

The Plague of Moral Alienation

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On the night of March 25, 1861—less than three weeks before the start of the Civil War—American Jews in the Confederacy gathered in their homes to celebrate Passover. It is likely, historians say, that some of them were served at their seder tables by slaves.

The idea of it is appalling and absurd. But Rabbi Dr. Lance Sussman, an historian of American Jewry, said it wasn't until the Civil War that many Confederate Jews came to see slavery as wrong.¹

And Jewish support for slavery in America was not limited to the South.

In January of 1861, in New York City, Rabbi Morris Raphall gave an infamous sermon defending slavery on biblical grounds. "[S]laveholding is no sin," he declared, "and...slave property is expressly placed under the protection of the Ten Commandments."²

It's baffling to me that any Jew could endorse slavery. But they did live in a society that sacralized slavery—and we are deeply influenced by our environment.

Maybe they were just too immersed in Southern culture, too invested in the slave economy, too entranced by the ideology.

But the consequence was profound moral alienation.

They might have recited the Haggadah, but they were deaf to its message.

Moral alienation has plagued us before. Listen to the prophet Isaiah condemn our ancestors for focusing on ritual observance while tolerating moral corruption in society:

*Your new moons and fixed seasons
fill Me with loathing;
they are become a burden to Me,
I cannot endure them.
And when you lift up your hands,
I will turn My eyes away from you;
though you pray at length,
I will not listen.
Your hands are stained with crime.
(Isaiah 1:13-15)*

God sent the prophet to rebuke them not because they *knew* they were doing wrong, but because they believed they were doing *right*.

The *Shem MiShmuel*, an early 20th-century Hasidic master, teaches that we suffered the same kind of moral alienation in Egypt. Even as slaves, we were so immersed in the materialism, the power-worship, and the moral depravity of Egyptian culture that we became spiritually corrupted.

"As long as we were in the darkness of exile," he says, "we could not sense just how far we had strayed from the true path. ...Although we had sunk to the 49th level of impurity, each person was righteous in his own eyes."³

But the Exodus changed everything.

"On that first day of Pesach," he says, "a great light poured over them from above...and they saw the truth of their existence."

In the light of God, they realized how far they had fallen into the depths of immorality, and "their hearts were broken."

Like our ancestors, we, too, have sunk low in the darkness.

- We have turned a blind eye to public corruption and thievery.
- We have sat quietly as the state amasses power, tramples on pluralism, and undermines our Constitutional rights.
- We have accepted outrageous violations of Jewish morality as the price of pro-Israel policies.
- We have become "gross and coarse" (*Deut.* 32:15), emulating the bravado, the disdain, and the indignity of our leaders in our own speech.
- We have revered power and money instead of integrity and character.

We might think we're on a fine path, but in truth our "hands are stained with crime." And the moral injury to our souls is greater than we know.

In 1861, after reading Rabbi Raphall's pro-slavery sermon, the legendary Reform Rabbi David Einhorn was aghast:

"Would it not then be justly said...Such are the Jews!" He asked. "Where they are oppressed, they boast of the humanity of their religion; but where they are free, their Rabbis declare slavery to have been sanctioned by God (!)..."

Einhorn demanded that the Jewish community repudiate Raphall's view loudly, "if it does not want itself and Judaism branded forever."

Rabbi Einhorn's words call out to us across time:

How have we fallen this far?

How can our hearts not be broken?

On Wednesday night, we will gather at our seder tables to tell the story—including the part about how “[our] father was a fugitive Aramean. He went down to Egypt with meager numbers and sojourned there, but...the Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us. ...We cried to Adonai...and Adonai heard our plea and saw our plight, our misery, and our oppression.”
(*Deut. 26:5-7*)

Can we tell this story in good conscience without doing our part to help modern-day asylum-seekers who are being “dealt with harshly” by the state?

Can we recline in freedom while our government builds mass detention centers around the country, and shuffles prisoners under the cover of night from one place to the next to deprive them of their legal rights?

We are commanded to be like God, who hears the cry of the oppressed. Can we allow it to be said that American Jews ignored the cries of the human beings living in terror from ICE?

Not unless, to quote Rabbi Einhorn, “we want ourselves and Judaism branded forever.”

Come with me to the protest tomorrow at noon in Port Washington. Let’s stand up together for what’s right.

We have lived under a cloud of moral darkness for a decade, but Passover promises to shine a light on the truth.

May it help us find our way out of this pit and become worthy of our Covenant with God once again.

1 See Sue Eisenfeld, “Passover in the Confederacy,” *The New York Times*, April 17, 2014.

2 Rabbi Morris Raphall, “The Bible View of Slavery,” January 4, 1861, <http://www.jewish-history.com/civilwar/raphall.html>.

3 *Shem MiShmuel*, Passover 1.