

## “Confronting the Slavery of Our Past”

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It was my first visit to Friendship Missionary Baptist Church – a large, historic and impressive African-American Church here in Charlotte. A nice gentleman offered to show me their spectacular stained glass windows. I had heard about them and eagerly accepted the invitation to tour their sanctuary.

Along the entire wall of one side of their sanctuary was stained glass art depicting the Church’s theology -- the creation of the world through Jesus dying on the cross and subsequent resurrection. Along the other side was the Church’s history in about four panels. The stained glass began with a panel capturing a scene in Africa. The next captured the images of slaves making the passage to the United States. Then there was glass art depicting the struggle for liberation and finally, a fourth panel reflecting the church’s ministries here in Charlotte.

I examined the stained glass and remarked, “Oh, that’s your history!”

To which the kind gentleman remarked, “No, that’s our history.”

I began to argue. It was several years ago, so I can’t remember if I argued outwardly with my words or internally my mind.

“That not my history. I’m Jewish.” I thought or maybe even said aloud. “Jesus isn’t part of my theology. And my ancestors were not slave owners. My father came here from Germany, barely escaping the ultimate horrors of the Holocaust, most of his family was not so fortunate.”

Yet still, that man of that church and his words stayed with me, “It’s our history.”

And then it dawned on me. I am white. I now live in the South. There were whites and there were even a small handful of Jews who were slave owners. Until I acknowledge that piece of my past (even though it wasn’t my own or my family’s) I cannot move forward with this gentleman and with others from his community, from our community as we walk together into the future.

Confronting our past is essential for moving forward.

We need to confront our past when it comes to our personal relationships. Whether it’s surrounding the mistakes we once made in relationships that deeply mattered to us, or with respect to words we regrettably uttered in anger or pain, or with regard to the poor choices that we made, we need to make peace with our past and with those for whom we may have caused pain and vice versa.

The same holds true with our Torah. We need to confront the past of our Biblical history. Until this year, I always glossed over the segment in this week’s Torah portion on slavery. But in my reading of this

week's text, the paradox was glaring. We just left Egypt. We just escaped slavery. Last week we stood on Mt. Sinai and received the Ten Commandments. And then, the first laws we immediately receive are laws on slavery.

The concept is the *eved ivri*, the Hebrew slave, who through extreme poverty or who cannot make restitution for a theft, sells himself into slavery. After seven years the slave master needs to let him go free. But if the *eved ivri*, the Hebrew slave, prefers the safety of servitude to the fears of freedom, his ear may be pierced with an awl, so that all will know it was his choice to remain in servitude.

Rabbi Gunther Plaut, author of our Reform Movement's Commentary remarked that, "It may be said that the Torah viewed slavery as an institution that needed humanizing."

Rabbi Michal Shekel adds, "Mishpatim is just the beginning, the baby step that would eventually be the giant leap for all humanity: the recognition of the *eved*, the slave, as a human being.

You see as Jews we grow and to evolve. Exodus is just one stage and one step along the journey. The slavery of today's parashah is more humane than the slavery we endured in Egypt.

We need to confront not only our Biblical history but our American history. The reality is there were Jewish slave owners. A small one percent of slave owners in the South were Jews and yet, they no doubt used our Jewish texts of Torah, in part, to justify their actions.

Upon reflecting on the Civil War that divided our country, largely on the issue of slavery and its abolition, a Rabbi by the name Rafi Rank noted : It is interesting to me that 7,000 Northern Jews were found on the Union Side and 3,000 Southern Jews fought on the Confederate side. How did the Southern Jews rationalize being slave owners, especially after their own history? Some Southern Jews probably owned hundreds of slaves. How could they read the story of the Exodus from Egypt and not feel guilty or ask 'what are we doing?'"

Sadly, slavery is part of our collective history. Jews fought for emancipation and Jews, as well, fought to maintain that structure that subjugated human beings. I imagine that on both sides of the battle, we used our sacred texts to justify our actions.

While the laws of Exodus moved us forward in the rights for slaves, it is not as far as we would have liked. And while Jews generally treated the slaves with compassion, I'm sure that was not universally the case.

The first openly Jewish United States Senator, Judah Benjamin, while master of 140 slaves on his large plantation, was reported, "Never to have felt that slavery reflected the Divine order of things." (Eli Evans, Judah P. Benjamin: The Jewish Confederate (New York, 1988), p. 33).

“What is a slave?” He once asked before a court of justice in a legal case:

“He is a human being. He has feelings and passion and intellect. His heart, like the heart of the white man, swells with love, burns with jealousy, aches with sorrow, pines under restraint and discomfort, boils with revenge and even cherishes the desire for liberty.” (Evans, Judah P. Benjamin, pp. 38-39)

The laws of slavery in our Torah portion and beyond soften the harshness of slavery, but they do not eliminate it. Until we own our past, we cannot move beyond it. Then we can fight as Jews for the freedom of 27 million slaves that exist today. 14,500 of whom are trafficked into the United States each year. As a website on this topic called “Free The Slaves” notes, “Slavery is not legal anywhere but occurs everywhere.” (<http://www.freetheslaves.net/Page.aspx?pid=375>) Our mandate from the narrative of Exodus is to work to eradicate it.

At the end of this week’s Torah portion, Moses is called up to the Mountain of Sinai. God says, “Moses, come up to Me on the mountain and be there.” It wasn’t enough for Moses to climb that momentous mountain, but he had to be fully present as God revealed Godself.

Menachem Mendl of Kotz, a Chasidic teacher comments on this verse saying, “The goal, you see, is not merely to ascend but also to be there, to be actually present there, and nowhere else – and not be going up and down at the same time.”

Being there is not easy. We can’t be present when we’re stuck in the past. We can’t be present when we’re fearful of the future.

With honesty and humility may we confront our past... so that we can be present and build more beautiful relationships today that will sustain us tomorrow and far into the future.