

If you were a slave

I attend a lot of meetings. (Maybe you can relate.) Many are important; few are memorable. About 15 years ago, I attended a Passover seminar at the Los Angeles Board of Rabbis that will stay with me forever.

Rabbi Joshua Levine Grater discussed modern-day slavery. He invited everyone present to contemplate slavery – ancient and contemporary, Israelite and gentile – and then to sing these words as a dirge: “Avadim hayinu lepharaoh bemitzrayim. Ata b’nai chorin.” The translation is: “We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt. Now we are free.”

It’s a song we usually sing up-tempo. We treat it as a children’s ditty. The text is a pastiche of two readings from the Haggadah. La, la, we used to be slaves. Yai, deedle, dai, now we’re free.

By slowing it down and singing it mournfully, the meaning hit me differently. We were slaves. We, our entire people, were slaves. I looked around at my fellow escapees, and I observed a few hard-boiled rabbis crying around the table. Everyone felt the weight of the words. Everyone mourned that human



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beings could do this to one another.

On Passover, we taste slavery in vegetables and dipping sauces; we feel freedom in the soft pillows on which we lean. Through sensory experience and the power of story, the ancient rabbis constructed an order (seder) meant to spark inquiry. Meanings, not just matzahs, are hidden, and they can be uncovered only through

feats of imagination.

The ultimate feat of imagination is set out as a requirement in Pesachim 116b: “In each generation, every person is obligated to see him or herself as personally having left slavery in Egypt.”

Can you truly imagine being a slave? Can you imagine being treated as a beast of burden, building with bricks in the hot sun, allowed no rest and little food? Can you imagine threats against your children? Under such circumstances, can you imagine losing connection with your past and hope for your future? That is what happened to the Children of Israel in Egypt. And that is what still happens to slaves today in countries across the world, including the United States.

Can you imagine being one of approximately 27 million slaves now in bondage? Can you imagine enduring your child’s kidnapping, knowing that she likely is enslaved? Can you imagine being so poor that you feel you must “sell” one of your children to get him an education (or at least the false promise of one) and to feed the others? Can you imagine generations of debt-bondage in your family, all for a fake loan or a paltry sum your grandfather borrowed? Can you imagine coming to this country with the help of coyotes, only to discover that the job they promised is a lie – and that you are a slave? Can you imagine going to a party only to be drugged, isolated, beaten, and ordered to make money as a street walker – or die?

If you can really imagine, then you are compelled to action. But what can be done?

Beginning last spring, I immersed myself in research about human trafficking. I wanted to find out what could make a difference. The Bible commands us: “love the stranger for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Deut.10:19, et al.). It calls Jews to be a “light to the nations” (Isaiah 42:6).

If individual Jews help to free slaves, each one does a mitzvah. When Jews band together to free slaves, we perform the same mitzvah, while making a statement about our faith, sanctifying God’s name, and, in the image of the ancient rabbis, “paving a path toward peace.”

That is why my family began a group called “Jews Freeing Slaves” on jchoice.org. It allows Jews to support the universal cause of human freedom as Jews, by donating directly to anti-slavery organizations with excellent track records.

Research is vital for measuring effectiveness and discerning the subtle, variable “best practices” for freeing slaves. But facts and metrics are no substitute for vision. It was one particular vision – my daughter’s – that gave my good intentions real power.

The breakthrough came when my 7-year-old, who couldn’t investigate, simply imagined.

Specifically, she imagined that I could personally have a hand in freeing 100 slaves within a year. My mind easily could have dismissed her idea as naïve and absurd, but my spirit felt a quickening, a sense of rightness.

Maybe it was all those years of practice at Passover seders that allowed me to see into her imagination. I made a solemn agreement with her to do it, if she would be my partner.

With this article, I am asking you join us. Imagine what we can do together – and, then, let’s do it.

Rabbi Debra Orenstein is spiritual leader of Congregation B’nai Israel in Emerson. She recently spearheaded Jews Freeing Slaves, a group at jchoice.org. Learn more about Freeing Slaves at RabbiDebra.com.