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# Who Are the Slaves Today?

A short investigation of 'עבדים היינו' and 'בכל דור ודור'

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# Seeing Ourselves as Slaves

עבדים היינו

Normally, we see ourselves today through the lens of the past. Our ancestors were slaves, and through their freedom, we understand our freedom. Today, we are going to look at the freedom of the past and see the slavery of today. Not symbolic, spiritual or religious, but the actual slavery that exists in our world, right here, right now. Today, for over 50 million human beings, Egypt is alive and well, Pharaoh is in complete control.



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In every generation, we are obligated to see ourselves as though we personally had gone out from Egypt. This is the meaning of the verse, “And tell your child on that day: this is on account of what God did for me when I went out from Egypt.” (Ex. 13:8) [Mishnah Pesachim 10:5]

**Commenting on this Mishnah, Rambam says:**

This is the meaning of the verse: ‘God took us out from there...’ (Deut. 6:23). And regarding this, God commanded us: Remember that you were a slave. In other words, it should be as though you personally were a slave and went to freedom and were redeemed.

**United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 4**

*No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.*

**Rights vs. Responsibilities**

The above declaration addresses rights, but the Torah often speaks in terms of responsibilities. Spend 3 minutes with a chevrotah discussing the difference between rights and responsibilities.



Let me be clear: By "slaves" I mean, very simply, those who are forced to work, under threat of violence, for no pay beyond subsistence. That is the nice, neat, horrible definition I have used since I began studying the subject in 2001. In the United States today, we tend to use the word "slave" loosely. Merriam-Webster offers as its first definition of the word, "drudgery; toil."

But that's not what slavery is, as Rambho Kumar can attest. Kumar was born into wilting poverty in a village in Bihar, the poorest state in India, the country with more slaves than any other, according to U.N. estimates. In 2001, desperate to keep him and his five brothers from starving, his mother accepted 700 rupees (\$15) as an advance from a local trafficker, who promised more money once 9-year-old Rambho started working many miles away in India's carpet belt.

After he received Rambho from the trafficker, the loom owner treated his new acquisition like any other low-value industrial tool. He never allowed Rambho and the other slaves to leave the loom, forcing them to work for 19 hours a day, starting at 4 in the morning. The work itself tore into Rambho's small hands, and when he whimpered in pain, the owner's brother stuck his finger in boiling oil to cauterize the wound -- and then told him to get back to work. When other boys attempted escape or made a mistake in the intricate designs of the rugs, which were destined for Western markets, the owner beat them savagely.

On July 12, 2005, local police, in coordination with activists supported by Free the Slaves, an organization based in Washington, liberated Rambho and nine other emaciated boys.

I've met and talked with slaves and former slaves like Rambho in a dozen countries, including the United Arab Emirates, Romania, India, Sudan and Haiti. The International Labor Organization of the United Nations estimates that in Asia alone, there are about 10 million slaves.

Even in the United States, low-end Justice Department figures estimate that there are about 50,000 people languishing in hidden bondage at any one time. On March 4, for instance, two south Florida women were convicted on charges of enslaving and torturing a teenage Haitian girl named Simone Celestine. The two women face 10 years in prison. Celestine was freed by the FBI last year after being held as a domestic slave for six years, during which time she said she was beaten with closed fists, forced to shower outside with a garden hose, rented to other homes and not allowed to attend school.

E.Benjamin Skinner, Slavery's Staying Power, LA Times, March 23, 2008

## Fun with Gematria

We are always one step away from true peace or utter enslavement:

שלום  
מצרים

When you add the gematria of *shalom* plus the tally of its letters (4) and the gematria of *mitzrayim*, they both equal 380.

*Mattiyahu Glazerson, The Secrets of the Haggadah*

Conclusion:

The Modern Jew is entangled in the activities of the Gentile society in numerous ways--economically, politically, culturally, and on some levels, socially. We share in the universal experience. The problems of humanity, war and peace, political stability or anarchy, morality or permissiveness, famine, epidemics, and pollution transcend the boundaries of ethnic groups. A stricken environment, both physically and ideological, can wreak havoc upon all groups...It is our duty as human beings to contribute our energies and creativity to alleviate the pressing needs and anguish of mankind and to contribute to its welfare.

*Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, Man of Faith in the Modern World*

### Some Resources:

The Religious Action Center, [www.rac.org](http://www.rac.org)

American Anti-Slavery Group, [www.iabolish.org](http://www.iabolish.org)

Rabbis for Human Rights, [www.rhr.org](http://www.rhr.org)

Progressive Jewish Alliance, [www.pjalliance.org](http://www.pjalliance.org)