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RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP AND TRAFFIC IN WOMEN

In recent years, I have learned to take bafflement as an important cue. When something baffles me, I know now not to push it aside as was so comfortable to do; but rather, to look at it squarely in the eye. And so it is with the matter of religious leadership and the scourge of traffic in women: where on this issue is the rabbi, the priest, the imam, the monk?

Although my question concerns religious leadership of every faith community, my greatest bafflement is reserved for my own religious leaders, for I know what our tradition teaches regarding traffic in women. I know that this crime violates three core principles of Judaism.

Let me begin at the beginning, with the explicit commandment against sexual trafficking in the Torah. For Jews, the Torah is the revealed word of God and the source of all ethics and morality. In, Leviticus, the third book of the Torah, we find a segment referred to as the holiness code (chapter 19). It contains a wide range of commandments that reflect the central and core teachings of the Torah, and it begins with the evocative and powerful exhortation by God to the nation: "you must be holy for I am holy." To give you a sense of the weight this chapter carried, here are some of the laws: You shall revere mother and father; keep the Sabbath; not turn to idols; not pick your vineyard bare but leave the gleanings for the poor and the stranger; do not steal or deal deceitfully; do not take God's name in vain; do not insult the deaf or place a stumbling block before the blind; do not render an unjust decision, by favoring the poor or showing deference to the rich but rather judge your kinsmen fairly; do not profit by the blood of your fellow man; love your neighbor as yourself; do not eat the blood of an animal; show deference to the elderly; do not wrong a stranger in your land; do not falsify measures. So central were these laws to the life of the community that this section was read aloud to the entire congregation.

Embedded in the holiness code is an explicit law against traffic, "Do not defile your daughter by selling her into harlotry, and do not defile the land lest the land be filled with depravity."(19:29)

The Torah was not at all prudish when it came to sex. In fact the first

commandment, "Be fruitful and multiply", and the first story of Adam and Eve, (though skewed from a feminist perspective) are about the naturalness of sex relationships. Judaism teaches that the body and soul are interconnected and that violation of one's body diminishes the image of God in which all human beings are created. The Torah knew whereof it spoke: in reading the testimony of these hapless victims of traffickers, one can see not only how their lives have been shattered but also how their very souls have been destroyed.

The second violation is that of slavery. When sexuality is part and parcel of one's self identity, the loss of control over one's sexuality is equal to a loss of freedom, i.e., enslavement.

In truth, slavery was permitted in the Bible but with very tight restrictions around it. It was not long before slavery was abolished altogether in Judaism. Yet, even where slavery did exist in ancient Biblical times, the sexuality of a female slave was protected by law. In the Torah we learn that a father was permitted to sell a young daughter as a slave to another Israelite and that often this was done out of poverty or indebtedness. But when the slave girl reached marriageable age, the master was required to do one of three things: marry her himself, take her as a wife for his son, or allow her to go free (Exodus 21:11ff). He could also pledge her to another Israelite who would redeem her with a payment to her first master, but her new master was required to keep her as a wife, and not as sexual property. In other words, her sexuality remained intact even as a slave and even if she was transferred as a slave was to another man. The laws were clearly intended to eliminate any possibility of sexual traffic in slave girls and women.

In contrast, trafficked women of today are much more vulnerable than slave women of ancient society. Reports from the victims of the sex slave trade show that they are beaten, raped, robbed, bought and sold, held in debt bondage, held against their will, under constant supervision, with no control over how much they must work, living with tremendous fear, suffering physical punishment if they try to escape; all of the classic attributes of the worst kind of slavery.

A third violation is the law against kidnaping. This law is one of the Ten Commandments. The sixth commandment declares, "Thou shalt not steal." The rabbis of the Talmud interpret the second decalogue that appears in the book of Deuteronomy to refer to stealing human life or

kidnaping. Trafficked women are kidnaped women, lured through trickery of the marketeers who promise them or their parents lucrative waitress or hairdresser jobs. Many of the victims are girls who have been snatched away in outright theft, disappearing from their homes and families and streets never to be heard from again.

Thus, three major transgressions are committed in the crime of trafficking in women. From what we know of the victim lives and stories, we could easily assign a fourth: "Thou shall not murder". Their stories inform us of the extent to which the will to live is destroyed. Even where the will to live remains intact, there is no physical protection for them and often they contract sexually transmitted diseases which end their lives prematurely.

But there is one more powerful connection that the Torah makes that must figure into any deliberation on the subject, the link between sexual trafficking and the quality of life for society at large. "Do not defile your daughter to sell her into harlotry and do not defile the land lest it be filled with depravity." The Torah understood this sexual perversion on a cosmic level, as changing the very order of nature and society. The idea of the pollution of the land through this crime infers that not only are body and soul interconnected but so too are human beings and nature interconnected, individual and society. Thus, sex crimes destroy individual spirit and body and pull down everything else with them: polluting the land, driving out holiness, and threatening the very covenantal relationship upon which Judaism is based, for God will distance God's self from a human community that exhibits such sexual depravity.

Now to return to my bafflement: given the sheer weight of the tradition against such a crime, given the enormous emphasis on sexual purity and holiness that we find throughout Torah and tradition, given the commitment of religious leaders to the sanctity and integrity of family life, I must ask the question: Where are the rabbis? Why do they not speak out? I am part of the Orthodox community. How many Orthodox rabbis have ever addressed this subject from the pulpit? How many have devoted to it a single sermon? Not one that I know of.

Where are the ministers, priests, clerics, monks? With the exceptional few who have taken the initiative to enter these troubled waters, there is virtual silence on the issue.

I believe that there are several reasons why clergy do not get involved. One is that it is not the people in the pews who deal with this issue, the good and moral citizens of society. It is unlikely that such lowlifes will find themselves in any assembly of decent people, and the pimps and traffickers don't come around for personal advice. Secondly, it takes enormous time to hear the stories and absorb the pain. Listening to Marco Gramegna's summary moments ago, even though I had read the report on the plane this morning, even though I had dealt with the issue last week in preparing this paper, I found myself wanting to flee this room, to cover my ears, so wrenching are the facts. Third, religious leaders are overloaded with all of the crises that unravel relatively intact families. So their attitude is one of 'let the feminists handle this one', or 'let the lawmakers and judges and police deal with it'.

Yet each of us is set down on earth to be responsible for the moral fabric of society, not only our own lives but whole societies in which we live. Each of us is given a gift in that we are entitled to make moral judgements and follow through on these judgements with our actions. But some are invested with greater moral authority than others. These are our chosen religious leaders and they simply may not turn away. If sexual trafficking is as grave a sin as the tradition communicates, if this is as grave a social sin as I feel in my bones, then the moral leaders must be present, vocal, pro-active on the issue. They can and should play a large role. They should be at the forefront, taking up the challenge to saving the souls and bodies, protecting society and cleansing it.

What can they do?

Religious leaders cannot directly stop the criminals; those indeed are jobs for the courts, judges, and police. But these crimes could not take place, I believe, without a neutral public, the bystanders. In speaking out, religious leaders will have an impact on the rest of society, on the bystanders, on ordinary good people. And there are many bystanders: the landlords, taxi drivers, dress shop owners, manicurists, travel agents, and their relatives, all perfectly nice people. They must understand that what they shield their eyes from is not simply dirty business but death dealing activities.

Secondly, these women need enormous amounts of help to rehabilitate themselves. They need help from social workers and activist organizations and their families. They need as wide an arc of help as they

can get. Religious leaders should take them under a sheltering wing, teach them that life is redeemable, no matter how far one has fallen, no matter how severely victimized or compromised. Their lives are not over; they can do teshuva. Teshuva is a Jewish concept that means repentance through the act of turning oneself around. The victims can do teshuva, not in the sense of repentance for they are not the guilty ones, but in the sense of turning their lives around. Some of these victims feel so hopeless and so compromised that they believe life holds out no other choice to them; that all options and paths are cut off, that they are consigned to this base and vile existence as long as they breathe. But a person of God can teach them to choose life; a religious leader can lift their spirits and give them hope. Since time immemorial, religious leaders have served sinners in this way. How much more so for victims of this unspeakable crime. It should not be below the dignity of religious leaders to come to a brothel, with an entourage, and with the full prestige of the office to talk to young women who are so dispirited that they do not even know how to turn for help. Consider what a statement such a visit would make in the surrounding environs about the inadmissibility of this way of life and the intolerance of this crime.

Third, the religious leader can serve also as intercessor with family. Many of these girls and women cannot go back to their families for they are held in contempt by them and they feel enormous shame themselves. We know that even when they are deported back to their native countries, they often don't go home but find ways to escape the route that would take them back to their families. They know the walls of altogether normal sensibilities that have been built up. They know what unwelcome awaits them.

Yet, the same argument that God can accept one as beginning with a clean slate — can speak to families who somewhere beneath all the emotional debris of anger and disdain, long for the embrace of their child or sibling. To recover the nurturing bonds of family is most significant; there are ways that families can give of themselves that don't compromise values but rather help heal the wounds all around. Who better than a religious leader can help to open the torn and scarred hearts of a family?

Fourth, the religious community should be educated to care for those women who have no other support systems of which to avail themselves. Just as places of worship lead the way in caring for the homeless, so

should members of religious communities be encouraged to touch escapees of that underworld that is frightening to ordinary folk. Shelters and half way houses under the canopy of synagogues, churches and temples and mosques could restore life and save lives.

Fifth, though of less direct impact but of greater significance for the future, religious leaders should take up the general cause of women's equality, and the end of hierarchy between genders. The problem of traffic in women is connected to the age old problem whereby women's bodies are viewed as the property of men. So leaders of religious communities today should be at the forefront of the move to eliminate all forms of gender discrimination, all slurs, put downs, macho jokes, sexist rhetoric — whatever demeans the class of women. That some men in Africa, or in other parts of the world for that matter, can throw acid into the faces of women who resist their advances is but an extension of the attitude of perceiving women as mere chattel, there but to do men's will. To the extent that our religious leaders can usher in a new worldwide order in which women will feel self esteem and men will view them as beings created in the image of God with equal respect and dignity, to that extent we will diminish the problem of traffic in women in future generations.

Sixth, religious leaders must lend their moral weight to the cultural task in redefining the nature of this crime. It is likely that prostitution will not end, but traffic in women must be put on a different plane altogether, on the plane of slavery, murder, kidnaping. The crime of traffic should be seen as a crime against God, a crime that destroys the image of God in another human being. In Judaism, incest is a crime for which one must martyr oneself rather than be forced to commit. That is how grave it is. So too should sexual trafficking in women be given the same moral weight.

The effect of redefining traffic would have an influence on the way cases are handled by the police and in the courts, which is often sloppily. Redefining the crime would also impact on the countries or states that have signed the instruments designed to repair the problem but have not yet adequately implemented them. Religious leaders can make a real difference in assigning value and creating definition.

Were I to end here, all of this would be nothing more than empty words, because the way religious leadership has worked through the centuries is in tandem with their laities. An exceptional few take the initiative to enter into such murky waters as the traffic in women

represents. And why should they, for their constituencies are quite clean on such matters. Yet, believing as I do that the spiritual leadership can have a great impact on elimination of trafficking, I know that they must be drafted to the cause. Vested with a unique moral authority, they can achieve things that politicians and lawyers cannot. But they must be drawn into the process by activists who would otherwise not think to turn to them, precisely because these two worlds are so separate, the one of noble behaviors and the other of base acts. It behooves the community of those ethical people who give their lives to ending this horrible crime, to turn to those more distant from it on a day to day basis. Religious leaders should be invited to participate in the plotting of actions, in reaching out, in the dissemination of knowledge. Conferences should be convened inviting the highest echelons of religious leadership; meetings should be scheduled, visits arranged and the like. It is only when the community of activists is brought together with religious leadership that we will begin to see a whole new and productive source of energy to attack this problem.

It goes without saying that the basis of traffic is often economic, — parents selling one child to pay off debts or feed a whole family; or economic in the sense of entrepreneurial pimps running lucrative businesses. It also goes without saying that the problem must be attacked then from an economic war on poverty, from a redistribution of wealth, from the absence of hunger and the illnesses of very poor people unable to help themselves in a hard world.

But we cannot wait until the economy straightens itself out and everyone is able to find a chicken in the pot. We cannot wait because to do so means that many more young girls and women will suffer this death of life in our and their lifetimes. Religious leaders must be brought more fully into the enterprise now, today, yesterday. If they join, it will be a blessing for all of us, perhaps most of all for 14 year old Lin, who lies now on a dirty cot in rags, ill with HIV, her fancy red satin dress and high heels in the corner. Or for 19 year old Nada, now in hiding, in terror that the only person formally responsible for her, the man who holds her passport and her savings, will find and beat her again. This is the real trauma, the sense of violation, of loss, abandonment, separation, defilement, and despair.

If we forge the right coalitions and do the right work, it will mean that

they will not have told their stories in vain. Together, religious leaders, lay persons of good will, and activists will remember never to forget these forgotten souls, and never to take leave of them wherever they are.