

## THE INVISIBILITY OF MODERN SLAVERY

A commentary on *Parashat V'Zot Haberachah*  
By Elliot Steinberg

*“This is the blessing with which Moses, the man of G-d, blessed the children of Israel before his death”  
Dvarim 33:1*

The first line of this week's *Parashat V'Zot Haberachah*, the last in the yearly cycle of Torah readings, speaks of the entirety of the following Chapter as one blessing to the entire nation. Yet the Chapter systematically offers numerous different blessings, one for each tribe. For the tribe of Reuven, Moses blesses life (and presumably fruitfulness) given the tribe's few numbers. For Joseph, he blesses *“his land with the bounty of the dew from heaven...with the bounteous yield of the sun and the bounteous crop of the moon...the bounty of the earth and its fullness”*. He blesses Zevulun's journeys, and Isaachar's tents. He blesses Gad with strength and ferocity and Asher with security. Each tribe is blessed with something unique, and yet each blessing is designed to strengthen the whole. These blessings are in essence the foundation for the children of Israel to be able to live freely once they cross into their own land, and they are all necessary for this to be achievable.

In order to live freely and properly in their own land, the Children of Israel need food security (Joseph's blessing), safe places to live (Isaachar's blessing), self-confidence and strength (Dan and Gad's blessing) as well as the others listed in the *Parasha*. Indeed, *Dvarim* 33 ends that with these blessings *“Israel dwells in safety, untroubled is Jacob's abode”*. These securities are vital to our freedom and without them, it is easy to be manipulated, entrapped and enslaved. Too often we take the blessings listed by Moses for granted, and are not aware when they are not enjoyed by others.

Modern slavery is one of the most pressing issues of our time, largely because

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of its invisibility. For most people, slavery is a relic of the past and ended with the abolition of the slave trade. The act of enslaving someone is illegal in almost all modern states, and yet that does not mean that people are not enslaved. Similarly, in Torah most people would see the moment of leaving Egypt to be the moment of gaining freedom, and yet what we are shown here is that there need to be securities in place for true freedom to be possible.

All it takes is a small change in circumstances to become vulnerable to enslavement. For Sophie, a British woman who was trafficked to Italy to work on the streets, she put her trust in someone that she should not have, and was too afraid to leave for threats made to her family. For Hai, a Vietnamese boy trafficked to Britain to grow marijuana, the lack of opportunity to earn money in Vietnam caused him to look for work elsewhere, something that traffickers prey upon.

Modern slavery is purposefully difficult to spot and operates through vast, highly-organised networks. And yet we are able to fight it in two key ways. The first is to be aware of what goes on in our communities. Look out for things that don't feel right or may suggest trafficking or slavery and notify the police or enforcement agencies. The second is to put pressure on companies, manufacturers and governments to ensure that the securities that people need to feel free are universally available, because at its root slavery will always be possible where there are people vulnerable to be enslaved.

That the blessings offered to all of the tribes are considered as one blessing in the first verse shows their interconnectedness, and the responsibility of everyone to share their own blessings for the benefit of the whole and look out for the needs of others.

As we finish this *Parasha*, we immediately loop back to the beginning of the Torah so as not to leave space in the cycle. It connects our responsibility for society and to one another with the beginning of creation, and our ability to live as free people to the way in which we relate to the world around us.

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