



Today's destitute 'slaves' who need our help

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Comment

As we sat down last week around our Seder tables to re-enact the story of our redemption from Egypt, we had the opportunity to reflect on modern-day slavery. Poverty and destitution are forms of slavery because they make us powerless and deprive us of the chance to exercise control over our lives. Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg recently remarked that he was horrified that destitute asylum seekers have to exist on £5 a week. That was, he said, less than he spends on care of his dog.

Jewish tradition is quite emphatic about the indignity of poverty. "No trouble is harder to bear than poverty. If all other troubles were placed on one side and poverty on the other, poverty would outweigh them all" (Exodus Rabbah 31:14).

A recent report produced by the New North London Synagogue's Drop-in Centre for Destitute Asylum Seekers, in conjunction with the charity PAFRAS (Positive Action for Refugees and Asylum Seekers), detailed the horrendous conditions experienced by destitute asylum seekers, estimated to be around a half-a-million people. The report includes the voices of the people themselves. Hamid, a 28 year old from Iran is one such voice:

"I have slept in parks, on buses, in phone boxes, in an old broken car. Often it's too cold to stay asleep and I wake up every hour through the night. When it rains, I wake up every 15 minutes. One night feels like a year".

Hamid is just one out of thousands of refused asylum seekers who are currently living in destitution in the UK. As soon as their claim is deemed to have failed, the government cuts off all support. As a result, they have nowhere to live and no money for food or clothing or any of the basic necessities of life. This can go on for months or even years. There are two exceptions to this rule: families with children and those people whom the government accepts currently cannot return home.

The NNLS/PAFRAS report reveals that many asylum seekers are sleeping outdoors and almost half go one or more days without eating. A third of the women interviewed

who were sleeping outside have been raped or sexually assaulted. Many have lost family members to conflicts in their home countries and 70 per cent have been tortured or fled widespread human-rights violations. Almost all of those questioned for the report came from wealthy, professional backgrounds. They have become non-persons.

Many asylum seekers know they have a strong case, despite being refused. In 2007, nearly 50 per cent of all refused asylum seekers were from Zimbabwe, Iran, Iraq, Sudan, Afghanistan, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Eritrea — all countries where there is conflict. The government has not removed Zimbabweans from the UK since 2006 because it is too dangerous to do so. If refused asylum seekers who cannot go back home through no fault of their own were allowed to work, rather than depend on handouts, they could support themselves and their families and consequently contribute to society.

Forcing asylum seekers into destitution in order to make them leave Britain is immoral and affects thousands of people. Such a policy is not only cruel and degrading but is not conducive to social cohesion.

The events of 3,000 years ago in Egypt, when we were the outsiders, have become an indelible part of Jewish history. In 2009 there are many more outsiders, human beings living on the margins of society. The injunction at the Seder to “let all who are hungry come and eat” can of course be taken on different levels. To keep faith with our redemption from Egypt, one level must be that we remember such people not only in our thoughts but, more importantly, in our actions.

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