

'Passover Project' seeks to combat modern slavery

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Nearly 36 million people worldwide, or 0.5 percent of the world's population, live as slaves. Slaves cannot walk away and they live in constant fear. There are

even instances of forced labor in toxic conditions right here in New York and New Jersey. Because slavery is a huge and thriving business – generating \$150 billion each year in illicit profits for traffickers – it is a tremendous problem to tackle.

Nevertheless, Rabbi Debra Orenstein of Congregation B'nai Israel in Emerson is determined to

do just that. Her Passover Project is a dynamic venture to educate and engage people to help end slavery in our lifetimes.

Rabbi Orenstein founded the Passover Project for Free the Slaves (a Washington, D.C.-based non-profit anti-slavery organization). This five-year campaign was launched last year to enlist Jewish schools, congregations and communities around the country into a network mobilized against human trafficking throughout the year.

The Passover Project has four key objectives:

- To make education about modern slavery a part of congregational life;
- To mobilize Jewish communities to take strong advocacy stands against modern slavery;
- To inspire synagogues, Jewish schools and other Jewish institutions to be careful consumers and investors, insuring that the companies they sustain with their dollars are not tainted by slavery;
- To support Free the Slaves through t'zedakah (charity) projects and Bar and Bat Mitzvah projects.

The Jewish holiday of Passover, which begins this year on the eve of April 22, is a prime opportunity to discuss slavery, as families gather to retell the story of how the Israelites were subjected to unbearable slavery in Egypt under Pharaoh and their subsequent escape to freedom.

"Passover is a time of renewal and innovation," Orenstein says. "When we revisit the story each year, we seek to do so with fresh eyes. Connecting the biblical story



Local Rabbi Debra Orenstein is the founder of the Passover Project for Free the Slaves.

to plight of slaves today is new for many people – and adds meaning to the holiday."

Rabbi Orenstein is passionate about her mission to educate and engage people to combat slavery: "the calling of my rabbinate is to help people make meaningful connections between the Jewish tradition and their own lives and callings," Rabbi Orenstein said recently.

As such, her Passover Project offers materials to be used during this important eight-day holiday that aim to educate people attending Seders (festive meals) for Passover about the different dimensions of modern-day slavery; explain the reasons why Jews, having been slaves in Egypt, have a particular responsibility to intervene; and suggest actions that Jews and their non-Jewish Seder guests can take - indi-

vidually and collectively – to free slaves now.

Last year alone, over 1,500 people downloaded information and teaching tools from the Passover Project.

Rabbi Orenstein has an illustrious academic and religious background. In addition to serving as the spiritual leader of Congregation B'nai Israel in Emerson, she is an award-winning writer and public speaker. She writes a column for the Jewish Standard and she is also a frequent guest on radio and television.

Rabbi Orenstein attended Princeton University, University of Judaism, The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, The Meisner-Carville School and The Institute for Jewish Spirituality. In recognition of her contributions to religious and academic life, she has been honored with the Wolfson Award for Outstanding Scholarship and Service, as well as Revson, Finkelstein and Woodrow Wilson fellowships.

For Rabbi Orenstein, freeing slaves began as a small undertaking, but grew into something monumental. Two years ago, she spoke to her congregation about freeing slaves on the Jewish high holidays and she took it as a personal goal to free 18 slaves.

"I was talking with my daughter, Hannah Mathilda, about tikkun olam (repairing the world) and setting goals to help make the world better," she said. "In the course of the conversation, I shared my goal of freeing 18 slaves. Hannah Mathilda, who is never one to think small, immediately asked, 'But why 18? Why not 100?' And so a new, bigger goal was born!"

Rabbi Orenstein is used to tackling huge hurdles and she prides herself on "trading in the impossible."

"At age 8, I announced that I was going to be a rabbi, and everyone said, 'You can't do that!' But my heart told me that I could," she said.

Years later, as a member of the first class to include women at The Jewish Theological Seminary, she faced resistance and negativity, but succeeded and was ordained as a Conservative rabbi in 1990.

Embarking on another major initiative, last week, Rabbi Orenstein attended a conference about slavery at the United Nations.

"One hundred ninety-seven nations and many faiths are now working towards the goal of abolishing slavery by 2030," she said. "By pooling our resources and establishing partnerships, I think it is achievable."

Rabbi Orenstein's work with Free the Slaves goes beyond the Passover Project. She believes that people of all religions can make a

18 Passover Project:

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difference every day, by advocating for governments and businesses to change practices that allow slavery to flourish.

Here are some things that she encourages everyone to do:

- Buy fair trade products. Voting with your dollars can and will make a difference. Read labels where you shop.

- If you own stock, ask the board of directors and CEO to ensure that there is no taint of slavery in the companies of which you

are part owner.

- View and sign the petition at www.generation-freedom.org. It asks all the 2016 presidential candidates to commit to spending 3 billion dollars a year to fight trafficking – 4 billion less than Americans spend annually on potato chips.

- Visit knowthechain.org and slaveryfootprint.org to learn about the supply chain of products you use every day and to support manufacturers who engage in fair trade.

For more information about the Passover Project, visit www.FreeTheSlaves.net/Judaism.

Photo courtesy Rabbi Debra Orenstein