

HUFFPOST POLITICS

Nancy K. Kaufman

CEO, National Council of Jewish Women

Passover, Liberation, and Modern Day Slavery

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This week, Jews across the globe are celebrating the holiday of Passover. As we gathered with friends and family around the seder table, we recalled the bitterness of our slavery in Egypt and celebrated our liberation and subsequent freedom. But, through the retelling of our history as slaves, we are also compelled to remember that slavery still exists in our midst.

Among the 27 million people in slavery around the world today are victims of sex trafficking, right here in the United States. Sex trafficking is often hidden and transcends class, race and ethnic origin. It takes place in our communities, behind closed doors and on the streets of our cities and towns, and is often accompanied by a feeling of powerlessness and hopelessness. It is a massive criminal industry that is practically invisible, but takes place every day seven days a week in poor and wealthy communities. Ignorance of its scope is a product both of the secrecy that surrounds it and lack of attention it has received, at least until recent years.

Thanks to the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000, we have a legal definition: "Sex trafficking is the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purposes of a commercial sex act, in which the commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such an act has not attained 18 years of age" (22 USC § 7102; 8 CFR § 214.11(a)).

We have begun to collect some statistics from a variety of sources, describing various pieces of the puzzle. The FBI estimates that 293,000 American youth are at risk of becoming victims of sex trafficking. Cases of trafficking have been reported in virtually every country and all fifty states, as well as the District of Columbia and the US territories. It is imported and home grown: The FBI also reports that between 2008 and 2010, 83 percent of sex trafficking victims identified within the United States were U.S. citizens.

We also know that traffickers target the vulnerable -- homeless youth; those in the foster care system who lack roots; those in poverty without adult guidance; those living in marginal higher-crime neighborhoods. Shockingly, the typical target is 12 to 14 years old. But despite what we know, as a country we have yet to make the shift in perception necessary to progress nationwide. We have yet to imbue the culture with the realization that these minors are victims, and not delinquents or criminals. Indeed, there are more shelters for animals than for trafficking survivors.

There are consequences to this failure. Far too often juveniles and young women are lured into relationships with older men who promise emotional and economic security that quickly

become relationships of trafficked and trafficker. Once snared, they are arrested and jailed for selling sex rather than sheltered and treated for being sold and for the abuse they have suffered. Frequently victims of trafficking often have been mentally and physically traumatized repeatedly, often for years. They need education, professional training, therapy, and health care, among other services.

Those who slip into a life of sex for hire under the pressure of a pimp don't always grasp the reality of their situation. They have suffered abuse for so long that the pressure to sell their bodies seems inevitable within a relationship in which they have long since ceased to control their own fate -- a relationship that follows a childhood of familial abuse or abandonment.

So as we reflect on the meaning of our freedom during the Passover holiday, there are many things we can commit to doing to ensuring the freedom of others in our midst -- from enforcing current laws to passing new ones, and providing resources and programs to fight trafficking and offer hope to the trafficked. But as we fight for those concrete advances, we also have to work to change the culture, to incorporate awareness of trafficking into our public consciousness -- through our health and educational systems, our professional networks, our religious institutions and organizations, and the media writ large. We must do our own targeting of attitudes and practices that put victims in double jeopardy. They not only suffer the physical and emotional misery and duress inflicted by their oppressors, but the indifference and derision of society at large. That is the scourge of slavery through the ages, be it sexual or otherwise. Ending that scourge honors those who escaped slavery and gave us the hope for freedom and rebirth, both of which we celebrate during Passover.