

Rosh Hashanah, 2nd Day

September 6, 2013

Starting with Wednesday night and continuing through today, most of us have had the wonderful experience of sitting down to at least one big holiday meal, often more. Many of us have had the blessing of hosting family and friends, or being guests in the homes of others. I do not want to intrude on the joy of a shared meal celebrating the new year, but I want you to know about the all-but-invisible guests who have made these meals possible. They are the slaves who provide the labor for our meals. 150 years ago this November, we will commemorate Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, which inexorably linked the fight against slavery to the fight to save the union. Most Americans intuitively believe that that was the end of slavery. So it is shocking to discover that according to the State Department, 12 to 27 million people are currently forced laborers, more than at any time in human history. The world has not advanced nearly as much as we would like to believe.

Throughout this morning, we hear the sound of the Shofar. As is often quoted, Rambam declares, "The Shofar exclaims: "Awake, O you sleepers, awake from your sleep!" When it comes to the issue of international slavery, we are as sleepers. We purchase food, clothes, furniture at happily affordable prices, and do not really believe that slave labor is part of what gets these goods to us. Go back to that Rosh Hashanah meal you enjoyed: Guess how many slaves went into it. It so happens that the website "slaveryfootprint.org" can help you do so. One of those eggs you put in your kugel? 2 slaves. The beef in your brisket? another 2 slaves. Lettuce: 3 slaves. Wine: 1. Dining room furniture? 2. If you are so inclined, go to that website after Shabbat and determine

your own “slavery footprint.” by providing some information about yourself. I discovered that there are about 100 slaves working for me, ranging from child cotton-pickers in Uzbekistan to the 200,000 children in Cote Ivoir who harvest 40 percent of the world’s cocoa beans.

Slavery is not always obvious. The chains that bind many modern slaves are invisible: things like threats of violence, unpaid debt, stealing of passports. Let me tell you the story of Rose. Rose was a 14 year old in Cameroon when she heard about an offer to work as an au pair and maid in the United States. In return, her host family would send her to high school. When she got here, she was forced to work from 6 AM to midnight, with high school nowhere in sight. When she asked the couple who had brought her over for time off, she was beaten. When they discovered her having a conversation with a man, they called her a slut and a prostitute. They told her the police were corrupt and couldn’t be trusted. Rose lived this way for 2 ½ years before she escaped. Her captors were sent to jail. All this happened in Silver Spring, MD. The worst part is, some of her captors’ acquaintances guessed what was going on and felt sorry for Rose, but they later told the police “they didn’t want to get involved.”

The truth is, the easiest thing is not to get involved, especially when much of the slavery that goes into the things we buy is far removed from us. It often takes several steps for things to get from raw materials obtained through slave labor to the final product that we buy. When it comes to slavery and human trafficking, after all, we have a defense. We don’t own slaves. We can’t control every part of the supply chain. In answer to this, the Talmud says the following:

All who can protest against [something wrong that] one of their family [is doing] and does not protest, is held accountable for their family.[All who can protest against something wrong that] a citizen of their city [is doing and does not protest], is held accountable for all citizens of the city.[All who can protest against something wrong that is being done] in the whole world, is accountable together with all citizens of the world.

This season of the year is all about taking responsibility, and not hiding our heads in the sand. We bear responsibility for the slaves and child laborers who work for us.

So what can we do? First of all, the companies that make our favorite brands don't necessarily know the origins of their raw materials, and they won't care unless we tell them to. So for a few clicks on the "take action" section of slaveryfootprint.org, you can send a message to companies asking them to examine and eradicate slave labor in their supply chain. Once you find out how many slaves are working for you, you can lower that number through keying in anti-slavery actions that you take. And you can buy fair trade goods. The cost might be slightly more, but remember the lower cost is often paid by the forced labor of other human beings. And you can publicize this cause simply by copying your slaveryfootprint number to Facebook, or do the same with a photo of you and your friends drinking fair trade coffee. Our Agudat Achim Tikkun Olam committee is planning a fair trade fair which will and highlight goods certifiably produced by legitimate labor, and further educate about this issue. I encourage you to become involved with the planning, and certainly to attend that event.

Next week, at the end of Yom Kippur, we will conclude the ten days of repentance with the blast of the Shofar. Why do we do this, when the Torah nowhere

mentions Shofar in connection with Yom Kippur. The answer is that the Torah commands us to signal the advent of the Jubilee Year – when all slaves are to be set free – with the blast of the Shofar at the end of Yom Kippur. That is the passage from which the words adorning the Liberty Bell were taken: u-kratem dror ba-aretz l'khol yoshveha, Proclaim liberty throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof. But we have lost count of the fifty year cycle, so we do not know for sure which years are Jubilee years. Thus we blow the Shofar every year at the end of Yom Kippur, for maybe this year is the Jubilee. This suggests that any year can be the Jubilee Year, if we make it such. Let us commit to make 5774 the year we begin to eradicate worldwide slavery and involuntary servitude. May we open our eyes to the slaves that work for us. Let us commit to concrete actions that undermine the economic advantages of using slave labor. May we ask questions about where our goods ultimately come from, and purchase fair trade goods wherever possible. When next year comes, I hope I am able to say there are fewer slaves involved in my Rosh Hashanah meal, and that our world values liberty and human dignity more than ever before.