A CRITICAL RE-READING OF SLAVERY IN THE TORAH

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The Haggadah permits participants to bend time and personalize the ceremony. Early in the medieval period rabbinic editors added the two words, *"Avadim Hayenu,"* ' we were slaves…' Rather than the historic third person plural-<u>they</u>, the first-person plural-<u>we</u>-immediately includes each person seated at the table at each Seder. That rhetorical device this year will also bring an immeasurable jolt of outside politicized bias by connecting the Seder to painful conversations about systemic racism, white supremacy, Black Lives Matter or Laurentino Gomes' bestseller, *Escravidao.* The word, 'slavery', cannot be simply contained in the historical past, because this year '*Avadim Hayenu'* will spark divisive political issues that require everyone's attention. Yet, the biblical and rabbinic concepts of slavery recounted during our Seder, have nothing to do with the centuries of slave trade that produced the contemporary questions we must acknowledge. This essay constructs from the text of the Torah, the foundation of critical perspective needed for such conversations.

'Slavery' in the Hebrew Bible is not the same as the Atlantic Slave Trade which is the basis of the conflicts that challenge us today. Paul Lovejoy's historical scholarship, "Transformations of Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa" provides a definition with which we can begin to distinguish ancient biblical texts from historical realities. "Slavery is one form of exploitation. Its special characteristics include the idea that slaves are property; that they are outsiders who are alien by origin or who are denied their heritage through judicial or other sanctions; that coercion can be used at will; that their labor power is at the complete disposal of a master…[they are] chattel, which is to say they can be bought and sold." "…slavery was fundamentally a means of denying outsiders the rights and privileges of a particular society so that they could be exploited for economic, political, and /or social purposes." (pg. 2) "…slaves were removed a considerable distance from their birthplace, thereby emphasizing their alien origins. This uprooting has been as dramatic as the transport of Africans across the Atlantic or the Sahara Desert….defining the slave as the outsider." (pg. 3) "….the American system of slavery was unique in…the

manipulation of race as a means of controlling the slave…" (pg. 8) (Paul E. Lovejoy, "Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa" Third Edition, Cambridge, 2012)

When 'slavery' is racialized, we are imposing an impossible moral challenge on the biblical text, because biblical slavery has nothing to do with race! A critical re-reading of the Torah requires consciously neutralizing today's highly politicized bias to overcome any misunderstanding of slaves and slavery in the Hebrew Bible. Ironically, today, the contemporary politicized meanings of 'slavery' add to additional misreading created by translations of the biblical text. Hence, let us critically re-read these texts with a renewed emphasis on the original Hebrew.

The Hebrew text in Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy uses the same root-word, *Ayin, Vet, Dalet* but the context of each usage is vital for a critical reading. In *Brown, Driver, Briggs Biblical Lexicon*, we find the Hebrew words, *Avadim, Avodah. Eved* to have several different meanings, ranging from serve/servant, labor(er), work(er), enslave/slave and worship/Temple service. Thus, we must be precise in any *translation* of both the ancient language and its corresponding culture.

The narrative text of Exodus uses this root word in many variant forms. When the Pharaoh motivates Egyptians to be afraid of the Israelites, and orders coercive labor to marginalize them, he distorts their power which in turn justifies his coercive use of their labor. Exodus 1:13 uses the word as a verb, '*Va'yavaydu'*, referring to what Egyptians forced upon the Israelites, the verse ends with the adjective, *'B'farech'*, ruthless to emphasize the kind of work.

Exodus 1:14 uses the same root as a noun, '*ba'avodah'*, using additional adjectives for emphasis of horror. The narrative context shifts from mere service and servant to enslaved and slavery: 'the וַיְמָרְרוּ אֶת־חַיֵּיהֶם **בַּעֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה** בְּחֹמֶר וּבִלְבֵנִים וּבְכָל־עֲבֹדָה בַּשָּׂדֶה אֵת **כָּל־עֲבֹדָתָם אֲשֶׁר־עָבְדוּ בָהֶם בְּפָרֶךְ:** various **labors** that they made them perform. *Ruthlessly they made life bitter for them with **harsh labor** at mortar and bricks and with all sorts of tasks in the field.'*

Exodus 2:23 again uses '*avodah'*, some translations offer 'bondage' as the essential narrative thread. Though the Hebrew root word is the same, the narrative context requires the reader to understand that the most severe slavery can only be dissolved by the Divine. וַיְהִי בַיָּמִים הָרַבִּים הָהֵם

וַיָּמָת וַיֵּאָנְחוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל **מִן־הָעֲבֹדָה** וַיִּזְעָקוּ וַתַּעַל שַׁוְעָתָם אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים **מִן־הָעֲבֹדָה:** 'The Israelites were groaning under **the bondage** and cried out; and their cry for help from **the bondage** rose up to God.'

Throughout, Exodus 3-13, the extraordinary 'origin-story,' the Israelites face coerced labor, suffering, expressing their oppression, until a leader is chosen by God for the unique purpose of saving/delivering/freeing them as *Avadim* in order that *Ya'avduni,* the Hebrew text uses the same root word in several different forms. Below are several key examples, showing the Hebrew root word and corresponding contemporary English translation. There is no consistent textual emphasis of this word as abusive labor, slavery. The simple term, *servant*, is used to describe to Israelites by Israelites and as those serving in Pharaoh's court. The same root word is also used several times for *worship,* linking service to God/cult to the root meaning. Finally, in Ex 13:3 with the actual event of the Exodus, Egypt is now described as 'House of Bondage'.

תַּעַבְדוּן אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים you shall **worship** God—Ex 3:12
וָאֹמַר אֵלֶיךָ שַׁלַּח אֶת־בְּנִי **וְיַעַבְדֵנִי** that he may **worship** Me Ex. 4:23
נִתָּן **לַעֲבָדֶיךָ** …עֲשׂוּ וְהִנֵּה **עֲבָדֶיךָ** to **your servants**! Thus, **your servants** are being beaten.Ex 5:15

מִקֹּצֶר רוּחַ **וּמֵעֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה** their spirits crushed by **cruel bondage.** Ex 6:19

שַׁלַּח אֶת־עַמִּי **וְיַעַבְדֵנִי** Let My people go that they may **worship** Me Ex 7:16
וְיַעַבְדֵנִי **worship** Me Ex: 26
וְאֶת־לֵב **עֲבָדָיו** and the hearts of his **courtiers** Ex 10:1
שַׁלַּח עַמִּי **וְיַעַבְדֵנִי:** Let my people go so that they **worship** Me Ex 10:3
מִבֵּית עֲבָדִים From the house of **Bondage** Ex 13:3

The Hebrew Bible's narrative about the Israelites' coerced, ruthless experience in Egypt is understood contextually as *enslavement*, because the same root word has far many different meanings. When the biblical text is only read in translation, the reader does not have the experience of finding different conjugations of the same root word with variant meanings. However, the biblical term, *Aved/Avadim/Avodah* is translated today, its ancient meaning was much more nuanced than our own understanding of 'slave/slavery'.

Exodus 1-13 are unique narrative passages from the Hebrew Bible that define a community's original identity for the purpose of their establishing transcendent destiny. The Hebrew Bible is

not a historical factual description of an ancient reality, but a document that purports to have Divine intent. This is not a story of '*Avadim*' being freed, but of a people covenanted to God who were brought from '*Avodah Kasha'/'MeBayt Avadim'* for the specific purpose of *Avodah* to/for God.

I am intentionally not translating in order for the reader to '<u>hear</u>' the Hebrew convey its own message. This origin story is not an ancient biblical example of slavery that is comparable to any other historical experience of people being incarcerated for the purpose of a dominant people's economic benefit. The single word used in biblical Hebrew suggests that this community was freed from oppressive labor/service to become the original community called to eternal service/worship. These specific biblical passages are linked to ideas and ideals outside the issues of slaves and slavery.

One final consideration about the Hebrew word *Avodah* from Pirke Avot 1:2; quoting Shimon the Just, we learn that the world stands on three things: Torah, *Avodah* (on worship/service to God/the Temple service) and acts of gracious kindness. The passage is important to our critical reading because early rabbinic tradition is teaching that this word now describes the *purpose of biblical freedom, Avodah,* to/for God. Whatever worship will become without the sacrificial cult of the Temple, we will continue to teach that one of the three essential religious values of a new post-biblical Jewish life will be the *Avodah* that linked biblical Israel from the wilderness through two Temples to the new not yet developed rabbinic understanding of worship.

Beyond the origin story of Hebrew 'slavery' in Egypt, the contemporary reader has the more difficult challenge of the laws of slavery found in Exod 21:2-11; Lev 25:39-45; and Deut 15:12-18). These basically civil, rather than ritual laws describe an ancient culture in which slaves, men, women and children, were accepted elements of that socio-economic reality. These laws pertain to 'wife-slavery' and two different forms of 'debt-slavery', in which each category includes Israelites and non-Israelites. The biblical text includes social realities rejected today, like daughters sold by their fathers to be married into a new household which was often polygamous. The circumstances of 'debt-slavery' include the thief who is 'enslaved' by the court to pay his debt or a person whose lack of any resources require self-indentured service to

survive. "Knowledge of the social and legal realities of the ancient Near East, often available only through study of other cultures, such as those of Mesopotamia, are critical for a full understanding of the world of biblical law……" (Aaron Koller)

https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-hebrew-slave-reading-the-law-collections-as-complementary

A 21st century reader engages these biblical texts and demands a strong moral justification which then diminishes critical understanding. The contemporary scholarship about these passages all emphasize interdisciplinary contexts. "Academic biblical scholarship has argued that these collections were each compiled by different editors/authors, in different times and places in ancient Israelite history. Although all sources draw from Israelite common law—similar to the Ancient Near Eastern common law from which codes like *Hammurabi* and *Eshnuna* draw—the editor/author who penned each collection reflects a different historical and geographical perspective and has his own interpretation of what the law should be. (Zev Farber)

https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-hebrew-slave-exodus-leviticus-and-deuteronomy

Since Genesis frames the origins of all people are, we to ignore examples of the social reality of *slavery*? In the Genesis narrative of Abraham and the commandment of the *Brit Milah* (circumcision) we find an example of slaves. In Genesis 17:12-13 specifies that every male in the clan must be circumcised, the text uses two unique words in reference to male children, born into the clan or purchased. יְלִ֣יד בָּ֔יִת וּמִקְנַת־כֶּ֖סֶף מִכֹּ֣ל בֶּן־נֵכָ֑ר אֲשֶׁ֛ר לֹ֥א מִֽזַּרְעֲךָ֖ הֽוּא This is the initiation of the Hebrews as distinct from all other people yet among the males to be included requires the legal descriptions of '*home-born'* and '*purchased from an outsider'.*

Genesis also includes three women essential to the narrative, Hagar, Zilpah and Bilhah, 'handmaidens' given to Sarah, Leah and Rachel. The text is ambiguous about whether these women are considered *servants* with limited freedom and rights. Hagar is asked by Sarah to become Abraham's concubine in order to be a surrogate, have a male child, this produces Ishmael, the progenitor of Arabs and Islam. Zilpah and Bilhah are gifts from Laban to his daughters who in turn offer them to Jacob, and they produce four of the 12 sons/tribes of Israel, Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. In the text these sons seem to be valued less until Jacob's full line is listed and he blesses each. Could four of the tribes needed for the ancient community of

Israel be children of 'slaves'? Such narrative details add another dimension to the technical laws discussed above, confirming that this ancient community had fully embraced the reality of various categories of what we call 'slaves'

Twice in Deuteronomy the biblical text challenges 21st century readers by using the second person singular, 'remember *you were slaves/a slav*e in Egypt'.

וְזָכַרְתָּ֗ כִּ֣י **עֶ֤בֶד הָיִ֙יתָ֙** בְּאֶ֣רֶץ מִצְרַ֔יִם Bear in mind that *you were slaves *in the land of Egypt Deut 15:15

וְזָכַרְתָּ֗ כִּ֣י **עֶ֤בֶד הָיִ֙יתָ֙** בְּמִצְרָ֔יִם Remember that *you were a slave* in Egypt Deut 24:18

These verses are not part of the Exodus origin story nor directly related to the complex laws pertaining to slaves, but rather a means of opening history as an ethical stimulant. Our identity as Jews is anchored by the shared communal experience of having been slaves and our deliverance for the purpose of serving God. Hebrews/Israelites were an ancient people who somehow found themselves in a brutal existence of coerced labor, and they were freed/saved from this for a transcendent purpose of ethics and worship of a Unique Creator and Redeemer. Deuteronomy challenges every reader to stop and engage personally in a commanded memory, a past that is much easier to ignore when it was *'their'* history. The text challenges all who read, that each one of us was an *Oved*, coerced labor.

Contemporary scholarship about the Atlantic Slave Trade and the intense political demands provoked by headlines about white-supremacy and systemic racism require deliberate and critical thought. The biblical text has no direct answers to these historic agonies of the past, because there is nothing in the Torah that corresponds to this complex issues. The Deuteronomy texts require that we bear witness to this dark and different past not as described by contemporary political discourse, but as human beings required by Jewish tradition to seek an empathetic recognition of suffering as a timeless ethical burden.

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