

Freedom Prayers and Modern Day Slavery

Topic

Prayer; Passover; Challenge and Response

Grade Level(s)

7-12

Goals for the Lesson/Activity

Students will:

- Become familiar with the many forms of slavery that exist today
- Understand the Jewish concept of freedom and how it differs from that of popular culture
- Write a Passover freedom prayer to share at their family Seders

Materials needed

Printed articles; paper/pen

Technology needed

Optional: computer to play videos; computer to do on site research

Background for Teachers

This lesson centers on two conversations and a prayer writing activity. The first conversation is on the Jewish concept of freedom with responsibility, namely, to serve God and Torah. The second optional conversation is about modern day slavery.

Use this lesson plan to discuss the Jewish concept of freedom with responsibility. The second topic – modern day slavery – is difficult/mature material. Include it at your discretion and inform your education director. Be sure to preview any of the videos you might use before showing them to make sure content is appropriate for your students.

Freedom with Responsibility

The Jewish concept of freedom differs profoundly from the common understanding of freedom in popular, secular culture. In the Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, the popular definition of freedom reads:

- 1: the quality or state of being free: such as:
 - a) the absence of necessity, coercion, or constraint in choice or action
 - b) liberation from slavery or restraint or from the power of another
 - c) Independence
 - d) the quality or state of being exempt or released usually from something onerous *freedom from care*

Freedom Prayers and Modern Day Slavery

- e) the quality of being frank, open, or outspoken *answered with freedom*
- f) improper familiarity
- g) boldness of conception or execution
- h) unrestricted use *gave him the freedom of their home*
<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/freedom>

The Merriam-Webster definition is consistent with our common understanding of freedom: that is, the exercise of freedom is about the ability to make individual choices in all areas of life, ranging from protected legal rights – religion, speech, peaceful assembly, etc. – to personal expressions of fashion, taste and lifestyle.

In contrast, the Jewish concept of freedom stems from the story of our enslavement in Egypt as told in Exodus, in which liberation from Pharaoh is for the specific purpose of serving God. This is not ‘life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness;’ this is freedom with responsibility. Judaism asserts that freedom is for the expressed purpose of expressing our relationship with God. The emphasis on freedom to serve God is reflected in these passages:

- “Then Adonai said unto Moses: ‘Go in unto Pharaoh, and tell him: Thus says Adonai, the God of the Hebrews: Let My people go, that they may serve Me” (Ex. 9:1).
- “...I have set before thee life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that thou may live, thou and thy seed; to love the LORD thy God, to hearken to God’s voice, and to cleave to God; for that is thy life, and the length of thy days...” (Deut. 30:19-20)
- R. Joshua b. Levi said, "No man is free but he who labors in the Torah" (Avot 6:2).

As such, the traditional Jewish understanding of freedom is not expressed purely in terms of physical liberty. Physical freedom has a purpose: service to God and Torah. Still freedom – meaning the absence of enslavement and the ability to make choices – is prerequisite for service to God and Torah.

Here are resources on the Jewish concept of freedom compared with the popular understanding:

- http://www.huffingtonpost.com/sr-hewitt/defining-freedom-for-jews_b_1373059.html
- <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/freedom>
- <http://www.hakirah.org/Vol20Goldman.pdf>

Freedom Prayers and Modern Day Slavery

Modern-Day Slavery

Modern-day slavery is big business, an estimated \$150 billion worldwide, and takes a wide variety of forms. The International Labor Organization estimates that there are 20.9 million victims of human trafficking globally:

- 68% of them are trapped in forced labor
- 26% of them are children
- 55% are women and girls

Here are links to a sampling of the many articles and dedicated web sites on various forms of modern-day slavery:

- Information on Human Trafficking/Involuntary Servitude from the FBI
<https://www.fbi.gov/investigate/civil-rights/human-trafficking>
- Labor Trafficking Fact Sheet
https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/orr/fact_sheet_labor_trafficking_english.pdf
- The Polaris Project - <https://polarisproject.org/>
<https://polarisproject.org/labor-trafficking>

Additional resources on modern-day slavery are available at the end of this lesson plan.

In *Birkot Hashachar* we thank God for our individual freedoms twice, with the blessings: **עבד** **שלא עשני עבד** and **מתיר אסורים**; that is, 'who made me not a slave' and 'who frees the captive.' These lines are based on *Tehillim* (Psalms) 146:7. (Note that in the Reform *Mishkan T'fillah* **עבד** **שלא עשני עבד** is replaced by **שעשני בן/בת חורין**, 'who made me free.')

Description of Activities

Discuss the Jewish Concept of Freedom with Responsibility

Present to the entire class an overview of the traditional Jewish concept of freedom with a purpose, namely, to serve God and Torah. Use the text sheet as a basis of the discussion. Address questions such as:

- How is this concept different from our popular understanding of freedom?
- In what ways is 'freedom with responsibility' either limiting or liberating?
- Is 'freedom with responsibility' true freedom?
- Is 'freedom with responsibility' necessary for a free society to survive?

Freedom Prayers and Modern Day Slavery

- How do you understand freedom as it relates to your own life? What are the responsibilities which accompany that freedom?

Discuss Modern Day Slavery

Divide the students into small groups to read and discuss one of the articles about modern-day slavery listed in 'Background for Teachers'. Have the students discuss questions such as:

- What makes this slavery?
- Why does this form of slavery occur?
- Who are the victims?
- What is our responsibility?

When the class reconvenes as one unit, each group will present the facts about that form of slavery and the highlights of their discussion.

Activity

Explain that there are two prayers about freedom in *Birkot Hashachar*: one thanks God for not being a slave (or being free, in the Reform siddur); the other declares that God frees the captive. Students write their own prayers capturing these two elements: a prayer of thanks for personal freedom and a prayer about the freedom of those individuals facing modern day slavery. Encourage students to read their prayers during their family Seders.

For learners who need extension opportunities

- Create a class mitzvah project responding to modern-day slavery. These videos could serve as a basis:
 - <http://edition.cnn.com/videos/world/2017/03/08/cfp-atlanta-anti-slavery-trafficking-club-kinkade-pkg.cnn>
 - <http://edition.cnn.com/videos/world/2017/03/09/drama-modern-day-slavery.cnn>
- Even when freedom is limited, we may still have choices. During the Shoah, some Jews “found within themselves the inner strength to examine their situation and to try and find meaning in the events that controlled their very existence” (from *Years Wherein We Have Seen Evil*, Volume 2, p. 165). Explore the ‘spiritual resistance’ to captivity and degradation that took place during the Holocaust. Write about the idea of being free even during slavery. Here are two examples:
 - In the Terezín Ghetto, teenage boys compiled a secret magazine titled *Vedem*, which printed prose, poetry, and editorials:
http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/education/newsletter/13/main_article.asp

Freedom Prayers and Modern Day Slavery

- The creation of the famous Ringelblum archives code named 'Oneg Shabbat' to document daily life in the Warsaw Ghetto under German oppression: http://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%205802.pdf

Additional Resources for Modern Day Slavery

- Labor Trafficking (bonded and forced labor):
 - Fishing: <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/05/11/asia/freedom-project-thailand-fishing-slave-ships/index.html>
 - Domestic servitude: <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/09/27/world/ima-matul/index.html>
- Human Trafficking (sex trafficking and forced prostitution)
 - Sex slaves: <https://polarisproject.org/sex-trafficking>
 - Girls sold by families: <http://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2013/12/world/cambodia-child-sex-trade/index.html>
 - Kidnapped as child brides: <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/04/17/asia/vietnamese-girls-child-brides-china/index.html>
 - Boys/young men for prostitution: <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/11/29/europe/refugees-prostitution-teenagers-athens-greece/index.html>
- Child soldiers: <https://www.hrw.org/topic/childrens-rights/child-soldiers>
- Organ Trafficking: <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/06/26/world/asia/freedom-project-nepals-organ-trail/index.html>

Here are videos about human trafficking. Once again, be sure to preview these videos before showing them to your students:

- Ashton Kutcher on Trafficking: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HUMfsvegMRo>
- Spotting Trafficking: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/otip/partnerships/look-beneath-the-surface>
- Child Brides: <http://edition.cnn.com/videos/world/2017/02/24/vietnamese-girls-sold-as-brides-in-china.cnn>