



AT PASSOVER: OUR OBLIGATION TO REMEMBER WE WERE ONCE SLAVES

Jews have celebrated the Passover seder for millennia all over the world. Even on the Civil War battlefield, soldiers who were engaged in a struggle that would determine the future of slavery in America held a seder. As the 150th anniversary of the end of the Civil War approaches, we look back to a time when Jews - most of them new to America - were divided on the issue of slavery. While we no longer disagree about the evils of slavery, we may be unaware that slavery persists in this time, even in this country. As we gather around the seder table – mindful of that ancient liberation from bondage – we recall the struggle against slavery in American history and the continuing effort to eradicate it in our own time.

JEWISH VOICES FROM THE 19TH CENTURY

Ernestine Rose was born in Russian Poland in 1810. The daughter of a rabbi, she came to America in 1836 and soon thereafter began lecturing on topics such as abolition, religious tolerance and equality for women throughout the Northeast. With great courage, she even traveled to the South to speak out against slavery:

In comparison to the liberation of 800,000 slaves (in 1834 in the British West Indies), the Declaration of Independence falls into utter insignificance. It falls short, just as theory falls short of practice. There is almost an immeasurable distance between the two. The one was an utterance of a great truth; the other was a practical application of it. How different the results! The Declaration of Independence - has it yet abolished slavery? ...Nature has not created masters and slaves; nature has created man free as the air of heaven. The black man and the white man are equally the children of nature. Slavery deprives us of ourselves. The slave has no power to say, 'I will go here, or I will go yonder.' The slave cannot say, 'My wife, my husband, or my child.'...This is the great abomination of slavery, that it deprives a man of the common rights of humanity, stamped upon him by his Maker.

- On the occasion of the anniversary of the West Indian emancipation, New York, 1853.

Human rights include the rights of all, not only man, but woman, not only white but black; wherever there is a being called human, his rights are as full and expressive as his existence, and ought to be without limits or distinction of sex, country, or color...and only ignorance, superstition, and tyranny - both the basis and the influence of the Bible - deprive him of it.

- Hartford Bible Convention, Hartford, Conn., 1853.

<http://www.brandeis.edu/wsrc/affiliates/ernestinerose/speeches.html>



The views of Ernestine Rose were not representative of the Jewish community as a whole. Already sharply divided along lines of tradition and observance, on the issue of slavery the community divided roughly along the same lines as the country: of 150,000 Jews largely new to America, about 25,000 lived in the South. But it may still surprise us as we celebrate our liberation from bondage in Egypt that there were Jewish voices raised in defense of slavery because it is an accepted institution in the Hebrew Bible.

Rabbi Morris Raphall, the first rabbi of Congregation B'nai Jeshurun in New York City, came to America from England in 1849. While he opposed slavery personally, he insisted that the Bible permitted it. A sermon he preached on the eve of the Civil War was published and widely distributed by pro-slavery forces:

The result to which the Bible's view of slavery leads us is - 1st, that slavery has existed since earliest times; 2nd, that slaveholding is no sin and that slave property is expressly placed under the protection of the Ten Commandments; 3d, that the slave is a person, and has rights not conflicting with the lawful exercise of the rights of his owner.

- Reverend M.J. Raphall, *Bible View of Slavery*, New York, 1861.

Rabbi M.J. Michelbacher offered up this prayer following his sermon on March 27, 1863 in Richmond, Virginia in response to the suggestion by the President of the Confederate States of America that there be a Confederacy Day of Prayer:

Again we approach Thee, O God of Israel — not as a single meeting of a part, but as the whole congregation of all the people of the land. The man-servants and the maid-servants Thou has given unto us ... the enemy are attempting to seduce, that they too may turn against us, whom Thou hast appointed over them as instructors in Thy wise dispensation! We believe, O God, that piety cannot subsist apart from patriotism - we love our country, because Thou has given it unto us as a blessing and a heritage for our children ... bring salvation to the Confederate States of America.

- <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/loc/slavery.html>

Rabbi David Einhorn, another immigrant from Germany and the first spiritual leader of Har Sinai in Baltimore, Maryland (a slave state), used his pulpit to respond to Raphall's 1861 sermon in defense of slavery based upon the Biblical text. His speech on April 19, 1861 led to a riot. His own printing press (used to publish his journal *Sinai*) was destroyed and he was forced to flee from his congregation, his home and his town. He resettled in Philadelphia and became rabbi of Congregation Knesset Israel in August 1861:

The question before us is exclusively this: Is the institution of slavery, in itself, a moral evil or not? And it is Dr. Raphall, a Jewish preacher, who has the sorry distinction of proclaiming, on the basis of God's authority, the rightness and the morally unobjectionable nature of slavery and to read the text diligently to Christian clergy of the opposite persuasion! A Jew, a twig on the stem that God everyday requires to praise its own liberation from Egypt and that today in most states of the Old World bends under the yoke of servitude and cries to God, has undertaken to defend slavery as a completely blameless institution sanctioned by God and to accuse those who do not believe this of fanaticism!

- David Einhorn, *Sinai VI*, 1861.



But while Jews were sharply divided on the subject of slavery, they celebrated the liberation of their ancestors from Egyptian bondage in the South as well as in the North and even on the field of battle. Do you suppose these soldiers were able to see themselves as going free from Egypt as the Haggadah instructs us?

Joseph A. Joel was a private in the Ohio 23rd Regiment. Here is his account of an 1862 Battlefield Seder:

Approaching the Feast of Passover, twenty of my comrades and co-religionists belonging to the Regiment, united in a request to our commanding officer for relief from duty, in order that we might keep the holidays, which he readily acceded to. The first point was gained, and, as the Paymaster had lately visited the Regiment, he had left us plenty of greenbacks. Our next business was to find some suitable person to proceed to Cincinnati, Ohio, to buy us מצות [Matzos]. Our sutler being a co-religionist and going home to that city, readily undertook to send them. We were anxiously awaiting to receive our matzos and about the middle of the morning of ערב פסח [Eve of Passover] a supply train arrived in camp, and to our delight seven barrels of Matzos. On opening them, we were surprised and pleased to find that our thoughtful sutler had enclosed two Hagedahs and prayer-books. We were now able to keep the seder nights, if we could only obtain the other requisites for that occasion. We held a consultation and decided to send parties to forage in the country while a party stayed to build a log hut for the services. About the middle of the afternoon the foragers arrived, having been quite successful. We obtained two kegs of cider, a lamb, several chickens and some eggs. Horseradish or parsley we could not obtain, but in lieu we found a weed, whose bitterness, I apprehend, exceeded anything our forefathers "enjoyed". We were still in a great quandary; we were like the man who drew the elephant in the lottery. We had the lamb, but did not know what part was to represent it at the table; but Yankee ingenuity prevailed, and it was decided to cook the whole and put it on the table, then we could dine off it, and be sure we had the right part. The necessaries for the choroutzes we could not obtain, so we got a brick which, rather hard to digest, reminded us, by looking at it, for what purpose it was intended.*

At dark we had all prepared, and were ready to commence the service. There being no hazzan present, I was selected to read the services, which I commenced by asking the blessing of the Almighty on the food before us, and to preserve our lives from danger. The ceremonies were passing off very nicely, until we arrived at the part where the bitter herb was to be taken. We all had a large portion of the herb ready to eat at the moment I said the blessing; each eat [sic] his portion, when horrors! What a scene ensued in our little congregation, it is impossible for my pen to describe. The herb was very bitter and very fiery like Cayenne pepper, and excited our thirst to such a degree, that we forgot the law authorizing us to drink only four cups, and the consequence was we drank up all the cider. Those that drank the more freely became excited, and one thought he was Moses, another Aaron, and one had the audacity to call himself Pharaoh. The consequence was a skirmish, with nobody hurt, only Moses, Aaron and Pharaoh, had to be carried to the camp, and there left in the arms of Morphens. This slight incident did not take away our appetite, and, after doing justice to our lamb, chickens and eggs, we resumed the second portion of the service without anything occurring worthy of note.



There, in the wild woods of West Virginia, away from home and friends, we consecrated and offered up to the ever-loving G-d of Israel our prayers and sacrifice. I doubt whether the spirits of our forefathers, had they been looking down on us, standing there with our arms by our side ready for an attack, faithful to our G-d and our cause, would have imagined themselves amongst mortals, enacting this commemoration of the scene that transpired in Egypt.

**The sutler of the Ohio 23rd was G.W. Forbes – “a co-religionist” – and, like all sutlers, he issued tokens to simplify the process of extending credit. The system was simple: a soldier, between often long and irregular paydays, could request credit from a sutler and by signing a paymaster’s order, receive from him tokens good (only) at the regimental store, there to buy such necessitates as clothing, shaving and toilet utensils, pen, ink, papers, tobacco, matches, candles, books, newspapers, liquor and – at least once, from G.W. Forbes, perhaps even with this token, Passover Matzoh.*

- <http://www.shapell.org/manuscript.aspx?civil-war-sutler-coin-jewish-passover-seder-1863>

Abraham Lincoln, the Great Emancipator, reminds us in the Gettysburg Address of 1863 that the great task of ending slavery is the work of us all:

It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

- Abraham Lincoln, “The Gettysburg Address”, 1863.

Lincoln’s words echo those of the Torah which commands us that - “You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” (Exodus 22:20) and the Haggadah calls upon us to see ourselves as if we had gone out of *Mitzrayim*. The Bible tells us the Israelites were liberated from Egyptian slavery and history tells us of the emancipation of African slaves in America but slavery still exists in our world, in this country and perhaps in our own community. Let us - the descendants of those who came out of Egypt - commit ourselves to learn more and do more so that we can enable others to celebrate their liberation from bondage.

Rabbi Carol Levithan
March 2014



MODERN SLAVERY: WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT IT!

Learn more!

[http://slaveryfootprint.org/#where do you live](http://slaveryfootprint.org/#where_do_you_live)

<http://nomoreslavery.com/2011/01/24/top-14-ways-to-be-an-abolitionist>

Take Action!

In the coming year, Congress will take up several pieces of legislation aimed at preventing the root causes of human trafficking in the United States. These include the vulnerability of children in the foster care system, fraud and coercion in the visa process for foreign workers temporarily in the country and transparency about slavery in the supply chain. Legislation about human trafficking is often bipartisan, with legislators on both sides of the aisle coming together to prevent this horrific crime. Below is information about three pending bills compiled by the Alliance To End Slavery & Trafficking (ATEST), a national coalition of major anti-trafficking organizations coming together to promote effective policy around modern day slavery. There is also information about a current bill compiled by the Polaris Project. You can call your Senators and Congressmen and urge them to support this legislation. It only takes a minute to call, identify yourself as a constituent, and say that as a Jew and as an American, ending human trafficking is important to you and it is critical for Rep. X to support Bill Y.

Child Welfare Response to Trafficking Act (H.R. 1732) Fact Sheet:

http://www.endslaveryandtrafficking.org/legislative_updates/fact-sheet-child-welfare-response-trafficking-act-hr-1732

Strengthen Regulation of Foreign Labor Recruitment Fact Sheet:

http://www.endslaveryandtrafficking.org/legislative_updates/fact-sheet-strengthen-regulation-foreign-labor-recruiters

Business Transparency on Trafficking and Slavery Act Fact Sheet:

http://www.endslaveryandtrafficking.org/legislative_updates/fact-sheet-business-transparency-trafficking-and-slavery-act-hr-2759-112th

Here is an action alert from Polaris Project about the current bill, H.R. 3344:

http://act.polarisproject.org/p/dia/action3/common/public/?action_KEY=16132

Legislative Update: Policy Resources

http://www.endslaveryandtrafficking.org/legislative_updates/policy_resources