

CHALLENGING HEIGHTS 2011

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I discovered that there are people who are enslaved in the 21st century. This difficult lesson was learned this past summer when fifteen other rabbis and I spent ten days at Challenging Heights, an organization dedicated to eliminating modern-day child slavery. We were on a service and learning trip sponsored by the American Jewish World Service (AJWS), which supports grass roots projects like this one in the Global South. Challenging Heights was founded by a remarkable man, James Kofi Annan.

As he recalls his experience, the fear, the pain, the misery are still palpable. “I was forced to dive under the boat to try and dislodge the fishing net which had gotten caught in the gnarled roots of the mangrove trees. Two children had been sent before me, neither of whom had come back up. They had drowned, but that did not stop my slave master from sending me down too. I was terrified but took the plunge. I saw the bodies of the other boys entangled in the net. I pulled at the net and it tore. I knew I would get a severe beating, but I was out of air so, with my final breath, I rose to the top. The canoe had shifted, and my head smashed against the hull, rendering me unconscious. When I awoke, I was covered with blood, my slave masters burning peppers to bring me back to consciousness. That was all the medical treatment I received.”



This testimony is from a man who was a child slave, not in the 19th century, but today, when child slavery still exists around the world. James Kofi Annan was the youngest of 12 children. He grew up in an extremely poor fishing village in the West African country of Ghana. There, people are barely able to survive, much less feed the ten to twelve children most families have. Desperate, parents sell their children – as young as four years of age – to traffickers and to fishermen for forty dollars. Illiterate for the most part, these parents do not see many other alternatives. By selling a child, families not only have one less mouth to feed, and cash in hand, they assume their child will learn a trade.



Unfortunately, the trade is learned through inhumane treatment and a disregard for life. Indeed, if the first two children who were sent ahead of James to retrieve the net, ended up drowning, why would James' masters send yet another child down into the dangerous waters? Because a child is bought for forty dollars, whereas the net costs two hundred. Becoming entangled in a fishing net is the number one cause of death for these children.

James was sold at the age of 6. His day began at 3 AM and ended 17 hours of extremely difficult work later. Once a day, he was given carbohydrates to eat. Beatings were a daily



routine and physical torture ensued from making a mistake. Sexual abuse was not uncommon. There was, of course, no medical care, and the children all got sick from drinking the water from a river used for many other purposes. The boys developed an affliction making it painful to urinate thereafter. Escaping was virtually impossible and those who were caught were dealt with ruthlessly. In this kind of environment, when the boys are old enough to stand up for themselves, they become the child traffickers and the slave masters, ensuring a vicious and cruel cycle.

James was different. He was determined to escape and he succeeded at age 13.



He broke the cycle, deciding to get an education, the first one in his family to do so. He returned to his village, but was rejected by his father as well as by the entire community. Despite these incredible odds, he not only began elementary school at the age of 13, supporting himself financially with various odd fishing jobs, he excelled, holding the record for best student, a record that had not been broken for 20 years. He then went on to high school, an hour and a half walk each way, where he also excelled despite the taunts from the other students and despite the severe caning he received when he wrote a French exam with the answers he had memorized for a class on environmental studies.

Where did someone like James get even an inkling about the value of education? He credits his mother with harboring a dream that one day one of her children would learn English. That dream, seemingly so small and so simple, propelled her son to seek a different life for himself, his family, and his community. Because James eventually became a manager at Barclays Bank, but he did not stop there. He put 60 percent of his salary into founding Challenging Heights, an organization dedicated to helping children lead a better life.



It is estimated that there are 1.3 million children in Ghana who are engaged in child labor. Challenging Heights is determined to end this practice, and is involved in a number of activities, including rescuing and rehabilitating children from slavery, and providing children in the

community with an education so that they will have greater opportunities to thrive in the future. Parents are also educated about the value of schooling their children, and women



are taught about micro-financing in order to strengthen the family's economic resources.



We were in Ghana to help build a computer center for the elementary school. You may wonder: What were 16 rabbis doing lifting bricks and laying mortar, especially since it was quite clear to us that the Ghanaian workers could have gotten the job done far more efficiently without us? And, as Americans, is James' problem and that of these children also our problem?



Perhaps we can gain insight from a Chasidic¹ story about twins who went separate ways in life. One twin becomes king, his brother slips into poverty and becomes a robber. When the robber is caught and hanged, the townspeople think it is the king. So the king, fearing for his reputation, has his twin's body removed from the scaffold. The lesson drawn from this tale by one of the rabbis on our trip is that there IS no other – the other is me, and until I can see the reflection of God's spark in every other human being, the world will not be redeemed.²



In the same vein, the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. once famously said in a 1961 speech: "All life is interrelated. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. As long as there is poverty in this world, no one can be totally rich; as long as diseases are rampant and millions of people cannot expect to live more than 20 or 30 years, no one can be totally healthy... I can

¹ From the mystical tradition.

² This story and insight provided by Rabbi Eric Yanoff.

never be what I ought to be until you are who you ought to be. And you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be.”

The other question I asked was: What were sixteen rabbis doing lifting bricks and laying mortar? Surely, the Ghanaian workers alongside whom we labored, could have gotten the job done much faster without a group of unskilled rabbis awkwardly trying to figure out what we were supposed to do! In the end, it was not so much our skill that we contributed but the fact



that we were there in the first place, showing that we cared, and serving as witnesses both to the deprivation all around us and to the hope that was generated by the courage and the vision of James Kofi Annan. I want to share what I witnessed in order to shed light on a corner of the world that is too often obscured by distance, indifference, and the media’s appetite for sensational news. I hope we are able to really feel the pain that James and other child slaves



have endured and continue to endure. And I want us to marvel at and become inspired by a man like James who was able to forgive his father and even support him in his old age. From a man like James who began with nothing, but whose motto is: “To whom much is given, much is expected.” We, who are so fortunate and so privileged, must insist on the humanity of those who are so bereft. We must also acknowledge that they are capable of developing solutions to their problems to which we must give support.

To do this, we can donate and work for organizations such as AJWS that sustain the locally-initiated and future-building work of people like James. As Sasha Dichter, who runs a non-profit venture that invests in enterprises that fight poverty in the developing world, suggests: “the greatest gifts are those that create a relationship of equals between the donor and the recipient. Otherwise, the gift can create subservience or obligation, can undermine the dignity of the recipient, and can keep the recipient subjugated to the giver and in a constant position of need.”³



May James' story remind us that we are all made in the image of God.
May James' story serve as a lesson on the endurance and brilliance of the human spirit.
And may James' story help us to realize that we are all capable of scaling challenging heights.



Photos by Rabbi Suzanne Singer. “Challenging Heights” photo by Rabbi Will Berkovitz.

³ <http://sashadichter.wordpress.com/2008/07/31/reflections-on-maimonedes-8-levels-of-charity-tzedakah/>