

“In the beginning, our ancestors worshipped idols”

A 1903 fine of \$1000-\$5000 would be roughly equivalent to \$60,000-\$300,000 in 2013. (Based on <http://www.measuringworth.com/uscompare>)

1. Refer to the picture below. It may be surprising to learn that slavery existed into the 20th century. Why do you think it was able to persist?



From PBS, “Slavery by Another Name”
<http://www.pbs.org/tpt/slavery-by-another-name>

In October 2018, the Tree of Life Synagogue building, less than a mile from the synagogue I serve, was attacked by a gunman. Our community is so interconnected that, in truth, the entire Pittsburgh Jewish community was attacked because we stood up for refugees and immigrants. The gunman’s fear of the other reflects Pharaoh’s fear: that strangers are dangerous. Just as Pharaoh’s fear was unfounded, so too the fear of immigrants and refugees is unfounded.

In the aftermath, as we picked up the pieces of our new lives, healing from our tragedy, we became like those wandering in the desert. We had to rely on one another. Not just a group of individuals but a community. We made it, spiritually, to the other side of the Red Sea, and we can see clearer now than ever.

We learned that we are in this struggle side by side. That each of us plays an important role and that, together, we are stronger.

- Rabbi Jeremy Markiz,
Congregation Beth Shalom,
Pittsburgh, Pa.

The Four Children

When we talk about forced labor, we may start out as the child who does not know to ask, because we don’t even know that the problem exists. Upon first encountering the issue, we ask simple questions. As we learn more, it is easy to slide into the frustration of the wicked child: This is such a massive uphill battle and I am so small — why should I bother caring? We seek the wisdom to overcome despair and find the ways in which we can be effective at fighting the root causes of forced labor.

On the path from first realizations to despair to activism, where do you find yourself tonight? What has your journey been to this place?

The seder demands that we look forward, not backward. To the children’s questions about why we celebrate Passover, we respond, “because God took us out of Egypt” and not “because we were slaves in Egypt.” We dwell on the joy and agency of liberation, not on the pain of slavery.

A rabbi once taught me that Judaism was a “system for goodness.” Over the years, I have learned to recognize that I am a part of systems that are often far less than good: systems that privilege few and hurt many. Our society’s demand for cheap products and services, and my mere participation in modern commerce, implicates me in the cycle of exploitation. It is this recognition that drives me to work to reform our public institutions so that they enable others to enjoy the same freedom that we celebrate around the seder table.

The ability to rejoice in our freedom carries with it great responsibility, for we cannot truly be free unless all people are free. Let us direct ourselves towards fixing systems that exploit vulnerable members of our communities and bring a time of liberation from these narrow places for all people.

- Keeli Sorensen,
Vice President of Victim
Services at RAINN
(Rape, Abuse & Incest
National Network)

This ordinary-seeming apartment building in Los Angeles housed a sweatshop in which 72 Thai women were held from 1987-1995². A group of traffickers lured the women in with promises of good wages, then forced them to work up to 18 hours a day making clothing for well-known brands for leading department stores. They were not allowed to leave the compound.



Photo by the Coalition to Abolish Slavery and Trafficking, 2004

Crushingly, the traffickers were only charged with crimes related to facilitating illegal immigration; at least initially, the survivors were threatened with deportation. America's laws against forced labor had not been updated since the Civil War. Since the passage of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act in 2000, both perpetrators and survivors would be treated differently.

3. What do you notice about the picture above? Does anything surprise you? What does this picture tell you about trafficking in the United States today?



Photo by Fritz Myer, June 2010, Courtesy of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers.

4. Thanks to a 2005 Congressional report, we know that slave labor was used in the construction of the Capitol. What does the juxtaposition in this image (left) say to you about our country?

5. How do we benefit today from the legacy of slavery in this country?

2. Refer to the picture below. Do this picture and this quote surprise you? Why or why not? What do they teach us about the legacy of slavery in the United States?

**“We used to own our slaves.
Now we just rent them.”**

– Florida grower quoted in the film



Florida farmworkers in 1960, from the Peabody Award-winning CBS documentary *Harvest of Shame*

RABBIS IN ACTION

In December 2013, I visited a local Wendy's restaurant with our middle school students. We did not do so to grab a snack, but to take a stand for human rights. We were urging Wendy's to join the Coalition of Immokalee Workers' (CIW) Fair Food Program.

Our task was not to be a menace, but to have meaningful conversations to create change. The manager knew we were coming and was happy to hear my students express their concerns about the exploitation of workers in Florida tomato fields. After talking with the manager, we handed her letters to pass along to the corporate office. She assured us that she would speak to her superiors and share our concerns.

We then left and gathered our posters and signs to raise awareness outside the restaurant. This was just one afternoon and one action, but it was an afternoon that inspired me. I now believe that these students will not just learn our tradition, but also live its values, ensuring equality and human rights for all.

– Rabbi Jesse M. Olitzky,
Congregation Beth El,
South Orange, N.J.

² For more information: <http://www.sfgate.com/news/article/70-Immigrants-Found-In-Raid-on-Sweatshop-Thai-3026921.php> and <https://americanhistory.si.edu/sweatshops/el-monte>.

17TH CENTURY-1865**Chattel Slavery**

The kidnapping, purchase, and sale of Africans as slaves.

1865-1944**Convict Leasing**

Prisoners are leased out as workers to private (white) citizens. These prisoners are overwhelmingly black and are usually arrested on flimsy charges, such as vagrancy.

MID 19TH-MID 20TH CENTURY**Sharecropping**

Black tenant farmers work a portion of the owner's land, in exchange for a share of the crop. They are required to purchase supplies and seeds from the owner. Tenants, often illiterate and at the mercy of unscrupulous landowners, frequently end up only breaking even — or even further in debt — at the end of a season.

17TH-18TH CENTURY

Indentured Servitude Poor, often white immigrants from Europe are bound to work for a set number of years. Often mistreated or held for longer than their period of indenture.

1852

The New York Times advocates bringing indentured Chinese workers to America, to take the place of slaves.

1862

Responding to public pressure about abuses and poor conditions, Congress bans transport of Chinese workers on American ships.

1942-1964

Bracero program (from the Spanish meaning “manual laborer”) brings 5 million Mexican farmworkers to the U.S. on temporary visas. Many abuses are documented despite promises of good wages and housing.

1953

U.S. institutes the H-2 visa program, which allows guestworkers to enter the country temporarily.

TODAY

An Example of Modern-Day Slavery
U.S. vs. Bontemps, July 2010. Cabioch Bontemps and two others are indicted by a federal grand jury on charges of conspiracy to commit forced labor, holding 50+ guestworkers from Haiti against their will in the beanfields of Alachua County, Fla. The traffickers held the workers' passports and visas, and the indictment states that Mr. Bontemps raped a worker and threatened her if she reported it. The Coalition of Immokalee Workers had trained law enforcement and helped with the referral to the Department of Justice, which later dropped the charges without explanation, though likely due to legal technicalities, in January 2012.

Guestworkers are ripe for abuse

The U.S. offers many kinds of temporary worker visas, with H-2 being the most common.

- H-2A, for agricultural workers: no annual cap; over 240,000 were authorized by the Labor Department in FY 2018.³
- H-2B, for non-agricultural workers: Congress authorized 135,000 for FY 2019⁴; majority come from Mexico and Central America.

H-2 visas are tied to a specific employer. If the employer is abusive, the worker has no freedom to quit without automatically becoming undocumented.

Employer-provided housing is often grossly inadequate, despite legal standards. Slashes in federal budgets mean the Labor Department cannot conduct adequate inspections.

Recruiters often illegally charge workers for their visas and travel, so workers arrive in the U.S. already in debt and vulnerable to trafficking.

³ <https://www.farmworkerjustice.org/resources/h-2a>, particularly the first fact sheet

⁴ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2019/04/06/trump-administration-nearly-doubles-h-2-guest-visa-program-which-brings-many-mexican-workers/>

Farmwork, Immigration, and Abuse ⁵

- 50% of farmworkers are not legally authorized to work in the U.S.
- 20% are legally authorized with a green card or a visa like the H-2A, for temporary guestworkers.
- Agriculture is the third most fatal industrial sector in the U.S.
- The industry is rife with labor law violations, including wage theft and unsafe working conditions.

⁵ <https://contexts.org/articles/stemming-the-exploitation-of-immigrant-farm-labor/>

“Together, 70% of US farmworkers are subject to the immigration enforcement apparatus as a form of labor control.”

Timeline of Forced Labor and Exploitation of Migrant Workers in America

Not all exploitation rises to the level of slavery, but America's histories of slavery and of exploiting foreign workers are intertwined.



This 12-foot tall statue was built by CIW and carried 235 miles across Florida in March 2000, at the very beginning of the Campaign for Fair Food. In June 2017, it was installed at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C., as part of a permanent exhibit, "The Nation We Build Together." This exhibit explores the question of what it means to be an American and how that has changed over time.

1. How do you think this statue is answering that question?

2. If you were curating this exhibit, what is one Jewish artifact you would include? One non-Jewish artifact?

3. How might you read Emma Lazarus's poem "The New Colossus" not only as a commentary on immigration but as a midrash on Miriam, Yocheved, Pharaoh's daughter, and the other women of the Exodus?

"The New Colossus," by Emma Lazarus

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
 With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
 Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
 A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
 Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
 Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
 Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
 The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.

"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
 With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
 Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
 The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
 Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
 I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

"Slavery was not born of racism: rather, racism was the consequence of slavery."

- Hon. Dr. Eric Williams, historian, first prime minister of independent Trinidad and Tobago (1944)⁶

Modern American racism was intentionally crafted in the American colonies as a form of social control — not just of Africans and Native Americans but also over poor white people. "[Slavery] made whiteness the mark of freedom, ensuring that 'ordinary' English settlers identified with their social betters instead of making common cause with the new [African] arrivals." (ibid) This intentional construction can be seen in the evolving legal definitions of whiteness over the years, from requiring three white grandparents to the "one drop rule." Slavery, originally an economic choice, gave rise to an entire racial system for organizing society — which has been reinforced, in subsequent years, by bringing other people of color to this country as migrant workers.

White Supremacy vs. White Nationalism

According to Eric Ward, Executive Director of the Western States Center and an expert on fighting white nationalism, these two ideologies differ in important ways, despite starting from a shared belief that white people and culture are superior to people of color.

	White Supremacy	White Nationalism
Goal	Exploit the bodies of people of color for economic and other gain, including sexual assault.	Expel people of color to create a "pure" white-only ethno-state.
History	Foundational system that pervades all aspects of American life	Particular political ideology arising in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement
Impact on Jews	Ashkenazi and other white-appearing Jews benefit from many of the same privileges as other white people.	Views all Jews as non-white and the root cause of white America's ills

1. Which is a better analogy for Egypt in the Exodus story?
2. How is white supremacy a root cause of forced labor and trafficking today?
3. How do these play out in our immigration system?

⁶ Qtd. in <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/03/american-immigration-service-slavery/555824/>

Every Passover, I sit with my friends and family to tell the story of our people's liberation from slavery in Egypt. As we tell the story, we are asked to imagine that we ourselves were once slaves in Egypt and now we are free.

As an African-American, during Passover, I often think about my ancestors who were brought to this country as slaves. I imagine they found comfort in the biblical story of the Exodus; seeing themselves as the Israelite slaves and the slave owners as the Pharaoh. I imagine them praying to God for freedom and never giving up hope.

As a Jew and an African-American, I carry the memories of people who were once enslaved. I hold on to our collective memory of our escape from Egypt to freedom. And like my ancestors, I pray for the freedom of all who are enslaved, and I am hopeful that next year we will all be free.

- Rabbi Sandra Lawson,
Associate Chaplain
for Jewish Life,
Elon University, Elon, N.C.;
T'ruah summer fellow 2013

Rabbi Lance J. Sussman, senior rabbi at Reform Congregation Keneseth Israel in Elkins Park, Pa., and visiting professor of American Jewish history at Princeton, [says]... The Passover narrative... didn't become an abolitionist-related story until after World War II and the Civil Rights era. "Originally, Passover was theological. It's about redemption and the power of God. It's not really about setting human beings free in a universal way. The text says that God frees the Hebrew slaves because God loves the Hebrews. God doesn't free all slaves for all of humanity or send Moses out to become the William Lloyd Garrison of the ancient free world."

- "Passover in the Confederacy," by
Sue Eisenfeld, *The New York Times*,
April 17, 2014

3. America generally, and the Jewish community in particular, prefers a tidy version of our history of slavery, racism, and the struggle for civil rights (e.g., Heschel marched with King). What narratives were you taught? What have you learned more recently to complicate those narratives?

4. Do you think the Passover story is a helpful lens through which to view America today? What are some of the strengths and weaknesses of this paradigm?

Summing Up: How We Remember America

"A new king arose
over Egypt who
knew not Joseph."
(Exodus 1:8)

וַיָּקָם מֶלֶךְ-חָדָשׁ
עַל-מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר
לֹא-יָדַע
אֶת-יוֹסֵף:

"God heard their
cry, and God
remembered God's
covenant with
Abraham, Isaac,
and Jacob. God
saw the Israelites
and God knew."
(Exodus 2:24-25)

וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים
אֶת נַאֲקָתָם וַיִּזְכֹּר
אֱלֹהִים אֶת בְּרִיתוֹ
אֶת אַבְרָהָם אֶת
יִצְחָק וְאֶת יַעֲקֹב:
וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת
בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֹּדַע
אֱלֹהִים:

1. What do these verses teach us about forgetting and remembering?

2. The sequence of verbs is: God hears, remembers, sees, and knows. We often need to have multiple kinds of contact with an issue before it sinks in for us. What is your experience — what does it take to move **you** from hearing about an issue to internalizing and acting on it?

Slavery was "normal," constitutional. Slavery built the USA. Slavery is regulated, that is to say allowed, in our Talmud. In 1861, when Reform Rabbi David Einhorn preached, "Is it anything else but a deed of Amalek, rebellion against God, to enslave human beings created in His image?" he was driven from Baltimore by a mob that included Jews. Orthodox Rabbi Sabato Morais went beyond the halakha of his day, in 1864, to thunder, "What is Union with human degradation? Who would again affix his seal to the bond that consigned millions to [that]? Not I, the enfranchised slave of *Mitzrayim* [Egypt]." Today it is disruptive to ask — and keep asking when ignored — "Who grew this food we're eating? Who sewed our clothes?" Even more disruptive to answer and then say that our tradition calls us to act. Do I have the guts to emulate our *gedolim* [great ones] and disrupt what's normal?

- Rabbi Robin Podolsky,
Religious Advisor,
Jewish Student Union,
Occidental College, Los Angeles