

Slave Safe

The Outcome of Two Pathways of Experiencing Slavery

This article relates to only a segment of either Jewish or Black people. In the Jewish group this pertains to those of the religious orthodoxy mostly from an East European ghettoized background that made family accommodations to the traumatic experience of oppression. In the African American group this explores those who suffered the dysfunctional outcome of trauma induced family life.

I must share that my son who is both Jewish, from my culture and African-American from his mother's was very upset about this writing. He related to me that I had no legitimacy to have the right to write about the Black experience. I was so surprised as how could I not have legitimacy living with my wife, his mother and having directly experienced the outcome of her being African American in America? However, as surprised and initially unwelcome his perspective was, it was his and I worked hard to respect his feelings even when he refused to dialogue. His feelings were certainly an indication of the difficult challenges that we have in America in accommodating diversity within the family.

Slavery is slavery and when a people are oppressed and that oppression continues through the generations it affects mothering most deeply. Her goal shifts from seeing her children grow and prosper to that of grow and survive. To accomplish this she fosters a home environment that encourages her children to master a life attitude of subservience and passivity no matter what the offense when in the presence of life threatening Oppression.

*There is nothing more precious than life.
There is nothing more painful than life without hope
To my people, even an Excruciatingly Painful Life is still worth living
For so it says in The Bible.*

In my experience, the following operates mostly through the subconscious mind. In this situation a man is born a slave, a male baby, raised by his enslaved mother. How will she raise him? To be a strong male? If she does he won't stand for being a slave and will seek to rebel or at least escape. If he fails, then torture and at times an agonizing death. What would most mothers then do if they saw this as their son's future? She has to make a terrible choice and maybe not really a choice. She can either raise him to be strong and fight for liberation or to raise him to be or at least appear to be weak and non-threatening, thus hopefully, and I mean hopefully, increasing the likelihood of his survival.

In America, while the enslaved population dreamed to be liberated, the reality of the odds for a slave to escape before emancipation was poor. They have seen and heard the cries of those who have tried and failed. As a result, I feel that many of these mothers will most likely raise him to be weak. Yes weak, but not too weak for he has to be able to serve the master in order to survive. She teaches him to turn the other cheek, accepting the blows, keeping his eyes averted, his head and body bowed, reply only when spoken to

and then in only the simplest of utterances. By doing so the master sees not the subtle power of the mother's love, but due subordination.

The mother's fear is so great and it is a fear that is so justly warranted that to save her son, subconsciously she will do everything in her power to undermine her son's self-esteem, to confuse him, to misdirect him away from the possibility of growing in strength, his destruction...that would only lead to a deathtrap confrontation with the master.

This is about two paths that mothers take, one a Jewish mother and the other a Black mother.

In my situation, being Jewish, my people having once and traumatically been enslaved for four hundred years with the Pharaohs and their pyramids. What affect did this have upon our lives even after Moses liberated us? Did the influence of slavery just disappear upon crossing the divided sea? Did we not create a golden calf as an idol as soon as Moses went up onto Mt. Sinai? Did the oppression of slavery have anything to do with our struggle once we entered the Promised Land to continue to live by the Torah and by G-d's Commandments and Laws?

What affect did we suffer traumatically of the cyclical loss to various invaders, a repeated punishment by G-d for straying from the path? In atonement G-d would relent and like the hero in the Rocky movies, we always were getting back up and reconquering. Then the Romans. With the destruction of Jerusalem, the Temple and the murder of a million Jews for rebelling in the final round the Romans knocked us out. This was followed by their instituting the Diaspora (the scattering of a people away from an established or ancestral homeland) into what was to become Christian Europe where we were accused, endlessly labeled as being Christ's killers and as a result faced not only oppression but frequent pogroms, (A pogrom is a violent riot aimed at the massacre or persecution of an ethnic or religious group, particularly one aimed at Jews.) After 2,000 years of terrifying Christian persecution what affect did having to experience the active effort at extermination of the millions of our family members? And surviving even this, and like the Phoenix to rise again from the ashes to be reestablished in the Holy Land as a Nation of Israel only to have the immediate effort of others to cast us into the sea...seeking again our annihilation?

No doubt these experiences have been thoroughly and genetically imprinted on me and those of my culture. Of focused attention, what affect did this imprinting through the generations have on Jewish mothers who had to live in a constant state of anxiety for the welfare of their family, especially their male offspring? Let me share that the stress of this anxiety has driven so many of our mothers into a elevated state of vigilance that comes ever so close to their being neurotic and as a consequence terribly over protective.

They talk with one another. They hear from their mothers and grandmothers that regardless of how things look, even when everything seems to be going well, it has always been only an interlude before the sword has fallen once again and again and again. In this state of justifiable paranoia she has the same purpose and direction of any slave mother derived from lessons that have been passed through the generations guiding them to subtly emasculate her male children sufficiently to render them less likely to attract attention from The Man of the then dominant culture.

You may cry this isn't so any more with the birth of Israel and I wouldn't disagree. However this experience is obviously still tainted by the at least endless verbal

threats of the benefit to the world should we at last be exterminated. Regardless of how dominant the Israeli military might be, the fear still is ingrained. So let's continue. Let's look at how our Jewish mothers have accomplished the act of diminishing their male children without completely castrating them at the same time.

I would like to suggest that they did this by redirecting their male children into a hidden intellectual coliseum of battle where their male aggressiveness could be safely channeled away from physical outlets. Not only did this redirection increase their safety it also supported and reinforced the core of our culture.

How was this accomplished? It came about in the manner in which the Jewish mother went about raising her female children to reinforce in them a reframing of what normally for a liberated people would make a male attractive as a mate. After the Diaspora the Jewish mothers began raising their daughters to find a Jewish male attractive by not alone how physically good looking and physically capable he was, but more so by how intellectually and spiritually devoted and gifted he is in the study of The Torah. The coliseum of battle took place within the Yeshiva (A Jewish religious institute of learning where male students study sacred texts.) In this setting they study The Torah (A scroll of parchment containing the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures, used in a synagogue during services.) and the commentary on the Torah, a body of rabbinical writings called the Talmud (The collection of ancient Rabbinic writings consisting of the Mishnah and the Gemara, constituting the basis of religious authority in Orthodox Judaism.)

The Yeshiva is by no means passive. Rather it is quite intellectually challenging, competitive and even verbally combative with all sorts of male emotions flying safely through a unique style of discourse, debate and culminating eventually in discovery. So, the Yeshiva was like a religiously intellectual Dojo (martial arts gym) and the boys were culturally guided and driven to redirect their male energy into this safe haven where it could be sublimated, subordinated and released in study.

The battle however wasn't to the point of demeaning humiliation for those less talented and gifted, for ultimately the competitive discourse of study being inherently confusing and complex had to be brought to the Yeshiva's Rebbe (A Jewish spiritual leader or rabbi) who sorted out the various viewpoints and instructed the boys to a higher thus broader perspective. This elevated position of the Rebbe, through his excellence in Torah and Talmud Study, created an image or role model if you will of the ultimate Jewish male. The Rebbe as the highest and best role model of Jewish manhood was quite different from that of the oppressor, who has always been viewed as The Soldier Warrior, the ultimate role model for recognition of their dominant manhood.

The most interesting aspect of this Jewish pathway is that through the sublimation of manhood it actually became the key to preserving the culture. Any other approach in Europe from the time of the Diaspora, would have resulted in their total annihilation. Success in the Yeshiva resulted not only in elevating a boy amongst his peers; it also had the advantage of making him attractive to the best families as a possible husband for their daughters. The young men understood this connection between a male's progress in the Yeshiva and this achievement acting to increase his desirability for a young woman. What a powerful incentive. It was by no accident that Jewish mother's in these communities raised their daughters to indeed highly value the young male Yeshiva students.

In comparison, let's look at the life of the American slave experience for those of African descent and the consequences lived after emancipation. There are numerous

differences of the African slave experience from those of Jewish descent. The Jews had a tremendous advantage in cultural survival. 1. Jews were one cultural people even during the centuries of slavery and after the diaspora. 2. After the Exodus and the giving of the Torah, Jews had a common language that was also written. The male children were taught to read and some to write and so they were able to communicate locally and at some distance from each other. 3. Jews as slaves in Egypt were allowed to form and keep family units. 4. The Jews had a long history of self-determination after the Exodus. During these years they developed all of the economic and financial skills of an independent nation. 5. After the Diaspora, following the third century when Rome became Christian the Jews living in Europe were marginalized by the converted Christians and forced to live in ghettos. This forced isolation prevented socializing with the Christian majority and reduced the chance of a dilution of Jewish Culture. These ghettos were isolated, but within and between them there was a thriving community encompassing most of the trades from which Jews could make a living. The Jews built synagogues in which they could practice their religious ceremonies and which provided a setting for weekly gatherings to celebrate the Sabbath as a community. This tradition of commerce, trade and most importantly Torah Study promoted healthy and safe outlets for the male energy. Another difference, which was not an advantage, was the genocide of the Holocaust. This of course gave rise to the formation of the state of Israel, allowing the Jews who chose to emigrate there the possibility to form their own government, re-establish a highly protected religious core, establish a highly technological economy, and a powerful military that protects the homeland. All of this was quite different from the experiences of African slaves in the Americas

The disadvantages of African Slaves in America: 1. Africans experienced slavery in their isolated millions far from their tribal homeland. 2. They completely lost direct contact with their African cultures. 3. Within a generation or two they lost their native languages. 4. Initially they couldn't even communicate with each other so varied were their regional languages. 5. The only common language that was available to them was the language of their masters. 6. Thus for the first few generations communication between slaves was challenging. 7. Because they were from so many different tribes each with its own cultural identity and to keep them disorganized they were so thoroughly mixed together that they didn't have the opportunity of reforming into some sense of their specific cultural identity. 8. African slaves were usually not allowed to form a family unit and when this was allowed, they were not empowered to maintain it as at any time one or more family members could be sold off to never be seen again. 9. African slaves were prevented by their slaveholders of obtaining the skills of literacy. 10. Spiritually, Blacks were not allowed to openly practice the religions of their African homeland and had to accept the Christianity of Southern Whites, their oppressors. 11. The White Christian religion taught that Jesus was their Savior and a loving God and that when abused one should turn their cheek for more abuse. 12. They were shown paintings of Jesus who was portrayed as a White Man and so the psychological influence of this was undermining of the slaves self esteem and connection. 13. Furthermore they were constantly framed as an inferior race and the Christian Whites took lines of the Bible out of context to rationalize the fable that Africans were more like animals than human, inferior in everyway to the White population.

The White society went so far to undermine the cohesiveness of a people suffering from the same abuse through their own brainwashing through the preachers preaching the rationalization for slavery that African slaves should be grateful for their removal from Africa so that they could be saved from their life of paganism that could upon their death only lead to them to Hell. This was taught and reinforced for hundreds of years in the Americas.

The one commonality with the Jewish culture is that at some point the Black slaves were allowed to start their own churches and it was in this sanctuary that Black men and women were able to at times to safely release their distress through prayer and the exuberance of Sunday church celebration.

Once slavery was abolished the Black population was cast out of the only life they had known. Thrown into the wilderness so to speak with only the skill learned as slaves. They could only struggle to survive without the experience and social skills of independence and the requirements of freedom. While a few of the men had the skills of tradesmen, most were field laborers. Likely the skilled ones were elevated socially when Blacks began to form towns. However, regardless of their increased status it was no safer for any Black male to stand up and to speak his mind when in the company of White men. The oppression continued.

The release from slavery did not diminish the concern and anxiety that the Black mother had for her male children and as the KKK began to terrorize the Black population the fear was reinforced. In response to the frequent violence directed at any Black male who questioned his mistreatment and many times for no other reason than they could, the Black mother continued to exercise her effort to diminish her sons sufficiently so that they would not have the “Spirit” of rebellion against White domination.

What did change with the end of slavery was that Black folk had the freedom to marry and raise a family. Having children that they could keep, free of the fear of losing them to the sale of an owner’s need for more money, they felt truly joyful. However there was a seemingly insurmountable problem for some such families.

The internal psychological conflicts for the Black male were onerous and debilitating. How could he alone provide for his family? Most of the time he couldn’t for all paying jobs and avenues of commerce were controlled by the White men. To add to the feelings of dejection his wife had to and could find domestic work with White families, a reframing of the master slave relationship with the Black woman always vulnerable to the moods of the White family.

Being free, but not free and with so little opportunity to make a living, most of the Black men were in a tough situation. Without an education, basic skills and financial resources he was reduced to seeking day labor where ever he could find it and so often when due to the season there was no work, he couldn’t. How did he feel? How would anyone feel? Inadequate, hopeless, frustrated and angry. Depression, despair and a feeling of hopelessness was the likely result. In this state how did he feel about his family? Regardless of his love for his family some of these men came to unknowingly resent their marriage as it became a symbol of their “failure” as a provider and this further undermined their self-respect as a man.

After slavery, the male sense of hope was quickly diminished by the dire economic straights Blacks lived within and worse, were still so dependent upon the White society for any form of employment. As time went on he no longer had the reality of

slavery as the reason for the poverty of his family. Regardless of the facts of the time, being that only his wife's had the ability to get regular work, basically becoming the bread winner for the family, his sense of inadequacy struck deep into his psyche. The woman became the provider and the husband a "lackey," a person who couldn't provide. How could he stand even being at home where the depth of his depressed feelings were the most vulnerable? So, some of these men left, seemingly abandoning their family. He had to find release, but how? It wasn't only so depressing it was all so terribly confusing.

Deep in his subconscious mind he secretly felt the affect of his emasculation by his loving mother. If she could only have understood the need for him to stand up to the oppression, not alone, but united with other males they could have at least fought together for their freedom while slavery was still active. It seemed that the only way to get respect from the White domination was to fight them to the point where the white oppressors were no longer willing to die for their social dominance.

So subtle was this anger at his mother whom he venerated. In the following generation with the woman being a single provider after her husband left home, their young sons saw how hard their mother worked to provide for them. Without a father in the home she became their Angel. Still, all along she, like her mother was unconscious of these psychological factors and so she wasn't able to explain the true nature of their father's departure. She too continued to act as her mother did with her boys by putting them down, the result of her continued anxiety and fear should they stand up to The Man. So while they adored their mother they also felt a rage against the emasculation, a rage that they couldn't express to their mother. What did they do when they became men?

In her relationship with her husband, she may have railed against him for not being able to provide enough for the family and at times withheld her love. In response some men would leave their home to find the opportunity to drink in order to sooth the pain of their existence. In this inebriated state, with their inhibitions dropped, some of these men upon returning home may have acted out their rage, a rage against womanhood who they felt betrayed them as a mother and a wife.

With no way to get help, eventually so many of them left the family not being able to experience the futility of their existence any longer. These men being excluded from a healthy family life sought out each other to share their shame and frustrations. They weren't alone in this. There were women who had been abused by their husbands and fathers and in reacting to such treatment found their way to the same places, as did the men who fled their families where there was plenty of booze and acceptable irresponsible behavior.

Being unable to direct his anger at the cause of his embroiled state such a man also found a release from this anger by striking out at his Black brother. Physically abusing his wife or the women he partied with was not satisfying enough. There was insufficient kick back that could empty the rage. These men found this outlet with each other and together as they fought, hurt and killed each other they were able to fully express their rage for at least a while if they survived and permanently if they failed.

The conflict within these men were complicated by the shame and guilt that they could not erase. So deep and deadly is this complexity within their relationship with women; his mother, later with his wife and even his daughters. He really had no chance to achieve the heroic with the females in his life.

His life is preserved, but without either the man or woman understanding this dynamic, he is dying corrosively, and in the end he dies a slave to the trauma of his existence. And so the next generation is born once again into this veiled slavery and the inhumanly endless cycle of this conflict between people who love each other so much. This is the true tragedy of African slavery whether of the body, the mind, and or of the spirit.

So, he lives or maybe lives for a while, but he can't stand himself and he can't stand the feeling of not being backed up by his mother nor by his wife in his trials with the oppressor.

The psychological aspects of this situation are so very sad. It starts with the subtle influence of deadly oppression giving rise to the undermining of manhood. Because of this anger when he enters the adolescent years and engages with a female for intimacy, some of these men project this resentment unconsciously toward her because he can't feel anything but a sense of anxiety, insecurity and the bottom line, a lack of trust. It gets a bit worse. Because of his unresolved anger, which he expresses toward his woman, he either doesn't consummate his relationship with her through marriage or abandons her soon after she conceives and or gives birth to a child.

He can't stay with her for fear of being uncontrollable at times and in this state he truly fears hurting her irreparably. This is all so often triggered while he may still be struggling to remain the man, husband and father in his household. However as he starts to witness the same "emasculating to save the boy" behavior of his wife, the mother of his son, it can just be too much to bear. So he can't do anything but leave to save what little sanity he retains.

To his son, his father has abandoned him. It's not over. Because he concludes that his father abandoned him his anger festers toward males and when pushed together with his male peers and as they get older they start to fight with each other to let out all that anger that has festered since birth.

Imagine the conflict of a man having his drive for strength being undermined by his mother from an early age. Because of the lack of education and the severance from his historical cultures in Africa and the continued domination of White men he truly didn't have a safe and psychologically reinforcing outlet. As stated above, in the orthodox Jewish ghettos of East Europe and in the orthodox communities in the U.S. manhood was defined by one's spiritual and intellectual prowess within Torah study. For the Black male living in the ghetto, the anger and resentment, which could not be addressed toward the oppression of the White society, was redirected to direct physical conflict within the ghetto directed toward his woman and other Black males. In their solitude within the ghettos up North, his social life became tribal giving rise to Black gangs and the oppression of the community in which they ranged.

The tragedy of slavery! The tragedy of the suppression of people from any background. The poor mothers in both groups sharing a deep desire to keep their men safe being caught in the cultural struggles that their people are so often trapped in. So many similarities in cause and yet so tragically varied in the result.

*There is nothing more precious than life.
There is nothing more painful than life without hope
To many, Excruciatingly Painful Life is not worth living*

*Unable to commit suicide these will push the limits until eliminated
And in this process, while most succeed, a few fail and in their failure to be
eliminated gain incredible strength and in that kind of strength become Seriously
Deranged and emerge more oppressive to their people than the oppressor. So rise
the loan shark, the drug dealer and the gangbanger.*

*Slavery is slavery and when it continues through the generations it affects
mothering even after liberation for her goal is do whatever it takes to assure the survival
of her children.*