

“WHAT IF YOU WERE AN EGYPTIAN?”

Each year on Passover we are asked to imagine ourselves as slaves in Egypt. For those of us who live in America in the 21st century, it is an empathetic stretch, because we are blessed in so many ways. But perhaps it is not such a stretch to imagine ourselves as Egyptians.

Many Jews employ other people in their homes, their businesses, to take care of their children. Not slaves, to be sure, but still we are judged by how we treat those over whom we have power. Do we consider the Nanny's taking care of our children to be more important than taking care of her own? Are our wishes always paramount? Does the desire for a clean house entitle us to be unkind, tyrannical, to pay meagerly wages, to recall in spirit, if not in fact, Egypt of old? How late did you keep “the help” at the Seder -- and did you thank and compensate them adequately?

In the stranger, Hermann Cohen beautifully wrote, was the idea of Judaism born. Thirty-six times the Torah mentions the stranger. The great moral test of life is not how we treat those who have power over us, but how we treat those over whom we have power. It is a *Hillul Hashem*, a desecration of God's name, to treat the stranger cruelly; it is a *Kiddush Hashem*, a sanctification of God's name, to be merciful, to be kind. Remember Egypt, toward those who work for you act as a Jew ought.