Should Our Values be Made a Harlot?

View PDF



Gilah Kletenik from Seattle is a Senior at Stern College for Women. A board member of the Social Justice Society of Yeshiva University, she has spearheaded the Society's initiatives against human trafficking. This article appears in issue 2 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

I always took pride in the pervasiveness of the term “Tikkun Olam.” Of course, having been raised Orthodox, I was taught to resent the primacy other circles in Judaism granted social justice oriented *mitsvot*. I was told that this amounted to the implicit neglect of other more “real” Divine charges. This Orthodox critique of other denominations, while perhaps compelling, was not strong enough to undue the powerful messages I learned in *Tanakh* class. It was evident to me, as made clear by the prophets, that social justice was certainly a top Torah priority, no matter the modern socio-religious implications. With this understanding, I was drawn to carry the social justice banner with religious fervor and, not surprisingly, a smattering of self-righteousness as well. And, while we may have disagreed about the ideal balancing act between social justice oriented commandments and other *mitsvot*, it became clear that social justice was, in many respects, to most Orthodox Jews, a “pareve” cause. While other day-to-day *mitsvot* do in fact demand the usual attention, who can oppose efforts to feed the hungry and strides at upholding human dignity?

With this understanding I began to explore the burgeoning world of social justice opportunities – fair trade, Free Tibet, mosquito nets in sub-Saharan Africa, domestic violence, the plight of the Palestinian people, immigration, to name a few. Soon, matters became murkier and questions about the complexities of social justice and Judaism abounded. When my friends and I worked to reinvigorate the Social Justice Society at Yeshiva University, late nights were spent debating the hierarchies of our

efforts – Jews before non-Jews, Israel before other countries, New York before the rest of the world? *Agunot* or Darfur, the terror stricken youth of Sderot or the child soldiers of Uganda, microloans in Calcutta or Manhattan's homeless? The realization that we could not just open up the *Shulhan Arukh* and find an answer was even more frustrating. Although Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks' writings were great inspiration, we began to feel as if we were treading through unchartered waters. It became clear to us that these and other questions would never be fully resolved. Perhaps instead of bemoaning the fact that there was no clear-cut *assur* or *muttar* verdict, we ought to revel in the privilege to grapple with these issues hands-on. Eventually, these halakhic ambiguities empowered us to become the true masters of our deliberations; enabling us to own our decisions in a very real way.

The dearth of halakhic discourse on these matters of social justice gave us a lot of flexibility. It meant that there was significant openness in terms of the causes that we selected address. Moreover, it hindered outside criticism and dissension; if there were no straightforward instructions, we were free to explore as we pleased; nearly any position or cause was legitimate from a Torah perspective.

It soon became apparent, however, that there were other concerns beyond the purely halakhic that might hamper the Orthodox receptiveness of our social justice efforts. No one will accuse the Orthodox community of being anxious to learn about unpleasant truths. One case in point, which continues to raise eyebrows no matter how delicately the matter is broached, is the troubling state of the commercial sex industry in Israel.

Sex slavery, a global phenomenon, is categorized by the UN Palermo Protocol as a form of human trafficking. Trafficked persons are recruited by force or coercion and exploited in various ways. One form of exploitation is through sex and prostitution, which has come to be termed "sex slavery." The state of sex slavery in Israel is especially troubling; Israel's inaction in combating this injustice continues to compel the US State Department to give Israel poor marks in its annual Trafficking in Persons Report (TIP), which measures every country's anti-trafficking efforts. The TIP Report maintains that Israel is not in full compliance with international anti-trafficking standards and urges Israel to become more diligent in these efforts.

Due to the very clandestine nature of sex trafficking, the precise number of sex slaves in Israel is unknown. However, some estimates by the Israeli government maintain that there are 3,000 sex slaves in Israel, while NGOs approximate that 3,000 new sex slaves are illegally trafficked into Israel each year alone. Machon Toda'a Awareness Center reports that most of these sex slaves come from the former Soviet Union. In their countries of origin they are recruited by traffickers promising them that

low-paying jobs in the food, modeling and massage industries await them in Israel. These women are then trafficked into Israel through a variety of ways. Sometimes they are smuggled across the Israeli-Egyptian border, though due to increased security, this method has become less popular. Recently, traffickers have succeeded in smuggling women into Israel through seaports and even through Ben Gurion International Airport by using the stolen identities of Jewish women in the former Soviet Union .

According to the Task-Force on Human Trafficking, once in Israel, these exploited women are sold in auctions to pimps and brothel owners at a value between $5,000 and $10,000. At this point they serve as prostitutes, often paid little or nothing, are deprived of their rights, underfed, compelled to work 6-7 days a week, receiving between 15 and 20 clients each day, with whom they are forced to have unprotected sex. Many of these women end up locked into discrete apartments and brothels, left with little outside contact and often find themselves with no way out. In fact, there are approximately one million visits per month to prostitutes in Israel, to both sex slaves and non-sex slaves. For a population of not even seven million, this number is staggering.

The facts speak for themselves; the state of sex slavery in Israel is appalling. NGOs bemoan what they call the Israeli government's inaction and apathy in combating this pugnacious industry. Nevertheless, few, particularly Orthodox Jews, are willing to confront this reality. This hesitancy is often due to a confluence of concerns, specifically the issue's inescapably unsavory nature. Beyond this, however, the conventional approach is to shy away from criticism of the State of Israel, especially if coming from a Diaspora Jew. Further, some claim, why focus specifically on Israel, when in fact sex slavery is an international injustice? Having taken on this issue, my colleagues in the YU Social Justice Society and I are intimately familiar with these concerns. And yet, it seems that precisely for these reasons – that it is distasteful and especially insidious in Israel – sex slavery ought to be a top priority of the Orthodox community.

Sex slaves are forced into having unwanted sex. They are essentially the victims of rape. Rape is undeniably a uniquely horrific phenomenon, the veracity of which is emphasized by the Torah. The Torah is arguably progressive in its redress to the incidence of rape; calling for the rapist to marry the victim. While perhaps traumatic for her, this in a sense protects the victim, insuring that her basic necessities will be met. On a more conceptual level, the *Tanakh* appears to go out of its way to record incidences of rape. Three rapes in particular, that of Dinah by the hands of Shekhem, the Concubine at Gibeah and Amnon's rape of Tamar, are recorded in detail. Given that the *Tanakh* is selective with its

words, the attention it accords rape is very suggestive. Perhaps because of rape's insalubrious nature, the Torah accords it particular attention, urging us to overcome our own discomfort. This is, in a sense, a wake-up call to address rape; to confront sex slavery head-on.

While the *Tanakh's* unprecedented regard for rape speaks volumes, the details of these episodes are even more powerful and instructive. In the narrative of Dinah's rape, the action or inaction of the characters is particularly poignant. Dinah is completely passive, she has no voice. She is the victim of Shekhem who "took her and raped her" (Gen. 34: 2). Jacob too is entirely passive, he learns of the rape, yet does not react. Instead, due to his inaction, Simeon and Levi take action by cunningly massacring the city's men. Their response is a violent, calculated, emotional one.

In the story of Dinah's rape the complexities of responding to sexual coercion emerge. Jacob does nothing, "he kept silent" (Gen. 34: 5), whereas Simeon and Levi take matters into their own hands, and are later chastised by Jacob for doing so. And yet, their motivations are recorded, suggesting that they were not misplaced, for, as they declare, "should our sister be treated as a harlot?" (Gen. 34: 31).

The episode of the Concubine at Gibeah begins with the book's recurring phrase "in those days when there was no king in Israel" (Jud. 19: 1). This prelude sets the stage for what will transpire, suggesting that not only did these occurrences happen because there was no king, but that because of this leadership vacuum, their was no legal recourse for the victims. Instead, the victim, or her memory, must be defended by personal initiative.

In this narrative, the Concubine, like Dinah, has no voice. Rather, the Lodger, in an act eerily similar to Lot in Sodom, gives over his own daughter and his guest's Concubine to the mob instead of ceding the Concubine's master, the Levite. The Concubine is then raped by the mob and consequently dies on the doorstep the following morning. Her master, in response to the rape, cuts her body up into twelve separate pieces, sending a piece to each tribe. "Everyone who saw it cried out 'Never has such a thing happened … Put your mind to this; take counsel and decide.'" (Jud. 19:30). The Levite, like Simeon and Levi, responds to the rape emotionally, violently, which eventually leads to the extermination of the tribe of Benjamin.

The rape of Tamar is more layered than those of Dinah and the Concubine. Amnon's actions are clearly premeditated and the rape itself is incestuous. Further, unlike Dinah and the Concubine, Tamar has a voice and cleverly, albeit unsuccessfully, tries to dissuade Amnon from raping her. In the aftermath of the rape, David, like Jacob remains silent. Absalom, Tamar's brother, follows in the footsteps Simeon and Levi, responding violently, a response that leads to more bloodshed and the

eventual undoing of David's throne.

What emerges from these three rape narratives is the thorniness of responding to the crime of rape. It seems that none of these responses are ideal – neither the silence of Jacob and David nor the violence of Simeon and Levi, the Levite and Absalom. And yet, as a community, in responding to the tragedy of sex slavery, we remain silent, passive and inactive. Perhaps its time for us to internalize the *Tanakh's* message and actively confront this vile reality.

People often ask me why I've chosen to devote time, through my work with the Task-Force on Human Trafficking, to combating sex slavery particularly in Israel. They also wonder about the denigration of Israel implicit in my efforts. These questions frequently transport me to the many hours we've passed in the Social Justice Society deliberating about the prioritization and hierarchies of our advocacy. Though we may never arrive at a conclusion, our unique connection and responsibility towards Israel is evident, especially in matters of sexual coercion. The Torah itself identifies the distinctive link between the heinousness of prostitution and Israel's sanctity. "Do not degrade your daughter and make her a harlot, lest the land fall into harlotry and the land be filled with depravity" (Lev. 20:29). While sex slavery is indeed a global problem, as Jews, we have a distinctively religious, moral responsibility to combat this evil especially in the Holy Land. And, while these efforts may suggest a somewhat unfavorable view of the State of Israel, is it better to stand idly by in silence?

I still believe that the Orthodox community does value Tikkun Olam. However, as I've discovered through my anti-sex slavery advocacy, and efforts in the Social Justice Society, there is often a discord between our theoretical regard for these issues and our ability to effectively translate these beliefs into action. The challenge is to help ourselves hear the cry of the prophets to "speak truth to one another, render true and perfect justice in your gates" (Zech. 8:16), with the comparable immediacy we approach the bugs in our broccoli. In so doing we ought to facilitate conversations that may not be palatable to the typical Orthodox ear, to embrace even the unsavory, to be critical of ourselves and our homeland. Let it not be said that we have made a harlot of our values.