

Racism

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The film that won Best Picture at the Oscars this year, [*12 Years a Slave*](#), is a moving picture about a free black man living in New York State in the 1840s, before the Civil War. It is based on a true account of how a free black citizen in New York State was tricked into visiting Washington, where he was drugged and sold into slavery in the south. After a horrific life, he was rescued through a chance encounter with what appears to be a religious craftsman from the North. There have, in my opinion, been better films about the horrors of black slavery in the USA. But it is always important to be reminded of the unspeakable cruelty we humans, of all persuasions and cultures, are capable of inflicting on our brothers and sisters.

It was probably political correctness that led to the gorgeous young Mexican-Kenyan actress Lupita Nyong'o getting the Oscar for best supporting actress. Beautiful as she was, and moving as her part was, I cannot believe that in any other film of any other subject she would have won the award. But I am glad of it nevertheless.

The Supreme Court of the United States is debating the issue of Affirmative Action again. I had a visceral reaction against such a policy, partly because we Jews did well despite not having such support. And because we have always believed in doing our best, regardless of the odds stacked against us, and using the challenge to excel. But I do think there is a special case to be made out because the disastrous state of much of black society in the USA. Most children grow up in single parent and multi-partner households, far too few black children graduate high school, there is a huge disparity between the chances of a black defendant being acquitted by a jury and a white one, blacks vastly outnumber whites in the jail population and in the numbers executed, and far too many blacks find full time employment. The resulting gang warfare, criminality, and violence that comes from feeling helpless and alienated are all reasons to do something about it. As with all human situations it is, in my view, almost impossible to isolate a single cause, be it internal or external. So locating blame is a futile exercise.

I also think that, ironically, doctrinaire white intellectuals, as typified by many in the teachers unions, do more to hold back black kids than the most prejudiced of racists, precisely because they refuse to let market forces in education, such as charter schools, improve their lot. They seem to care more about protecting jobs for teachers, even criminal ones, than success for pupils.

Many years ago I recall an argument I had with a bright young black woman in London who told me that she thought that slavery was every bit as significant a crime as the Holocaust. I argued that there was a difference. The evils of slavery were motivated by financial gain, blacks were treated as commodities, whereas the perpetrators of the Holocaust were not even interested in preserving Jews to put to work (though some were). The main motivation was

the eradication of Jews as if they were vermin. There were no extermination camps or ovens for blacks. We parted company acrimoniously.

Over the years I have reconsidered my position. Not because I think the two are of identical nature, but because at root both are reflections of the absolute wickedness of too many people. Taking away a person's freedom is nowadays, in theory, an offense against every attempt to define human rights, whether it is defined as Habeas Corpus or Liberty. To rape, mutilate, and flog human beings is the very height of inhumanity and sadism. To tear children away from their parents is a betrayal of the family as the core institution of human love and care. Slavery did all that to the extent that sometimes death was indeed preferable. In some ways you could even say that slavery was worse, because its crimes were carried out by many more people over a much more extended time frame. Kidnapping (for slavery or other reward) is equated in the Jewish legal tradition with murder.

You may argue that slavery under some conditions could also be supportive and caring, and in some cases it was. But the mere institution of ownership of other humans can put people at such an extreme disadvantage that they will often accept humiliation, sexual exploitation, and inferior conditions either because psychologically they have been conditioned to or out of a desperate desire to ameliorate their state.

The daily cruelty inflicted by an uncaring human on another is a scandal that continues. Large numbers of the poorest Asians and Africans work under inhuman conditions. They are often indentured literally as slaves or by circumstances. They live without hope of freedom or recourse. Often they are cut off from their children for years. Although in relatively civilized societies bosses, civilian and military, can also impose themselves on subservients, kidding themselves that there is no compulsion, at least one goes to the courts with the possibility of escape.

None of this was possible for black slaves. The Civil War, which was ostensibly fought over slavery, did not ameliorate the suffering in the South. It took more than another hundred years. And prejudice remains against blacks at least as much as it does against Jews. Once it was religion to blame, but then Red idealists proved it's a universal disease.

It is a pointless exercise to say "my pain is greater than yours" or "my suffering cannot be compared to any other." All individual suffering is a crime against God and Man and must be prevented by law or negotiation. While the Torah allows taking a life in self-defense, it does not tolerate individuals inflicting pain gratuitously or for financial and personal gain on innocent human beings for any other reason. We need to be constantly reminded of this.