

Vayeitze 5777 Modern Day Slavery

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Human Rights Shabbat

Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheynu Melekh Ha'Olam, She'lo asani aved.

Blessed are you, Adonai, our God, ruler of the universe, who did not make me a slave.

A Jew who prays in the morning begins the day with a variety of appreciations of life including this one. Even the secular Jew on the whole will wake appreciating the gift of freedom and the opportunity to go to school, to work, to play or pray and to do all of that at liberty in the UK.

Our People have experienced many episodes when this was not the case. Daily in our prayers and most powerfully at Pesach do we recall those times through the motif of slavery in Egypt. Yet the berachah is not an excuse to gloat at our good fortune; it is a reminder that modern day slavery exists.

This week's sedrah, Vayeitze accounts Jacob's transition from voluntarily entering servitude for Laban and then the subsequent indentured servitude that Jacob has to endure to "pay" for the privilege of actually marrying Rachel.

The Torah allows for slavery of fellow Israelites and Canaanite slaves, the former have some means of emancipation the latter not. The Rabbis codified these laws into halachah. Although there were some protections, slavery was accepted. Indeed, this country participated in the hideous mass Slave Trade of the late 16th to 19th century, enriching ourselves by enslaving Africans and shipping them in and to the most horrendously inhuman conditions of servitude. This legacy still blights American society.

To say nothing of the barbaric treatment of humanity today in many areas of the world let us just focus on this country. Despite the existence of Article Four of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms; and this country's Modern Slavery Act (2015), we know that modern day slavery exists and if we care to look for it, for example when we get our car cheaply washed, we will witness the fact that over 13,000 people in the UK are recognised as living in slavery and one hates to think how many more are unrecognised, many as trafficked sex slaves.

It should be a source of pride to the Jewish Community that saw more synagogues than ever mark Human Rights Shabbat this weekend, that the Jewish charities and campaigning organisations, Rene Cassin and Tzelem, are leading our call to end modern day slavery. If you do no more than look at their websites this weekend, that will be something but they would of course appreciate your participation in their campaign, even with a simple tweet or like.

Everyone has the right wake up in the morning and thank God that we were not made slaves. Let us enforce that right for all.