

*Slavery Here and Now*

by Rabbi Debra Orenstein (January 28, 2014)

I studiously avoid the sports pages, but the news has trickled down even to me that that the Superbowl is coming to our state. My husband, a committed 49-ers fan, informs me that this knowledge has been widespread for some time.

Until recently, I was unaware of something that should be, but isn't, equally well-known: that slaves will service fans at the Superbowl. I am not writing about underpaid or abused workers – which is an injustice in itself. I am referring to people who are unpaid and working out of fear. The F.B.I. anticipates both forced prostitution surrounding the Superbowl and forced labor for some hotel and restaurant workers.

Shamefully, major sporting events reliably attract both johns and sex workers. Even more shamefully, these events bring - through blackmail, beatings, and intimidation - underage girls and boys as well as women and men who work as prostitutes. Some are runaways who were “helped” by pimps and now fear for their lives if they try to escape. Others are immigrants who thought they were coming to this country for dignified, paid work. Then, suddenly, they have no choice and no voice.

This underbelly of sports and entertainment is not the only evidence of slavery in our midst. In the words of Kevin Bales, anti-slavery author and activist, “Slavery is not legal anywhere, yet it happens everywhere.”

Experts estimate that approximately 27 million people worldwide work without pay, under the threat of violence, and with no means of escape available to them. They work on farms and in nail salons; in factories and on the streets; in mines and motels, quarries and kitchens. They work in the homes of free people.

Israel has its own human trafficking problem – the very definition of *shanda* (public shame) for a Jewish State.

Federal government officials estimate that at least 17,500 people are brought into the United States each year and forced into domestic service, agricultural work, prostitution, or sweatshop labor. Citizens and residents are also enslaved. Overall, approximately 150,000 slaves currently work in the United States, of whom about half are below the age of 18.

Sometimes we call these folks “debt laborers,” “victims of human trafficking,” or, irrelevantly, “immigrants.” I prefer the word “slave.” It is more accurate, less evasive.

Until last year, slavery was something I thought about mostly on Passover. Now, the subject has become a disturbing companion; I think of it daily. In the past two weeks, I attended two trainings on human trafficking, one sponsored by the NJ Coalition Against Human Trafficking and the other by T’ruah – North America, a rabbinic social justice and advocacy organization. Some of this is me; I have become obsessed. But my education and involvement are also a reflection of a cultural shift. We are becoming aware, and, as a result, we are becoming increasingly disgusted, indignant, and ready to make a change.

My consciousness was raised last spring when I received an email from the Social Action Committee of the Rabbinical Assembly inviting rabbis to write and share outlines for High Holiday sermons on the subject of Human Trafficking. As a past member of the committee, and wanting to be a “good rabbinic citizen,” I volunteered. At that point, I had no interest in giving such a sermon myself. I planned to explore personal meaning and personal goals on the High Holidays. I wanted to choose subjects that touched my congregants’ lives directly.

In the course of my research, I read harrowing testimonies and statistics about contemporary slaves. I became haunted. I also read books and articles about people who are taking practical steps to free slaves. Among them are Jessica and Julia Baer, two teenagers from Fair Lawn, who with the support of their parents and community, have helped free 30 slaves ... and counting. (*The Standard* featured them in an article on May 3, 2013.) I became inspired.

As I considered the plight of slaves, I thought of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel’s words in his last interview: “How can I pray when I have on my conscience the awareness that I am co-responsible for the death of innocent people in Vietnam? In a free society, some are guilty; all are responsible.”

In the end, I did speak on slavery, among other topics, and I found that it wasn’t a remote or impersonal issue. Sadly, slavery is right here, right now. On January 15, 2014, three men and one woman ranging in age from 23 to 59 were arrested for prostituting a 15-year-old girl, after the 26-year-old male among them “befriended” her at a party. The accused live in North Bergen, Ridgely Park, Jersey City, and Union City. The victim is from Essex County.

In another sense, too, slavery is immediate for us. The Bible repeatedly demands that we *continually remember* our experience of slavery in Egypt as an impetus to treat others with compassion: “You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the soul of a stranger, having been strangers in the Land of Egypt.” (Exodus 23:9. See also Deut. 10:18-19 and Leviticus 19:33-34, among others).

Weekly, Shabbat is “a remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt.” Radically freeing and inclusive, Shabbat grants everyone rest from labor:

“You shall not do any manner of work, not you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your man-servant, nor your maid-servant, nor your ox, nor your donkey, nor any of your cattle, nor the stranger who is within your gates; that your servants may rest, as you do.” (Deuteronomy 5:13).

Sometimes, we talk metaphorically about Shabbat “liberating” or “releasing” us from over-booked schedules, excessive work, and constant connectivity. Those are powerful words and important concerns. But the metaphor should not be more real or urgent to us than the needs of living, breathing slaves who literally never get a Shabbos.

After speaking publicly about slavery, I took on the personal goal of freeing 18 slaves this year. In the course of discussing spiritual intentions and *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) with my seven-year-old daughter, I told her that I was researching mitzvah opportunities for the best way to free 18 people. Never one to think small, she asked, “Why 18? Why not 100?” And so a more ambitious goal was born – one that I co-own with my daughter.

In a future column, I will share the results of our efforts. Right here, right now: there is a Superbowl. And there is a simple way we can all exercise our responsibility to help.

The New Jersey Coalition Against Human Trafficking is mounting a campaign to raise awareness of contemporary slavery during the halftime show. To participate, you need only register at [thunderclap.it](http://thunderclap.it) and then tweet about human trafficking during halftime (**#HTchallenge**). Directions and sample messages are available at [halftimechallenge.net/game-plan/pre-game/](http://halftimechallenge.net/game-plan/pre-game/)

The goal is to raise an outcry against slavery that drowns out even the Big Game, even the halftime show, even the Clio-worthy commercials.

Increasing awareness is certainly not enough, but it is vital. Kevin Bales wrote, “If there was ever a tipping point when slavery can be brought to a full stop, it is now.

Two key obstacles stand in our way: lack of awareness and lack of resources.” If we create massive awareness on Superbowl Sunday, I believe that massive resources will soon follow.

Here and now, let’s join together and find out.