

**Liberal Judaism's 2007 Haggadah Supplement**  
**Marking the 200th anniversary of the legal abolition**  
**of slavery in Great Britain**

This year as we celebrate *Pesach* and the redemption of our ancestors from Egyptian bondage, we are also called upon to reflect on the wider history of human slavery. Together with our non-Jewish brothers and sisters, we commemorate the fact that in 1807, Parliament passed the *Abolition of the Slave Trade Act*. This act was the result of many years of campaigning by those who could see the Divine Image in the face of every human being. Despite the important statement it made, however, the Act was not even the beginning of the end of slavery. Slavery continued at that time - and continues in our own day. This leaflet contains some readings on the subject that you may wish to include in your communal or family Seder to encourage reflection on the slave trade today.

***To be read at Yachatz, the breaking of the middle matzah, p.6***

POVERTY IS THE ROOT CAUSE OF MOST SLAVERY

Traditionally, we break the middle matzah so that one piece is much smaller than the other. This act can serve to remind us that the distribution of wealth and resources in our world today is not fair; indeed, the gap between rich and poor has never been wider. The Biblical prophets teach that we must work not simply for a reduction in *absolute* poverty, but also for a more just society in which everyone gets a fair share, and not the meagre 'bread of affliction.' When holding up the matzah, you may wish to say:

We raise this smaller piece of matzah, *halachma anya*, to remind ourselves that slavery still exists, that people are still being bought and sold. We make room at our Seder table and in our hearts for those who are now where we once were. We have suffered while others stood by and pretended not to know. We have eaten the bitter herb; we have been taken from our families and brutalised. In the end, we have come to know in our very being that none can be free until all are free. And so, we commit ourselves to work for the freedom of all people. May the taste of this 'bread of affliction' remain in our mouths until all can eat in peace and security. Knowing that all people are Yours, O God, we will urge our government and all governments to do as You once commanded Pharaoh on our behalf - *Shalach et Ami!* Let My People Go! May they and we take these words to heart. Amen

- adapted from *Pesach and Slavery*, an unpublished document produced by the former Social Action Forum, a joint project of Liberal Judaism and the Reform Movement

## To be read at p. 11

עֲבָדִים הָיִינוּ ... עֲבָדִים הֵם הַיּוֹם

**Avadim Chayyinu**, we WERE slaves - but millions ARE slaves today.

According to some estimates, there are as many as 27 million slaves in the world today, more than at any other time in history.<sup>1</sup> Some of their situations fit our classic understanding of what it means to be a slave - many do not. But those who are forced into bonded labour to pay for medical treatment and even for food are every bit as much enslaved as our ancestors were.

עֲבָדִים הָיִינוּ ...

**Avadim Chayyinu**, *D'var Acheir* - Another perspective

We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt. But before that, we were refugees from famine there. Our ancestors did not *want* to go to Egypt; they *had* to because of circumstances beyond their control. So it is with many refugees and many economic migrants today. If they cannot feed themselves or care for their children due to drought or conflict, what choice do they have but to seek the means of survival elsewhere?

Many who despair of gaining asylum legally put themselves in the hands of unscrupulous traffickers, who then 'sell' them on as black market labourers, domestics and sex workers.

These make up a large percentage of the global slave trade today. If you live in a major metropolitan area, some of them are probably living very near to you, possibly even in your own street.

If the orphan is in debt,  
he can only pay [with] himself.  
*Zambian Proverb*

## To be read at p. 21

בְּכָל־דּוֹר וָדוֹר חַיֵּב אָדָם לִרְאוֹת אֶת־עַצְמוֹ.

בְּאֵלּוֹ הוּא יֵצֵא מִמִּצְרַיִם

**B'chol dor vador...***In every generation, we are obliged to see ourselves as if we personally went forth from Egypt.*

Other ancient peoples made extravagant claims about being descended from great heroes, or even gods. Uniquely, the Jewish people has always traced its ancestry back to humble slaves. Why?

1. See [www.freetheslaves.net](http://www.freetheslaves.net)

- God wants us to 'know the heart' of the vulnerable and to be able to identify with their experience. Understanding ourselves as having been *personally* redeemed from Egypt should awaken our compassion and spur us to work to free those who remain enslaved.

Rabbi Michael Lerner says, "The central message of *Pesach* is this: oppressive realities can be changed; God is the force that makes it possible to move from 'what is' to 'what ought to be'. Recognizing that transformative force in our lives is the central point of the *Seder*."

מְרוֹר זֶה שְׂאֵנוֹ אוֹכְלִים, עַל שׁוּם מָה?

## Maror - the bitter herbs, p. 32

In the Sephardi tradition, it is common to use endive instead of horseradish for the bitter herbs. Although a bit sharp, endive does not start out particularly bitter to the taste. However, the longer one chews it, the more bitter it becomes. So it is with the experience of debt bondage - both for countless individuals and for the HIPC's (heavily indebted poor countries).

As the *maror* symbolises the ongoing bitterness of slavery, we do NOT recline when we eat it. To recline at will is one of the actions of a free person, not a slave.

## Egg and Salt Water, p. 33

We begin our Seder meal with an egg in salt water. This is an old and widespread custom, but no explanation has been handed down for it. We know that the salt water represents our tears and the egg represents new life and hope. Perhaps when we eat the two together we are reminded that new hope arises out of suffering.

Just as birth follows the pain of labour, so freedom follows slavery and liberation follows struggle. Rabbinic tradition foresees the birth pangs of the Messiah, a time of oppression and suffering, which will herald the time of redemption.

To what may interest be likened? To a man bitten by a serpent (*neshech* means 'bite' and 'interest'), who is not aware of the bite until a swelling sets in. So, too, with interest - a borrower is not aware of it until it swells up all about him.

- *Tanhuma Mishpatim 9*,  
*Ex. R. 31:6, Sefer*  
*Ha-Aggadah*

We can help bring about the time of redemption. But it requires of us struggle and tears. We can bring an end to slavery at last. But it will not come without heartache. As we eat the egg in salt water, let us resolve to dedicate ourselves anew to the struggle for freedom for all God's children. Then out of the tears of slavery will emerge hope and joy.

## **LJ Social Action**

You may like to join this work in one of the following ways:

- Become a Fairtrade Synagogue, supporting producers who reject slave labour practices. Choose products with the Fairtrade label to use at home and in your synagogue. Consider having a Fairtrade Kiddush. Resources at [www.fairtrade.org.uk](http://www.fairtrade.org.uk) and Liberal Judaism Social Action [http://www.liberaljudaism.org/tikkun\\_1.htm](http://www.liberaljudaism.org/tikkun_1.htm)
- Join the UK campaign to abolish modern slavery – Anti Slavery International, Thomas Clarkson House, the Stableyard, Broomgrove Road, London SW9 9TL. Tel 020 7501 8920 [www.antislavery.org](http://www.antislavery.org) Further details of their campaign to prevent Trafficking is on their website and also in the Liberal Judaism Social Action resource pack below.
- Further information is in the Liberal Judaism Social Action's 'Pesach and Slavery' resource pack. Included is a sample letter to the Prime Minister and Anti Slavery's online Declaration against slavery and its consequences, which you may consider signing. You will find this on the Liberal Judaism Social Action webpage or in printed form by writing to:

Liberal Judaism Social Action,  
The Montagu Centre,  
21 Maple Street, London W1T 4BE

*Whoever is able to protest against the transgressions of his family and does not do so is held responsible for the transgressions of his family. Whoever is able to protest against the transgressions of the people of his community and does not do so is held responsible for the transgressions of his community. Whoever is able to protest against the transgressions of the entire world and does not do so is held responsible for the transgressions of the entire world.*

*(Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 54b)*