This Passover, I am particularly focused on the rights of women and girls, both in our own backyard and around the world. The Talmud teaches that the optimism and initiative of Jewish women ensured our redemption from slavery in Egypt.¹ And today, women are often still the catalysts for change and liberation; yet too many women around the world are still enslaved and oppressed—including the victims of rape and violence, those who are denied an education and those coerced into sex trafficking.

The specter of violence against women looms large today. Millions of women in war-torn countries like Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda don't move freely from place to place for fear of being raped—a fear created and exacerbated by soldiers who purposefully and disgracefully turn women's bodies into casualties of war.

Denying girls the education they need undermines their freedom as well. Let's be clear: meaningful freedom for women and girls will never be possible without the ability to access education and the social tools necessary to build a fruitful life. But barriers to girls' education are enormous worldwide. Women activists like the brave Mukhtar Mai of Pakistan receive death threats almost weekly for striving against the odds to educate young girls.

Sex trafficking is a global pandemic in parts of the world, and in Southeast Asia alone, 250,000 women are trafficked every year.² Traffickers prey on women and their families who are vulnerable because they are forced to grapple with the grim daily realities of life in poverty. These women are bound by modern slavery—trafficked and abused, they languish without the freedoms and protections they deserve. Some are chained to beds, given just enough food and water to stay alive, and have no way to protect their own physical and sexual health. We must fight to liberate these women and girls from the shackles of bondage—both physical and figurative—that keep them from freedom. As Passover reminds us, we must not rest until these women too, are free.

This month, as we prepare our Seder tables, we also celebrate Women's History Month and International Women's Day. These are both opportunities to pay tribute to the indelible contributions women have made worldwide, while rededicating ourselves to the plight of those women and girls who still need our help today. And every year at

¹ Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 11b.

² Ateneo Human Rights Center, "Trafficking in Women and Children in Zamboanga, Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi (ZAMBASULTA)," 2012. Available at http://www.ungift.org/doc/knowledgehub/resource-centre/CSOs/CSO_Ateneo_Trafficking_in_Women_and_Children_in_ZAMBASULTA.pdf.

Passover, we draw from our people's own difficult past for the strength and courage to change the outcome of their future.

President Obama has said: "Promoting gender equality and advancing the status of all women and girls around the world remains one of the greatest unmet challenges of our time, and one that is vital to achieving our overall foreign policy objectives."³ We believe that all who understand that the story of gaining freedom continues to this day will support these goals. For women to be free, we must ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women; pass the International Violence Against Women Act; and work tirelessly wherever we can to support global health, education, political participation, and women's empowerment.

Only when women everywhere can stand tall and strong together in peace and security can we confidently say: *Once we were slaves, and now we are free.*

American Jewish World Service embodies the natural harmony between Jewish faith and action, putting these values into practice every day. Working to protect the health and safety of women and girls is a vital part of our community's drive to make the world a better place. As Jews, our fundamental belief in freedom, justice and human rights requires that we work tirelessly to end the scourges of violence against women and forced child marriage, defeat those who would block girls who need and want to go to school and stop the practice of coerced sex trafficking.

Going forward, as we work together to bolster their sexual health and rights, we must not only protect, but empower, women and girls everywhere. By working together, we can ensure that the future we leave to our children is one of inclusion, equity, security, hope and freedom. This year, too many women are still slaves. Next year, may we all be free.



Rep. **Debbie Wasserman Schultz** represents Florida's 23rd Congressional district, which encompasses parts of Broward and Miami-Dade counties. She is a member of the House Committee on Appropriations and serves on the Subcommittee on State and Foreign Operations, where she advocates for funding for security, economic and humanitarian assistance and works to reduce poverty around the world. She is also a member of the Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues, a bipartisan Members' organization dedicated to promoting women's economic, health, legal and educational interests. The first Jewish Congresswoman ever elected from Florida, Rep. Wasserman Schultz introduced the resolution behind Jewish American Heritage Month, now celebrated annually in May.

Passover occurs on March 26 – April 2, 2013.

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³ Presidential Memorandum—Coordination of Policies and Programs to Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women and Girls Globally, 30 Jan 2013. Available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/01/30/presidential-memorandum-coordination-policies-and-programs-promote-gende>.