

Slavery

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

In Britain we are “celebrating” 200 years since William Wilberforce forced an anti-slavery bill through Parliament. A film, *Amazing Grace*, has just been released that tells the story. We British are rightfully proud of the fact that we banned slavery long before anyone else did. But rather like the American Civil War, freeing slaves did not end discrimination or prejudice. Nevertheless it was an important landmark in the slow process of turning modern societies into ones that respect human rights, in principle at least.

Slavery of one sort or another continues to exist, mainly in Africa, the Middle and the Far East. It may be disguised sometimes, but in practice it involves some humans using and treating others as chattels and animals. Even in the “West”, the White Slave Trade is thriving and police and immigration forces are struggling to cope.

I find it difficult to read Biblical texts that seem to condone slavery. There were Jewish slaves who served limited terms, usually to pay off debts, but remained citizens bound by all Jewish Laws. And there were non-Jewish slaves who were regarded as property. They were converted to Judaism on acquisition and became fully fledged members of the Jewish community on being freed. It may be remarkable that thousands of years ago the Bible insisted on rights for slaves, but still the idea that such behaviour could have ever been institutionalized is problematic. Even if the Talmud says, “He who acquires a slave acquires a master,” because of the many obligations a master had (even to the point of not being allowed to live on a higher material level or have a less comfortable pillow), nevertheless the very notion is offensive to modern, civilized sensibilities.

Over the years, millions of Jews were captured and sold into slavery by successive conquerors. This meant children like ours, if they were not brutally massacred or tortured to death, were sold into prostitution and treated as animals. If you watch the miniseries *Rome* on television (assuming you have one of course, you decadent child of modernity) you’ll get a flavour of what slavery was like in Roman times. Indeed, read the Book of Lamentations to see what being conquered long before the Romans. Yet slavery persisted and most humans on this earth thought it the natural way of life. There were whole classes of eunuchs, mutilated and put to service under the Ottomans, and thousands of poor European boys were painfully castrated to provide the church and aristocracy with “castrati” singers.

You may wonder why, if the Bible was Divinely Inspired, it couldn’t try to change peoples’ attitudes and ban slavery outright. Maimonides gives a relevant answer with regard to sacrifices in his *Guide to the Perplexed*. He says that the Bible tried to wean humanity gently off its idolatrous and inhumane practices. It could not have insisted on too radical a change because the human mind would not have been able to grasp it. So to have created a religion in those days without sacrifices would have been as

unthinkable as creating a religion thousands of years later without prayer. (Perhaps in the future new religions will simply require meditation or ESP.) Similarly, the Torah dealt with a simple agricultural economy. To have discussed the perspectives of Marx, Samuelson, or Galbraith would have been anachronistic and meaningless. Still, the general values of human concern and responsibility were given as starters on which to build and advance. And that, in my view, is the genius or the inspiration of the Torah.

But the current discussion about the ongoing destructive legacy of slavery raises two issues I find problematic; both use the Holocaust to justify an unjustifiable position. And I will confess here that the only time a black person of my acquaintance has got up from my table in protest was when I made this very point a few years ago.

Slavery and the Holocaust, indeed, share two common features—prejudice and inhumanity. But the nature of the process and the concept of compensation were very different. The aim of slavery was to use human beings as part of an economic process that, in its day, was universally accepted. It was never an ideological aim of slave traders or owners to exterminate them as a matter of principle. It is true that millions died through intolerable conditions, neglect, and cruelty. If it is simply a numbers game then, yes, more slaves died. And it is true that for too long others turned blind eyes and frankly enjoyed their superiority.

Slavery was accepted by all religions and societies for thousands of years and no religion, no country, can claim to have clean hands or innocence. It is a childish blame game to say Muslims traded more for longer or that Christians were crueller or that Arabs only used them for sex or the British made a better business out of transporting them. Besides, many, if not most, African slaves were captured and sold in the first place by their own. It was, until recently, perfectly normal behaviour in Africa to use or sell off conquered manpower. That was the normal way of life and intertribal politics, for better or for worse. Like modern financial markets it was 'dog eat dog' and the weak go to the wall and to the victor go the spoils. Just because some tribes of different colour did better than others is no reason to pick on some and lay the blame at their door.

And so to compensation; nowadays society has advanced to the point where we compensate victims of crime or people wrongly imprisoned or offended. But we do this to those who personally and directly suffer. This was also the basis for German reparations. It is true that Menachem Begin and the Herut and Revisionists parties at the time strenuously opposed reparations on principle, and I am not sure I do not agree with them. Nevertheless, money was paid essentially to those who suffered personally, not for all previous generations of Jews who were killed by Christians or Europeans or suffered from anti-Semitism in whatever form. We in Britain allowed the most inhumane child labour in our factories and on our farms right through the Industrial Revolution. But we do not offer to compensate the grandchildren of child labourers in the Dark Satanic Mills of Lancashire.

I would agree that there is an argument for positive discrimination to assist poorly performing sectors of society, particularly the victims of prejudice.

But financial compensation has become the new lottery of the lazy classes who want a quick financial fix before sinking back into lethargy or criminality and refusing to raise themselves legally by their boot straps. Many prominent blacks in the USA who have risen to the highest ranks also argue against the compensation culture. It would be money far better spent to raise the quality of education (if the teachers' unions don't impede progress in pursuit of their own vested interests).

As we celebrate Passover we are commanded more than any other time (and no other principle is repeated as often in the Torah) to remember what slavery was like and to be sensitive to others. The wrong done to humans by other humans, whether in Europe, the Americas, Cambodia, Rwanda, or Sudan is a blot on humanity, a scandal that is still going on long after the wrongs done to the Atlantic slaves was stopped and the process of rectification began. But, as with us Jews, memory is essential. We must remember the awful things done to African slaves and determine to do our best to stop all inhumanity wherever it occurs. Yes, we must mourn and regret and cry, every day of our lives, for the cruelty that humans do to each other, anywhere and everywhere, then and now.

But we must also go forward and celebrate life and do that within a caring, ethical and ideally spiritual framework. That is the essential message of Passover. We humans, regardless of race or creed, are all created in the image of God and to treat any other human as less than an equal in the eyes of our Maker, is a betrayal of our own souls.

[submit feedback](#)