

InterfaithFamily Passover 2015 Resource for Jewish Educators

Exploring Connections Between Solomon Northup's Autobiography, *Twelve Years a Slave*, and the Exodus from Egypt

Recommended Use: Use these readings in Jewish educational settings to teach about Passover. There are 4 pages with parallel texts, featuring an excerpt from Northup's memoir alongside Jewish texts that relate to the themes Northup raises. The 5th page offers a visual learning opportunity involving word-art, and it's being included here in order to spur ideas for visual art projects connected to these materials. This resource is intended primarily for middle school or high school teachers at after-school Jewish religious school programs or day schools. It can also be used as an adult education resource for interfaith study between Jewish and Christian congregations, or between Jewish and African-American organizations holding joint seders. Rabbis may also want to use this resource for sermons or newsletter articles.

Feel free to contact us , or to offer feedback: educator@interfaithfamily.com.



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SOLOMON NORTHUP (1808—1863) WAS A FREE-BORN AFRICAN-AMERICAN FROM NEW YORK WHO WAS KIDNAPPED AND SOLD INTO SLAVERY UNDER FALSE IDENTITY PAPERS. AFTER 12 YEARS OF BONDAGE, NORTHUP WAS FREED FOLLOWING LEGAL PROCEEDINGS. HIS 1853 MEMOIR, *12 YEARS A SLAVE*, IS ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT PUBLISHED WORKS OF ITS KIND, AND IT FORMED THE BASIS FOR THE ACADEMY AWARD-WINNING BEST PICTURE OF THE SAME TITLE. IN THIS EXCERPT, NORTHUP DESCRIBES HIS THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS SHORTLY AFTER BEING ABDUCTED, STRIPPED OF HIS IDENTITY PAPERS, AND FORCED INTO A SLAVE TRADER'S HOLDING PEN. IN THE PASSAGE IN BOLD, HE ALLUDES TO SEVERAL PSALMS. PSALM 34 INCLUDES THE VERSE, "THE ETERNAL IS CLOSE TO THE BROKEN HEARTED; GOD RESCUES THOSE OF A BROKEN SPIRIT."

Depositing our blankets in one of the small buildings in the yard, and having been called up and fed, we were allowed to saunter about the enclosure until night, when we wrapped our blankets round us and laid down under the shed, or in the loft, or in the open yard, just as each one preferred. It was but a short time I closed my eyes that night. Thought was busy in my brain. Could it be possible that I was thousands of miles from home — that I had been driven through the streets like a dumb beast — that I had been chained and beaten without mercy— that I was even then herded with a drove of slaves, a slave myself? Were the events of the last few weeks realities indeed? — or was I passing only through the dismal phases of a long, protracted dream? It was no illusion. My cup of sorrow was full to overflowing. Then I lifted up my hands to God, and in the still watches of the night, surrounded by the sleeping forms of my companions, begged for mercy on the poor, forsaken captive. **To the Almighty Father of us all — the freeman and the slave—I poured forth the supplications of a broken spirit**, imploring strength from on high to bear up against the burden of my troubles, until the morning light aroused the slumberers, ushering in another day of bondage.

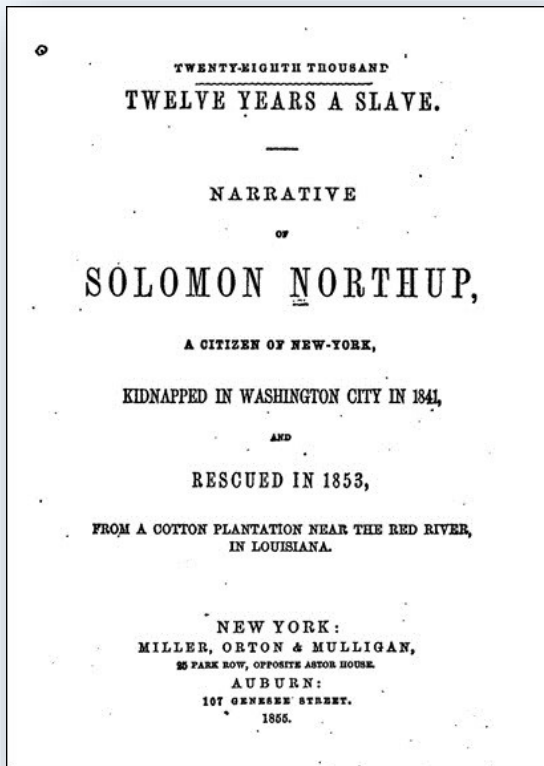


SOLOMON IN HIS PLANTATION SUIT.

Solomon Northup

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reedom — freedom for herself and for her offspring, for many years had been her cloud by day, her pillar of fire by night. In her pilgrimage through the wilderness of bondage, with eyes fixed upon that hope-inspiring beacon, she had at length ascended to "the top of Pisgah," and beheld "the land of promise." In an unexpected moment she was utterly overwhelmed with disappointment and despair. The glorious vision of liberty faded from her sight as they led her away into captivity. Now "she weepeth sore in the night, and tears are on her cheeks: all her friends have dealt treacherously with her: they have become her enemies."

NORTHUP WRITING ABOUT EMILY, A SLAVE WHO HAD BEEN PROMISED FREEDOM FOR HERSELF AND HER CHILDREN, AND WHO WAS TAKEN ON A JOURNEY UNDER THE PRETENSE THAT SHE WAS ABOUT TO RECEIVE HER FREEDOM, ONLY TO DISCOVER THAT SHE HAD BEEN MISLED AND WAS ABOUT TO BE SOLD ALONG WITH HER CHILDREN. BIBLICAL REFERENCES PERMEATE HIS DESCRIPTIONS OF ENSLAVEMENT. HE MENTIONS MT. PISGAH, THE HILLTOP THAT MOSES ASCENDED TO IN ORDER TO GLIMPSE THE PROMISED LAND INTO WHICH HE WOULD NEVER ENTER. THE CLOUD AND PILLAR OF FIRE ARE REFERENCES TO EXODUS 13: 21-22: "AND THE ETERNAL ONE WENT BEFORE [THE ISRAELITES] BY DAY IN A PILLAR OF CLOUD, TO LEAD THEM THE WAY; AND BY NIGHT IN A PILLAR OF FIRE, TO GIVE THEM LIGHT ... THE PILLAR OF CLOUD BY DAY, AND THE PILLAR OF FIRE BY NIGHT, NEVER DEPARTED FROM BEFORE THE PEOPLE." FINALLY, NORTHUP QUOTES THE BEGINNING OF THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS. THE PART OF THE VERSE HE QUOTED CONNECTS EVEN MORE POWERFULLY TO HIS DESCRIPTION OF EMILY'S PLIGHT WHEN IT IS READ ALONG WITH ITS SURROUNDING VERSES. "SHE WHO WAS A PRINCESS AMONG THE PROVINCES HAS BECOME A FORCED LABORER! SHE WEEPS BITTERLY IN THE NIGHT AND HER TEARS ARE ON HER CHEEKS; SHE HAS NONE TO COMFORT HER AMONG ALL HER LOVERS. ALL HER FRIENDS HAVE DEALT TREACHEROUSLY WITH HER; THEY HAVE BECOME HER ENEMIES. ... ALL HER PURSUERS HAVE OVERTAKEN HER IN THE MIDST OF DISTRESS."

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n the latter part of August begins the cotton season. At this time each slave is presented with a sack. A strap is fastened to it which goes over the neck, holding the mouth of the sack breast high, while the bottom reaches nearly to the ground. Each one is also presented with a large basket that will hold about two barrels. This is to put the cotton in when the sack is filled. The baskets are carried to the field and placed at the beginning of the rows. When a new hand, one unaccustomed to the business, is sent for the first time into the field, he is whipped up smartly, and made for that day to pick as fast as he can possibly. At night it is weighed, so that his capability in cotton picking is known. He must bring in the same weight each night following. If it falls short, it is considered evidence that he has been laggard, and a greater or less number of lashes is the penalty.

⁶ That same day Pharaoh gave this order to the slave drivers and overseers in charge of the people: ⁷ "You are no longer to supply the people with straw for making bricks; let them go and gather their own straw. ⁸ But require them to make the same number of bricks as before; don't reduce the quota. They are lazy; that is why they are crying out, 'Let us go and sacrifice to our God.'⁹ Make the work harder for the people so that they keep working and pay no attention to lies." ¹⁰ Then the slave drivers and the overseers went out and said to the people, "This is what Pharaoh says: 'I will not give you any more straw. ¹¹ Go and get your own straw wherever you can find it, but your work will not be reduced at all.'" ¹² So the people scattered all over Egypt to gather stubble to use for straw. ¹³ The slave drivers kept pressing them, saying, "Complete the work required of you for each day, just as when you had straw." ¹⁴ And Pharaoh's slave drivers beat the Israelite overseers they had appointed, demanding, "Why haven't you met your quota of bricks yesterday or today, as before?" ¹⁵ Then the Israelite overseers went and appealed to Pharaoh: "Why have you treated your servants this way? ¹⁶ Your servants are given no straw, yet we are told, 'Make bricks!' Your servants are being beaten, but the fault is with your own people." ¹⁷ Pharaoh said, "Lazy, that's what you are—lazy! That is why you keep saying, 'Let us go and sacrifice to the ETERNAL.'" ¹⁸ Now get to work. You will not be given any straw, yet you must produce your full quota of bricks." - *Exodus 5: 6—18 (NIV)*

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he effect of these exhibitions of brutality on the household of the slave-holder, is apparent. [Master] Epps' oldest son is an intelligent lad of ten or twelve years of age. It is pitiable, sometimes, to see him chastising, for instance, the venerable [slave] Uncle Abram. He will call the old man to account, and if in his childish judgment it is necessary, sentence him to a certain number of lashes, which he proceeds to inflict with much gravity and deliberation. Mounted on his pony, he often rides into the field with his whip, playing the overseer, greatly to his father's delight. Without discrimination, at such times, he applies the rawhide, urging the slaves forward with shouts, and occasional expressions of profanity, while the old man laughs, and commends him as a thorough-going boy . . . "The child is father to the man," and with such training, whatever may be his natural disposition, it cannot well be otherwise than that, on arriving at maturity, the sufferings and miseries of the slave will be looked upon with entire indifference. The influence of the iniquitous system necessarily fosters an unfeeling and cruel spirit, even in the bosoms of those who, among their equals, are regarded as humane and generous. Young Master Epps possessed some noble qualities, yet no process of reasoning could lead him to comprehend, that in the eye of the Almighty there is no distinction of color. He looked upon the black man simply as an animal, differing in no respect from any other animal, save in the gift of speech and the possession of somewhat higher instincts, and, therefore, the more valuable.

Teach a child in the way s/he she should go, and the child will not stray from it even when s/he gets older. —Proverbs 22:6

**What is learned in early childhood is absorbed in the blood.—
Avot de Rabbi Natan 24**



ONE OF THESE BUTTERFLIES IS MADE UP OF WORDS FROM THE BOOK OF EXODUS. THE OTHER IS MADE FROM SOLOMON NORTHROP'S WORDS.