

LIBERATION AND OPPRESSION

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The story told in the Biblical book of Exodus is a powerful one. It tells of a people enslaved by a brutal dictator, of their relationship with their God—a relationship that gave them hope and courage to face the harshness of life, and of their liberation from captivity. It tells of years wandering in the desert after liberation, years that allowed the people to create a unique identity rooted in covenant with their God.

In the book of Exodus, we learn that the holy in the Universe is on the side of those who are oppressed.

We learn that power concedes nothing without a demand.

And we learn, in the words of Bishop Desmond Tutu, that liberation is costly.

Liberation is costly to those who are oppressed—it demands a singular focus, it demands persistence as systems that took generations to build are slowly dismantled, it demands strength from within to keep enough hope that the work that needs to be done seems doable, and not an impossible task.

Liberation is also costly to those who are complicit with the oppression, or those who are coerced or forced into defending it. The story in Exodus is not a happy one—it is not a bloodless revolution or a sudden revelation to those in power. The story in Exodus is a grisly, violent story of extreme measures taken by an angry God against not only the cruel and vicious Pharaoh, but also all of the people of Egypt, whether or not they had any power to help the Israelites escape from bondage.

It is hard, I will admit, for me to believe in any sort of God that would do the things recounted in Exodus, even to free people from slavery.

Dan Clendenin, the author of “Journey with Jesus,” in reflecting on the story of Exodus, writes, “Liberation from oppression is a good thing, and always worthy of celebration. But the writer of Exodus construes Israel's emancipation to include Egyptian subjugation. ... [T]he writer insists that... [the] revenge was the very act of... [God] Himself. ... [God] will slay the first-born of every Egyptian, from the highest in Pharaoh's house to the lowliest prisoner languishing in a dank dungeon, even including the firstborn of Egyptian livestock.” (Dan Clendenin, “When Faith is Hijacked,” found on-line at <http://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20050829Jj.shtml>)

The story of the Exodus is a powerful one. It is a sacred story to the Jewish people—the story of their ancestors, a story that Jews are instructed they must re-tell in the annual celebration of Pesach—Passover—the celebration of which began last night.

And yet it is also a story that transcends one particular place and time.

It is no accident that African slaves in the Americas, when introduced to the Christian religion, latched onto the story of the Exodus, the story of Moses leading his people out of slavery in Egypt thousands of years ago. Enslaved people on this very shore found in that story some hope for their own future.

In singing about Moses and the liberation of the Israelites, they reminded themselves of their relationship to a God who was on their side, and in that God, they found the strength to live another day.

It is no accident that the oppressed peoples of South Africa find meaning in the story of the Exodus—even after the end of the brutal apartheid regime that ruled their nation for so many decades, even after their liberation had been secured.

A mere change in government could not undo centuries of oppression, and so the people of South Africa continue to look for inspiration to the story of the Exodus—a story of wandering in the desert for forty years, a story of hardship and of want, and of a renewed covenant with God through the forging of a new identity.

And so, today, we honor the story of Exodus—for its historical significance as well as its applicability to the modern day.

In thinking about how this story can speak to us in the present, it is possible to take many different paths. It is possible to explore the metaphorical ways in which all of us are restricted, the ways in which our spirits need to be liberated. It is possible to figure out what Unitarian Universalists of many different theological bents have to learn from the story of reliance on a particular kind of God in whom not many of us believe.

It is possible to look at modern forms of oppression—racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, and others—and how we must work to dismantle them, to liberate both their victims and those of us who are complicit in their perpetuation (consciously or not).

It is possible to look at the phenomenon of hope, and how those of us who are comfortable in our power and privilege forget that there are those for whom hope is a necessary ingredient of survival.

All of these things are possible, and I promise you I'll go down those pathways with you in years to come. I doubt we'll run out of ways to explore this powerful text.

This year, however, I'd like to take the story a little more literally. For, you see, even in this modern world, there are people quite literally enslaved. There are people whose labor is forced, who toil under inhuman conditions.

Kimberly French, in an article for UUWorld about contemporary slavery, writes, "You, in all likelihood, own items that were produced by slaves: Chocolate. Hand-woven carpets. Cotton. Coffee. Tea. Tobacco. Sugar. Tomatoes. Cucumbers. Oranges. Grains. Clothing. Sneakers. Soccer balls. Gold. Diamonds. Jewelry. Fireworks. Steel. Glassware. Charcoal. Timber. Stone. Tantalum (a mineral used in laptops, pagers, personal digital assistants, and cell phones). Products in all of these industries have been found made with slave labor, then sold in the global market." (French, Kimberly, "Bitter Harvest," UUWorld, June 2004, found on-line at <http://www.uuworld.org/2004/06/feature1.html>)

The American Anti-Slavery group writes on their website that "Contrary to popular belief, slavery didn't end with Abraham Lincoln in 1865. Experts estimate that today there are 27 million people enslaved around the

world. It's happening in countries on all six inhabited continents. And yes," they write, "that includes the United States." (American Anti-Slavery Group, found on-line at http://www.iabolish.org/modern_slavery101/)

According to the site, "The CIA estimates 14,500 to 17,000 victims are trafficked into the 'Land of the Free' every year. Why," they ask "hasn't more been done to end a dehumanizing, universally condemned practice? One challenge is that slavery today takes on myriad, subtler forms than it did during the Atlantic Slave Trade — including sex trafficking, debt bondage, forced domestic or agricultural labor, and chattel slavery — making it tougher to identify and eradicate." (Ibid.)

Many of the people being held in slavery today are children. The United Nations estimates that 1.2 million children each year are victims of child trafficking. (United Nations Factsheet: "Slavery Today" found on-line at <http://www.un.org/events/slaveryremembrance/factsheet.shtml>)

In addition, the UN says that some 250,000 children are "being exploited as child soldiers in as many as 30 areas of conflict around the world." (Ibid.)

Many of them are young girls, kidnapped from their homes and forced into slavery as prostitutes. I recently saw an Dateline exposé in MSNBC in which pre-pubescent girls as young as five were being sold for sex to tourists—some of them Americans—in Cambodia. It was truly revolting. Revolting enough that the journalists sent to report on what was going on felt compelled to rescue as many of the girls as possible.

Dateline interviewed some of these girls. "One 14-year-old," NBC News writes,"who was recently freed from a brothel, says she came from an extremely poor family in the country next door, Vietnam. She says when she was walking home from school one day, she was approached by a woman offering work in a café. But the café turned out to be a brothel. With no money and no way to get home, she didn't have much of a choice and was forced into sex with grown men, many of them American." ("Children for Sale," NBC News, found on-line at <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/4038249/>)

Why, despite being illegal in every nation on our globe, does such slavery exist? The United Nations says it is a problem that follows "vulnerability exacerbated by poverty, discrimination and social exclusion." (UN Factsheet)

And these problems are not just on cocoa plantations in Ghana, back alleys in Phnom Penh, and factories in Bangladesh. This is a problem here in the United States as well. The poverty that exists around our globe drives people to our country in hope of a better life—and that poverty, combined with our country's ridiculous laws and practices around temporary workers and immigration—forces many of those people to rely upon less-than-honest means to get here.

Much of the modern-day slavery in this country involves undocumented workers, many of whom are forced to work on farms, never able to pay back the cost of their transport into our country.

As Kimberly French wrote in her UUWorld article:

"A 2002 case that resulted in federal sentences of ten to fifteen years for three family members who contracted farm labor from Florida to North Carolina shows how contract slavery works:

“In early 2001 three Mixe Indians from Mexico each paid \$250 to be smuggled into the United States. Penniless and stranded in an abandoned trailer with thirty others in Arizona, the three men agreed to go with a recruiter promising them jobs picking oranges in Florida. For three days they were packed in vehicles with no food and no stops to relieve themselves.

“They were met in Florida by the Ramos brothers, who wrote a check to the recruiter and said each man owed \$1,000 for transportation. Anyone who tried to leave without paying would be beaten. The workers were housed in a filthy converted bar, six to a room, on bare mattresses. They worked twelve hours a day, six to seven days a week, under twenty-four-hour surveillance by guards with weapons. Each week the Ramoses deducted exorbitant fees for rent, food, work equipment, and daily transportation from the workers' ‘wages,’ then claimed to credit whatever remained to their ‘debt.’ The Ramoses were found to have ‘employed’ thousands of undocumented workers in a similar pattern over a decade, according to Florida State University's Center for the Advancement of Human Rights.” (French, “Bitter Harvest”)

What can we do about these problems?

First, we can ask our government to do something about it. While there are many things our government can do, there is one particular piece of legislation pending that pertains to this topic.

The House of Representatives has before it legislation that would establish a Congressional Commission on the Abolition of Modern Day Slavery. The bill is numbered HR 2522, and it has been referred to committee, probably to die there. (<http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bill.xpd?bill=h110-2522>)

We can and should demand that it be passed. Now, it turns out that New York's own Representative Nadler is the chairperson of the subcommittee to which that bill has been referred. If any of you know someone who lives in his district, which snakes from the Upper West Side to Coney Island, perhaps you can ask them to give him a call. Even if you don't, perhaps you can call your congressperson and ask them to co-sponsor it—neither Nita Lowey nor John Hall has done so yet, nor have any of the representatives from Connecticut.

Next, we can pay attention to where our money goes.

This means shopping with a conscience—buying from companies who we know take care not to engage in slave labor. Fair Trade certification, as well as others—such as RugMark for carpets—requires that producers certify that their products are made free of slave labor.

Perhaps that next chocolate bar can be a Fair Trade-certified one.

The Not For Sale campaign website also gives some tips, including this disturbing news about a major tire manufacturer: “In November 2005, the International Labor Rights Fund (ILRF) filed a case in US District Court in California against Bridgestone alleging “forced labor, the modern equivalent of slavery” on the Firestone Plantation in Harbel, Liberia. The lawsuit states: “The Plantation workers allege, among other things, that they remain trapped by poverty and coercion on a frozen-in-time Plantation operated by Firestone in a manner identical to how the Plantation was operated when it was first opened by Firestone in 1926.”” (Not For Sale Campaign website, <http://www.notforsalecampaign.org/free-to-work.html>)

Perhaps we should choose other tires when next our cars need them.

Finally, we can watch where we invest our money. The Unitarian Universalist Association has long promoted socially-responsible investing and shareholder activism on issues we care about.

On the issue of slavery, our denomination has joined forces with powerful investors in order to make change. For example, “the UUA co-filed a resolution with the New York City Employees' Retirement System (NYCERS) asking the H.J. Heinz Corporation to adopt a global code of conduct. In response, Heinz agreed in 2002 to improve auditing of its foreign contractors.” (<http://www.uuworld.org/2004/06/feature1b.html>).

The UUWorld reports that other corporations are listening as well. Where do you have your money invested? What are the principles guiding your 401K? Perhaps you should take a look.

As we prepare to begin the annual celebration of the Biblical Exodus, we pause, stunned, to recognize that slavery is not a problem relegated to the past. The ancient stories of liberation echo today.

There are many, across the globe, who are in need—quite literally—of liberation from bondage in slavery. They are not out in the open, building pyramids or picking cotton, but they are there, millions of them.

May they all one day be free.