

## For all we are worth

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### How much does it cost to free a slave?

What does a person cost?

When I was a kid, science teachers were fond of telling their students (if they wanted to shock or humble us) the chemical value of a human body. It amounted then to about \$1.78. With inflation, today you may be worth as much as \$4.50.

Now, I don't want you to get a swelled head (because we'll be needing it at its regular size), but if you sell off the components of your body, according to a 2011 story in *Wired*, then your heirs could get \$45 million today, according to "Inside the Business of Selling Human Body Parts." That's because we live in the West. Blood, organs, and DNA are cheaper in the developing world.

The phrase "human values" normally has a very different connotation, but I have a morbid fascination these days about the price of a person. As I have mentioned before in the *Standard*, I made a commitment last Rosh Hashanah to take an active role in freeing slaves.

The most recent estimates put the number of slaves in the world today at 30 million. Federal officials report that about 60,000 slaves are now captive in the United States.

The price of a slave is shockingly low — \$40 in some parts of the world. In hard currency and in percentage terms, the price for slaves actually has gone down in the United States since the Civil War. Across the world, life literally is counted as cheap.

I set a goal to free 100 slaves in a year. I wasn't sure how I would go about it, but I committed to finding out. My first partners were my family and synagogue. Later, I collaborated with and learned from local federations, the New Jersey Commission Against Human Trafficking, T'ruah, Breaking the Chain Through Education, JChoice, the Rabbinical Assembly, the Religious Action Center, and Free the Slaves.

How much money does it take to free 100 slaves?

More than you might think, given the cost of buying a slave on the open market. You can't just buy a slave's freedom outright. It might be dangerous. It probably would encourage the kidnapping of more slaves. It certainly would require participating in the slave economy. And it doesn't prevent re-enslavement.

Many factors can affect the cost of liberation. Among them: What are the local economic and social conditions? Were the slaves transported, and will they be far from home when rescued? What equipment and staff are needed to secure their freedom? Are police or government officials likely to help, or do they side with — or fear — slaveholders? What immediate medical care will be required?

It is not enough to pluck slaves from their environment. They must gain the resources to maintain their freedom. Insufficiencies in food, work, housing, education, and/or the rule of law keep people vulnerable to trafficking. Most immediately, those who have access to schools, health care, and credit are far less likely to be exploited.

If you have the choice of watching all your children starve or receiving payment for the oldest to be taken to a farm or factory for a "good job" (even if you know what that really means), then you might sell one child in order to save the others. Ensuring that people have a viable way to feed their families protects parents and children from such a "Sophie's Choice."

People regularly fall into debt bondage, although it is either altogether illegal or practiced with illegal excess. A man who owes less than \$100 dollars to an employer might be forced to work it off over decades, and the bondage commonly is extended to his children, as well. Workers are charged both interest on the debt and rental fees for the equipment they use in their labor, so that backbreaking work over many years never lowers the pay-off amount. Bullied and often beaten, these slaves typically do not know that the law is on their side. Public education campaigns, along with community organizing, have ended debt bondage in many regions by empowering people to claim their freedom.

Sometimes you have to improve the lives of desperate people who resort to enslaving other human beings in order to feed themselves. Along the Volta River in Ghana, pollution and over-fishing have created an environmental crisis for the region and an economic crisis for the local fishermen, who no longer can make a living. For some, the "solution" is to kidnap children to work as slaves on their boats. Breaking the Chain Through Education ([btcte.org](http://btcte.org)) helps fishermen to succeed

without slaves, thereby aiding would-be and former captors, even as they rescue and provide schooling for enslaved children.

In “Ending Slavery,” Kevin Bales, founder of Free the Slaves ([freetheslaves.net](http://freetheslaves.net)), estimates that the cost for securing long-term freedom for a single slave in the developing world varies between \$400 and \$1,200. Assuming a cost of \$800 per slave, my partners and I must raise \$80,000 in order to free 100 slaves. That is why you will see a prominent “donate” button at [RabbiDebra.com](http://RabbiDebra.com) and an account at [jchoice.org](http://jchoice.org) for Jews Freeing Slaves.

It’s commonplace to assert that “you can’t just throw money at a problem.” Well, you can’t just throw money at the problem of slavery, but even small amounts of well-placed money can do astonishing amounts of good. It’s worth repeating: with the help of vetted organizations on the ground, you can liberate a human being for about 800 bucks.

Not only your tzedakah, but also your grocery money and clothes budget can be deployed to help end slavery. Fair-trade foods and clothing cost only a little more in the short run than the cheapest (slave labor?) goods. In the long run, your purchasing power can help change industries and buy people’s freedom.

Giving of your time also can help to free slaves. Last January, anticipating the Super Bowl and the prostitutes it brings to town, the NJ Coalition Against Human Trafficking, including Jewish Federations, the National Council of Jewish Women, and synagogues, educated local hotel managers and the broader community about forced prostitution. Hundreds of volunteers distributed 85,000 bars of hotel soap with wrappers that featured the Human Trafficking Resource Center hotline. I can’t say that it was that the advocacy and the soap that led directly to the liberation of 16 minors and 54 adults and the arrest of 45 sex traffickers. I am confident, however, that this kind of public involvement encourages — and puts positive pressure on — law enforcement. Equally important, it helps to change our culture.

On Friday, September 19, at 7:30 pm, Maurice Middleberg, executive director of Free the Slaves, will speak at Congregation B’nai Israel, 53 Palisade Avenue in Emerson, during Shabbat services. The public is invited. Mr. Middleberg will discuss Jewish perspectives on slaves and the practical, concrete steps that each of us can take to help end slavery.

We ask in the morning liturgy: “What are we? What are our lives? What is our piety? What is our righteousness?” As Elul, the month of preparation for the High Holidays, approaches, those questions become more urgent. What, really, is the measure of a person? How are we measuring up, by God’s standards and our own?

These questions circle back to the question with which I began: “What does a person cost?” That’s a heretical question. A better one is: What is a person worth? In particular, what are you worth? And what is the worth of a slave you may never meet, but just might be able to save?

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