

Yom Kippur Daytime 5771  
Rabbi Fine

Throughout the high holiday season, we add Psalm 27 to our prayers, which begins, *Adonai Ori v'Yishi* – God is my light and my help. Why do we refer to God as our light and our help in particular during this time of the year?

Because this is the promise of the high holidays. If we shine a light on ourselves on Rosh Hashanah through honest introspection, revealing our darkest places, then we will be helped to change and improve our lives. I discussed this theme at length on Rosh Hashanah.

But our haftarah from Isaiah this afternoon came to remind us, that our work is not only to shine a light on the dark parts of ourselves that hide in the shadows, but also to shine a light on the dark parts of the world around us.

Isaiah calls out to us to see and acknowledge the ways our world is broken, and to reach out to those in need. When we do so, he promises that God's light will not only shine within us but will burst out to illuminate the world around us.

Speaking through the prophet, God declares, “This is my chosen fast: to loosen all the bonds that bind fellow human beings unfairly, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke... Then cleansing light shall break forth like the dawn, and your wounds shall soon be healed.”

Just as it is not always easy to shine a light inward to see the truth of our lives, so too it is not always easy to face the truth of the brokenness of our world. But this is our work on Yom Kippur. We must allow God to be our light if we want God to also be our help.

I want to focus today on one the aspect of Isaiah's moral imperative that I mentioned above – to loosen all the bonds that bind fellow human beings unfairly, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke.

Unfortunately, these words are at least as applicable to the world we live in today as they were in Isaiah's time, not just in a metaphoric sense but in a literal sense. We live in a world in which millions of our fellow human beings are bound up in slavery, oppressed without freedom, from far-off impoverished countries to right here in Massachusetts.

I mentioned slavery briefly last year. This year I am going to focus on this terribly difficult but terribly important moral issue in greater depth.

Some of you may be surprised to even hear that slavery exists in our modern day. After all, we all know that the trans-atlantic slave trade that was the shame of our country's past was abolished.

But slavery is in fact alive and rampant in our world today. It thrives in the shadows, oppressing millions of women and men and children.

The exact numbers are debated. Some anti-trafficking groups suggest the number of modern slaves is as high as 27 million. The International Labour Organization, a U.N agency estimates that 12.3 million people are engaged in forced labor of all kinds. There are a range of ways slaves are used, from child slaves forced to fight in the Congo, to slave labor used to create parts for our cars in Brazil, to clothing we wear from India. Each of these types of slavery raise significant moral challenges.

But today, I want to shine the light in the darkest of places, focusing on the most egregious form of slavery, which is also that which is most rampant in our world – sex trafficking.

By a conservative estimate, worldwide there are 3 million women and girls, as well as a small number of boys, who can be fairly termed enslaved in the sex trade.

I will say right now, that this is obviously a disturbing topic, and I want to forewarn you that some of what I will share today is explicit.

This is indeed a grim topic, one that is not fun to learn about or talk about. But that is also exactly why it is so important to bring it out of the shadows. I believe this is exactly what our early sages intended when they chose the Torah portion that is traditionally read on the afternoon of Yom Kippur – the laws of sexual misconduct from Leviticus.

Here at Temple Sinai and in many other synagogues it is a tradition to read an alternative to that section, in part because we find it distasteful or not meaningful to read laws forbidding incest and other forms of sexual abuse. In addition, for most of us our contemporary perspective would lead us to make the list a little different if we were to make it today, not putting homosexuality among a list of sexual misconduct. But the essential message of Leviticus 18 is just as important to hear today as it was 2000 years ago.

Sexual abuse is not only not a thing of the past, it has reached new and terrifying heights in the global sex slave trade. More women and girls are shipped into brothels each year in the early twenty first century than African slaves were shipped into slave plantation each year in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. According to the Journal of Foreign Affairs, it is almost certain that the modern global slave trade is larger in absolute terms than the Atlantic slave trade in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries was.

If this horrific reality could not be changed, then I would be hesitant to require us to hear about it and confront it today. But amidst these

terrible facts, it can also be said that it is clear there are real ways to improve the situation.

It can also be said that there is a growing global abolitionist movement that is working to end slavery. My goal in speaking about this issue from the *bima* today is not depress us or disturb us. My goal is no less than to convince you that you should become a modern day abolitionist, and that we as Jews must join others around the world in becoming leaders in the abolitionist movement.

A few Shabbas' ago we had a passionate conversation about this issue. Some members followed up by offering to get involved with me to start an anti-slavery campaign here at Temple Sinai, which I will say more about at the end of my talk.

One of our congregants recommended to me the new book by the Pulitzer Prize winning journalist couple, Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn called "Half the Sky," which perhaps some of you have read. While I had done a good bit of learning about the slave trade already, this book is the most cohesive, lucid, and ultimately inspiring presentation of the issue that I have encountered.

The book details the couples' firsthand investigation of the sex trafficking industry. It contains some of the most disturbing stories of human evil that I have ever encountered. But it also contains stories of courage, change, and hope.

I want to share with you two such stories, which encompasses many of the common threads in trafficking.

Amidst their exploration of the world of slavery, Kristof and WuDunn chose to try to rescue two teenage girls in Western Cambodia in a fairly straightforward way. They bought them from the brothel owners.

One was named Neth, who looked fourteen or fifteen. Believing Kristof to be a customer, she was brought to Nick's room, where she sat on the bed quivering with fear. She had only been in the brothel for a month. Nick had an interpreter in the room with him.

She was thin and fragile looking. She began to calm down as Nick asked her about her life. For the first 5 minutes she claimed that she was selling her body out of her own choice. But when it became clear that this wasn't a test by the brothel owners, that she wouldn't be beaten for telling the truth, she told her story.

A female cousin had taken Neth from their rural village, telling her family she would be selling fruit in Poipet. Once she was in the city, she was sold to the brothel and guarded.

Neth was allowed to walk around Poipet, but only with a relative of the brothel owner who kept her under close watch.

When Nick asked her why not escape at night, she told him they would recapture her and do something terrible to her. She knew a group of girls who tried to escape and they were caught and then locked up in a room and beaten.

The police would be of no help because they were receiving bribes from the brothel owners.

When Nick asked her what she would do if she were set free, Neth lit up, saying she would go back home to her family, and that she would like to try to open a little shop to make money.

After she passionately said she would never return to the brothel if she were set free, Nick schemed with her a plan to buy her from the brothel owners and take her back to her family.

He bought her for \$150 from the brothel owner, and then returned her to her village and family and gave her money to start a small grocery shop.

Neth's story is typical, except for the fact that she became free. Young girls from rural villages in particular, commonly become sex slaves by being tricked to think they are being brought to a city where they will have a regular job. But when they get there they find themselves trapped. When they resist becoming prostitutes, they are usually beaten and drugged until they have no will left; until they are broken.

The other girl that Nick bought was named Srey Momm. Her story illustrates some of the other common trends in sex trafficking. Unlike Neth, Srey had been enslaved for 5 years and hadn't had any communication with her family during that time. After Kristof freed her, they went back to her village. He described the reunion with her family as follows:

“With every passing mile of our long drive, she became more anxious about whether her family would accept or reject her. Suddenly she screamed and, although the car was still moving, yanked open the door and leaped out. She hurtled over to a middle aged woman who was staring wonderingly at the vehicle, and then the woman, Srey's aunt, was screaming as well and they were embracing and crying.

A moment later it seemed as if everybody in the village was shrieking and running up to Srey. Her mother was at her stall in the market a mile away when a child ran up to tell her that Srey had returned. Her mother started sprinting back to the village, tears streaming down her cheeks. She embraced her daughter and they both tumbled down to the ground. It was ninety minutes before the shouting died away and the eyes dried, and then there was an impromptu feast.”

Srey's family decided she would sell meat in a stall next to her mother in the market, and Nick left some money to finance the project. The organization American Assistance for Cambodia, agreed to assist her with the transition. Srey was thrilled.

But a week later an excruciating letter arrived for Nick from his interpreter. Srey had voluntarily gone back to the Poipet brothel without anyone forcing her and without telling her family until she called them from there.

At the brothel, Srey had become addicted to methamphetamines which are often given to girls to keep them compliant and despondent.

As soon as she got her drug fix, she wanted to be free again. Two more times she was freed by an aid worker, and twice more she returned, due to the addiction.

When Nick saw her years later in 2008, Srey was living in the brothel with a new young new roommate. Srey appeared to be starting to step into a managerial role. In Kristof's words, "the slave was becoming the overseer."

Thank God, this cycle of oppression was not completed, due to a crackdown on brothels in 2008 that happened because Cambodian authorities were reacting to growing pressure from the West about this issue. Business became too difficult and unprofitable for the owner of the brothel, a woman named Sok Khorn, so she decided she would try something else, opening a little grocery shop.

Srey found herself free and went on to get married, finally leaving the life of slavery, at least we hope.

While these painful stories illustrate the horror of the slave trade that is most rampant in developing countries in Asia, particularly India, the same elements can be found much closer to home.

As I mentioned last year, my own shocking wake up call to this issue came in South Tel Aviv. I visited with my rabbinical school classmates a yeshiva where secular Israelis study Torah and do social justice work in the local community.

We were taken on a tour of the neighborhood right next to the old central bus station, where we walked down a street filled with the bright signs of brothels. We were told that in these buildings women from Asia and Europe were held against their will as slaves.

Trafficking began in Israel during the Intifada. Since Israeli's could no longer get cheap Arab labor because of closings of the West Bank, construction companies and others began to hire foreigners who were willing to do the work. Along with this, women were told they were headed for respectable work, but were tricked into slavery.

According to Kristof and WuDunn, here in the United States most prostitutes are not slaves as in developing countries. But it does exist.

I'm sure some of you have followed the controversy over Craig's List. Yes, Craigslist, the same website on which you may have sold your old couch or bought a vacuum, has been accused of also being used to sell human beings, with prostitution ads that promote human trafficking of children and lead to assaults on women.

About 2 weeks ago, due to public pressure Craig's List removed access to their "adult listings" section.

The controversy that perhaps pushed public opinion over the edge and put the heat on Craigslist to get rid of that section of its website took place right in Boston, in the case of a medical student who was charged

with murdering a woman he arranged to meet through craigslist. In addition, 17 state attorney generals sent a letter to Craigslist urging them to shut down that section of their site.

An abolitionist organization called The not for sale campaign, has a website that includes a tool to allow people to report incidents of trafficking which show up on a map of our country. Out of curiosity, I went to Massachusetts to see if there were any cases reported.

Indeed there were. Where were the cases? One was in East Boston. One was in Brookline Massachusetts. One was in Peabody Massachusetts.

You can breathe. That is the end of the disturbing part of this sermon. We will turn from shining light into the darkest of places to the redeeming part of the picture.

Assuming I have convinced you that there is a problem, the question becomes, what can be done to deal with it?

Is there anyway we can really have an impact on this widespread and horrific human rights issue?

The evidence shows that the answer to this question is yes. There are several strategies that can help move towards the abolition of slavery.

The first, is at the governmental level. In the words of Kristof and WuDunn, “the tools to crush modern slavery exist, what we need is political will.”

There is empirical evidence that a hard line of cracking down on prostitution can work when combined with social services and drug rehabilitation.

When Western governments use their power to push developing countries to get serious about trafficking, those countries push their police to make raids on brothels. The corrupt police then demand higher bribes from the brothel owners, which makes the business less profitable.

If it isn't profitable, they begin to think like the brothel owner Sok Khorn – 'perhaps I could do better in groceries'. This is how governmental action can lead to the freedom of girls like Srey Momm. Kristof and WuDunn state that "some degree of prostitution will probably always be with us, but we need not acquiesce to widespread sexual slavery."

For us as Americans, we can lobby our government to put pressure on other countries. In addition, we can bring the more general issue of slavery out of the shadows by becoming responsible consumers, buying fair trade items when possible, and by demanding more information about where products come from.

The second strategy that can help eliminate trafficking is investment in education and rehabilitation for women in developing countries. Rescuing girls is one thing, but it is much more effective to keep them in school as a way to prevent them from being trafficked, or returning to it.

Assistance in the realms of health and education have a very good record for making a difference.

Take for example, the impact made by the Overlake private school in Redmond Washington, populated by upper middle class 5<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> graders.

The principal of the school, Frank Grijalva was looking to teach his students about those less fortunate. After learning about trafficking in Cambodia, the students chose to participate in a program of the Rural School Project of American Assistance for Cambodia. For \$13,000 a donor can start a school and the funds are matched by the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank.

The students of Overlake did bake sales, car washes, and talent shows, as they learned about Cambodia's history of war and genocide, and their efforts led to the building of a school near the Thai border that is notorious for cheap brothels.

19 students traveled with the principal for the opening of the Overlake school. They were so affected by the experience of meeting the Cambodians who appreciated the school so profoundly, that they created an ongoing relationship with the school. They funded an English teacher, arranged for internet at the school, built a playground, and sent books.

Delegations went back twice more to learn and teach. Kids who might have ended up as slaves found themselves learning in school and emailing with American kids.

American Assistance for Cambodia also runs a program where donors can sponsor a child for \$120 per year, with \$10 a month going to the child's family to help the child stay in school instead of needing to look for work where they can easily be tricked into slavery.

Needless to say, the Overlake project was transformative for the Americans as well. In the words of the principal, "the project is simply the most meaningful and worthwhile initiative that I have undertaken in my thirty six year in education."

Education is an important way to fight trafficking not only because it keeps girls in school, but because it empowers them. The girls who are trafficked are often the most vulnerable in society, from poor families and villages. Traffickers feel they can get away with it because the girls and their families don't have social standing. Education can change how women are viewed, and can also transform their ability to stand up for themselves.

In addition, the evidence shows that core societal issues such as poverty can be profoundly impacted by the empowerment of women through education. This is why Kristof and WuDunn call their book *Half the Sky*. It is based on the Chinese proverb, "women hold up half the sky." When women are not allowed and encouraged to do so, our problems arise as the heavens come crashing down.

In addition to the importance of governmental pressure for making change, equally important is the creative work of courageous individuals who become impassioned, whether here in the United States or in India. Even more effective has been the collaboration of individuals and small organizations from the West and the East.

For example, a woman with tremendous courage named Sunitha, became a local organizer in India, risking her own life by starting a school in a former brothel, providing rehabilitation and job training for new careers for thousands of formerly enslaved women. But she wouldn't have been able to do this without support from small donors in the United States who believed in her cause.

The good news in the face of the grim reality of modern slavery, is not only that it is possible to have an impact, but that there is a growing global network of abolitionists who are already having an impact. I

hope that today many of you may have become inspired to want to become a modern day abolitionist.

If so, our task is to figure out the actions we will take that will make us worthy of that title in the days ahead.

Just as in Isaiah's time, we need to be reminded the true meaning of our fast today. We are not only here to improve ourselves. We are here to improve the world; to commit to being God's hands in helping those who suffer in desperation.

The very core of our identity as a people is shaped by our own miraculous exodus from slavery in Egypt. And our history since then has been shaped for centuries by persecution and oppression.

We know that what it means for someone to stand up for you when you are vulnerable. We know what it meant for a righteous gentile to muster the courage to save the life of a Jew. To be a Jew is to know where we come from, and to use our moral compass and moral authority to fight the oppression we encounter in the world.

The sheer scope of the slave trade can be overwhelming. But lest we become frozen in the face of the magnitude of the task, I urge us to recall the words of the great sage Rabbi Tarfon.

*“Lo alecha hamalacha ligmor, v'lo ata ben chorin libatel.”* You are not required to finish the task, and you are also not free to desist from it.

We must remember the teaching of our sages that we know to be true, that saving one life is like saving a whole world.

It is not our job to worry whether we will complete the task of abolishing slavery from the whole world, but it is our obligation to engage in the process of trying.

Listen to the simple wisdom of a student from the Overlake School in Washington: “All anyone should do is use their gifts in what way they can, and this is how I can use mine.”

As members of the American Jewish community, we are blessed to have tremendous gifts with which to have an impact. We live in the most powerful country in the world. We are educated and skilled and creative and connected in many arenas.

And we are a people that has a history of having a disproportionate impact on the larger society and the world at large. I have no doubt that as the Jewish community becomes more mobilized around this issue, we can likewise make a significant contribution to the abolitionist movement.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this talk, several congregants and I have committed to starting an anti-slavery campaign here at Temple Sinai this year as a sub-group of our social action committee.

We are in the early brainstorming and planning stages, and we hope you will choose to get involved. I’ve reached out to the Marblehead Ministerial Association, and some of our other local faith leaders expressed interest in exploring collaboration on this issue.

The first step is to raise awareness about the issue in the first place, which we have begun with our lively communal conversation several Shabbases ago, and with this sermon today. Our work group has not yet reached the point of deciding what the best way to have an impact as a community will be, and I welcome you to contact me if you have thoughts.

There are many possible ways to focus our efforts. Perhaps our focus should be to collaborate with Israeli groups to end sex-trafficking in Israel. Perhaps we should consider working with the various faith communities in our area to fund a small school in Asia as the Overlake School did.

However our efforts evolve, I assure you there will be real ways for you to get involved this year, and when those opportunities arise, I urge you take them.

May we all seek to instill true justice and compassion in the world this year.

May we live to fulfill the vision of Isaiah:

“If you remove from your midst the yoke of oppression, the finger of scorn, and the tongue of malice; if you put yourself out for the hungry and relieve the wretched, then shall your light shine in the darkness, and your gloom shall be as noonday.”