

Slavery and Its Legacy

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Has truth become *treif*—that is, not kosher, not fit for consumption? We could be forgiven for thinking exactly that. Last month, in the Dallas area, “A top administrator with the Carroll Independent School District...advised teachers... that if they have a book about the Holocaust in their classroom, they should also offer students access to a book from an ‘opposing’ perspective.”ⁱ What first seemed like a horrifying example of Holocaust denial turned out to be more complicated. As explained by the Dallas Holocaust and Human Rights Museum, “This direction was given in response to the district’s struggle to comply with a new Texas law (known as HB 3979) that requires teachers who choose to discuss current events or widely debated and currently controversial issues of public policy and social affairs to strive to explore the topic from diverse and contending perspectives without giving deference to any one perspective. The district’s response illustrates the dangers of this new legislation – mandating that historical facts be taught alongside an opposing view.”ⁱⁱ

The target of the law, of course, is not Holocaust education, but lessons about racism and white supremacy and their lasting impact in America. Still, as the Dallas Holocaust and Human Rights Museum was quick to point out, an educator could be forgiven for imagining that, since she must provide “opposing views” of slavery and Jim Crow to spare the feelings of white students who might feel guilty, she may also be required to provide alternative ways of looking at the Holocaust to avoid getting in trouble with the same white supremacists who oppose honest teaching about American racism.

Millenia before the Holocaust, we Jews knew about slavery and its dehumanizing impact. Writing in *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*, Rabbi Esther Lederman explains a key narrative in this week’s Torah portion, *Vayeishev*: “Jacob favors Joseph, his first-born from his beloved Rachel. He showers his son with affection, most notably with a coat of multiple hues and colors. The brothers become jealous and one day hatch a plan to kill Joseph. Tempered by Judah’s caution, they throw him instead into an empty pit and then sell him into slavery through a wandering group of Ishmaelite traders.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Rabbi Lederman quotes Professor Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, who “argues, ‘The brothers’ crime remains throughout Jewish history as a kind of ineradicable original sin, with proliferating effects.’”^{iv} We can count off those aftershocks: When Moses comes to bring God’s freedom, enslaved Israelites are so resigned to

their fate that they reject the promise of liberation. Even after they are freed, the Israelites are mired in an enslaved mindset, to the point that God ultimately decides that they must wander forty years in the wilderness, while the previously enslaved generation dies and only their children enter the Promised Land. Egypt, then, is not the last place the Israelites are enslaved, as one exile after the next and persecutions down the centuries are all linked in the Jewish consciousness to our initial enslavement. We are viewed, and we view ourselves, as a perpetually persecuted people.

Rabbi Lederman asks us to look at the root of that initial enslavement of Joseph to grasp its pernicious impact. She points to this verse: “When the brothers saw that he[, Joseph,] was the one their father loved, more than any of his brothers, they hated him and could not bear to speak peaceably to him.”^v Rabbi Lederman offers the interpretation of the medieval commentator Sforno, who understands the verse to mean that the brothers would only talk business to Joseph, but would not “speak to him concerning any private matters, brotherly concerns.”^{vi} In other words, as Rabbi Lederman writes, “the relationship between Joseph and his brothers is purely transactional, built on maintaining the family business... They have no real relationship to speak of, no family intimacy, no sense of kinship and love.”^{vii}

Rabbi Lederman then turns to another commentator, Radak, who says the verse means that the brothers only talked to Joseph to engage in conflict; and a third, Rabbi Jacob ben Asher, who says that the brothers didn’t speak to Joseph at all, but only talked about him, denouncing him to strangers.^{viii} Rabbi Lederman summarizes, “These three commentaries highlight a trajectory that begins with isolation and continues through to hate... Rabbi Jonathan Sacks concludes, ‘As far as [the brothers] are concerned, there is no Joseph. They don’t recognize him... They never did. They never recognized him as one of them, as their father’s child, as their brother with an identity of his own and a right to be himself.’”^{ix}

Similarly, the enslavement of Black people in America was facilitated by seeing people of color much as Joseph’s brothers viewed him: Not of as children of the same father, unrelated, inferior, and less than fully human.

The time has come to tell the truth. Just as Joseph’s brothers enslaved him after dehumanizing him, so did white Americans enslave Black people whom they regarded as less than fully human. And slavery, which lasted for nearly two and a half centuries in this land, carried an impact long after the Emancipation Proclamation. White supremacy persisted, and with it came peonage—not merely “sharecropping,” but a new form of slavery, another being convict leasing, as states offered incarcerated Black people to landlords as enslaved servants. Jim Crow

perpetuated the violence done to black bodies; and Black people accused of crimes, often falsely, were lynched by the thousands, including right here in Arkansas. And lest we think white supremacy in America is a thing of the past, we need look no further than our prisons, where Black people face mass incarceration, not only disproportionate to their numbers but also to their crimes.

Meanwhile, legislatures across America, particularly in the South, continue to pass laws prohibiting schoolteachers from telling the truth about these generational crimes, the history and the present of slavery, America's original sin.

I conclude with Rabbi Lederman's final words: "When Cain says to God, 'Am I my brother's keeper?' God replies, 'Your brother's blood is shrieking to Me from the ground!' The blood of Joseph, as symbolized by the blood of the goat used by the brothers to cover up their crime, called out to Jacob as well. So too does the blood of sold, tortured, and lynched Black bodies call out to us from the soil of this country. Are we ready...to respond to Cain's eternal question, 'Am I my brother's keeper?' Yes. We are. We must be."^x

ⁱ Mike Hixenbaugh and Antonia Hylton, "Southlake School leader tells teachers to balance Holocaust books with 'opposing' views," *NBC News*, October 15, 2021, [Southlake school leader tells teachers to balance Holocaust books with 'opposing' views \(nbcnews.com\)](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/education/southlake-school-leader-tells-teachers-balance-holocaust-books-opposing-views-n1234567).

ⁱⁱ Statement on Carroll ISD Administrator, Dallas Holocaust and Human Rights Museum, October 15, 2021, [Statement on Carroll ISD Administrator - Dallas Holocaust and Human Rights Museum \(dhhrm.org\)](https://www.dhhrm.org)

ⁱⁱⁱ Rabbi Esther L. Lederman, "The 'Original Sin' of Slavery," *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*, Edited by Rabbi Barry H. Block, New York: CCAR Press, 2021, p. 53.

^{iv} *Ibid.*

^v Genesis 37:4.

^{vi} Lederman, p. 54, citing Sforno on Genesis 37:4.

^{vii} Lederman, p. 54.

^{viii} Lederman, pp. 54-55.

^{ix} Lederman, p. 55.

^x Lederman, p. 57.