

Trafficking Sermon

By Nancy Ratzan

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It is deeply meaningful to me to be in this space, on Shabbat, in front of this congregation, talking about us *engaging* in something that needs our *voices* and our *action*.

For me this moment reflects the aspirations and promise of our Temple Beth Sholom community.

When I was President of Beth Sholom starting in 2002, we were engaged in re-imagining our congregation, our campus, and our commitment. We imagined moments like this. Opportunities for our community to be together, in welcoming, sacred space, connecting, studying & learning how to live Judaism. So that we will strengthen ourselves, each other and, ultimately, our capacities to go out into this world and make a difference.

I am extremely grateful to R Glickstein for inspiring that vision, to our community, for building & now living it, & to R Pomerantz for allowing us to *live our Judaism* in this way tonight: by shining a light into what I believe is the darkest corner of our world, a light that I believe can create change.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, a great Jewish philosopher, taught us, what I believe needs to be our foundational approach to HT: While “Few are guilty, we are all responsible.”

So many of us – engaged, well-intentioned, good people, have fallen prey to the myth that human trafficking, the *exploitation* of one human by another to compel labor or commercial sex, is something that happens in *faraway places*.

We have been *lulled* into believing that human trafficking is something *beyond our reach, beyond our community and beyond our responsibility*.

But the truth is: right here, *literally* in our backyards, children are being sex trafficked (sold to be sexually exploited), every day.

Children as young as 12-years old.

Children that are sold as many as 15 times a day, each child.

Children, whose life expectancy as a trafficked child is 7 years.

These are our children.

They are “the child next door”, predominantly U.S. citizens who, due to no fault of their own, are now Miami’s “throw away” children.

Many of these lured children have been in foster care or were sexually abused or ran away from home. Whatever their story, there is an endless pool of these vulnerable children.

In just the runaway population, the pool is immense.

We know that 1 in 7 children run away, at some point, before the age of 18.

And on any given day in Florida, we have 30,000-40,000 runaways.

And we know that within 48 hours of leaving home, 1 in 3 runaways are exploited for sex trafficking or pornography.

And we know that we have not yet pulled back the curtains to see and understand, how pervasive, brutal and seemingly endless this extreme exploitation of children really is in Miami.

We got a peek last week, when the Miami Herald front page headline read: “*13 year-old girl forced into prostitution, then nude dancing at Miami Beach strip club*”

Yet that story is just the tip of what really is a ubiquitous criminal enterprise, that has pervaded this community with impunity.

Last year when Florida implemented the FL Safe Harbor Act, so that minors engaged in commercial sex can be treated as victims, not criminals,

And the Miami-Dade State Attorney’s office created a unit dedicated to finding and prosecuting sex traffickers and buyers, and protecting victims, *In just one year*, the Miami SAO caseload grew from 1 case to over 120 filed cases, with 100 more under active investigation. They have found this most brutal and hidden crime under *literally* every stone they have turned.

Although it is beyond the scope of what we be cover in depth tonight, we know that there is incredible complexity to the web of both the plethora of *causes for* and the expanse of *solutions needed*, to end this horrific form of sexual exploitation. From addressing the root causes of vulnerability and the failures of our child welfare system, to the difficulty of prosecuting cases with victims who are trauma-bonded to their traffickers. From the dearth of shelters and services to rehabilitate these unimaginably damaged children, to the need to end the demand of those who seek to buy children for sexual exploitation.

And yet with all that complexity, the linchpin to addressing *all and any* of this is AWARENESS.

The sale of children for sex in Miami, and indeed, in Every Town, USA, will flourish as long as it remains hidden.

This evil will exist and thrive in the darkest corners of our community as long as there not enough powerful voices demanding change.

Abraham Joshua Heschel also taught us that: While “Some religions require a leap of faith; Judaism requires a leap of action.”

It is clear that when more engaged, good, well-intentioned people like you, know the true nature and breadth of sex trafficking in our community, we will act and we will demand change. Community awareness and citizen action will create change.

As reported to President Obama in April:

Quote: “We will not make progress in identifying and rescuing victims, raising funds, and engendering the political and public will to stop this evil until more people understand this issue. Raising public awareness is thus a key and primary priority for the success of this work.”

(Building Partnerships to Eradicate Modern-Day Slavery, Report of Recommendations to the President, President's Advisory Council on Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships, April 2013 (emphasis added))

Well I'm here to tell you, that there is a movement afoot in Miami to raise public awareness and you can be a part of it.

Early last year the Miami-Dade State Attorney, convened an Anti-Sex Trafficking Policy Institute comprised of more than a dozen local agencies that are working together to develop and coordinate the spectrum of services and protocols needed to identify and restore victims and prosecute seller and buyers. And they are making progress.

I sit on that Policy Institute, as a community conscience. In that role, I have been asked to build a community awareness campaign that will permeate this community with the truth about sex trafficking of our children

We now have: *Stop Sex Trafficking Miami*, a bold campaign of powerful, shocking messages, tools and graphics to educate our community and incite the public and political will to create change.

The first year of the campaign is formally launching next week, and it is all about Awareness.

Here are some ways for you to engage right now.

First, be a voice for change. Now that you know that 12, 13 and 14 year old children in Miami are being sold for sex, tell 5 more people. When enough of us know what is really going on, our outrage will create change.

This campaign is designed to be a viral collaboration. We are inviting every organization, thought leader and activist that cares about the exploitation of children, to use the bold messages and tools of this campaign to "shout from the mountaintops" and educate their spheres of influence.

By all of us using the same messages, repeated over and over, we can penetrate this community and reach a *tipping point* of awareness and then action.

Several non-profits are already on board and working both collaboratively and in their spheres of influence to create this Awareness:

- the Jewish Community Relations Council and Women's Philanthropy at Federation established Task Force to Combat HT and created "Trafficking Shabbat" with more than a dozen congregations of all streams of Judaism educating about trafficking from the pulpit last Shabbat and this Shabbat
- Last year the Greater Miami Section of National Council of Jewish Women funded the Miami-Dade State Attorney's Trafficking Hotline and awareness efforts, and will engage in more education this year, possibly by hosting a film series followed by panel discussions.
- The Women's Fund of Miami-Dade has been co-convening with me organizations such as Jr League, Girl Scouts, and Agua, that want to learn about and use this campaign to educate their constituents and enhance their own unique work on this issue.

- One Billion Rising Miami, which is part of Eve Ensler's V-day International event to address violence against women, is highlighting trafficking and our *Stop Sex Trafficking Miami* Campaign at their Feb. 14 rising event at MDCC downtown campus
- And the MD State Attorney's Office is formally kicking off our campaign on Jan 23 at their HT Community Forum.

Another great opportunity to infiltrate awareness into our community is by supporting our "bus tour". Our campaign messages are going on "tour" as 12-foot long banners on the sides of city buses that will circulate throughout Miami-Dade. We are seeking to feature one sponsor for each month of our year-long tour. So if there are interested sponsors or leads, please let me know.

Finally, tonight as you leave, please take home our campaign "buzz cards" (on the table outside the Chapel.) The cards have two of our messages on the front, and an e-mail address to sign up, learn more, get our tools and messages and become a voice for change. And there is a sign up sheet to "Learn More and Become a Voice for Change." Sign up, take several cards and use them to share what you now know with others.

Let's take heed in the words of Albert Einstein (another great Jewish 20th C thinker): "If I remain silent, I will be complicit."

We cannot be silent to this.

Now that we know, we are responsible.

Let Us Be a Voice for Change.

Thank you and Shabbat Shalom.