

# The Jewish abolitionist

By Robby Berman

Slavery on Egyptian soil is a thing of the past for Jews but not so for black Christians. This past Pessah, Charles Jacobs was in Sudan – in an area that was once ancient Egypt – helping free black slaves. Jacobs, the Boston-based founder and president of the American Anti-Slavery Group (AASG), flew to Sudan together with former congressman the Reverend Walter Fauntroy and Washington D.C. radio host Joe Madison. There they witnessed the redemption of 2,953 slaves by the Zurich-based Christian Solidarity International.

“We made a pact with the people we met there that we wouldn’t rest until we put black chattel slavery on the world agenda,” says Jacobs.



Jacobs, married and a father and former business consultant in his late fifties, has the distinction of establishing the first abolitionist group in America since the Civil War. About 10 years ago, a South American client of his jokingly offered to sell him an African slave. “But after a little research I found the offer not to be so far-fetched. I made a few calls and discovered that all the people who were supposed to know about [ongoing] African slavery already knew about it: the US government, Amnesty International, and the United Nations. Madeleine Albright told me the tragedy of African slavery doesn’t seem to be marketable to the American people. It was then that I started the American Anti-Slavery Group.”

Jacobs is not a newcomer to social action. Coming of age during the Vietnam War era, he became a strong anti-war activist and a member of the Students for a Democratic Society, and also marched for black civil rights. “I was present at the famous Martin Luther King Jr. ‘I have a dream’ speech.”

In 1995, Jacobs testified before Congress about the slavery trade in Mauritania. And although slavery exists in a number of African countries such as Benin, Ivory Coast and Mali, it is particularly egregious in Sudan.

War has plagued Sudan for 33 of the 45 years since it gained independence from Anglo-Egyptian rule in 1956. The latest conflict broke out in 1983, and is seen as a fight between the predominantly Christian

not more than the going rate for slaves so as not to encourage it.”

In fact, a recent *New York Times* editorial accuses such anti-slavery groups of doing just that: encouraging slave taking by offering money to redeem them.

“The empirical evidence [that we are right] is that the frequency of the raids has steadily decreased even during our buy-back operations. Also, 40 village chiefs have signed a letter asking us to continue our efforts.

“If they thought we were incentivizing this atrocity they wouldn’t support it. This slavery is more of a religious missionary activity than an economic one: They want to spread Islam,” says Jacobs. “If it was about economics they would steal cattle.”

ON MAY 2, AASG organized an anti-slavery rally in the Sudanese Mission on Manhattan’s Third Avenue. Jacobs’s publicly thanked New York City Comptroller Alan Hevesi and State Comptroller Carl McCall for divesting New York City and New York State pension funds of stock in Talisman Energy of Canada, a company Jacobs says is linked to the slave trade via its Sudanese pipeline.

Among those who spoke at the rally was ex-slave Francis Bok, a towering, lanky black man. Like Frederick Douglass in the mid-19th century, the self-educated Bok escaped to freedom and, under the aegis of the AASG, is touring the US speaking to



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He is upset that Israel has established ties with African countries such as Mauritania that encourage slavery. "As Jews we should be in the forefront of abolition," he says. "I wonder if Jews worked as slaves in the same spot where we are redeeming them."

Jacobs spent Shabbat in Wonrok, a village, in the Bahr el Ghazal province, that straddles the border between north and south Sudan. He lit Shabbat candles with a Jewish journalist, and although it was a week before the actual holiday of Pessah, they ate matza. "I'm newly Orthodox and every day, in my morning prayers, I bless God who releases those in bondage. This is what we are about."

The trip was not without danger: Jacobs, *sans visa*, illegally entered Sudan via territory controlled by the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA). A week after he left Wonrok, it was shelled.

south, which is seeking greater autonomy and religious freedom, and the largely Muslim government of the north. In 1986, Arab militiamen loyal to the government began abducting people who are then sold by the raiding parties further north.

"African slavery is the dirty little secret of the human rights community," says Jacobs. "When white people see white people acting immorally towards blacks they are instinctively moved to correct it so they are not identified with evil. South Africa is a good example. But when they see non-whites doing evil things, they don't act. It's a subtle racism: 'What do you expect from them?' It's a double standard."

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"When you hear these horror stories it sounds very similar to pogroms. The raiders shoot babies, gang rape the mothers and amputate limbs of slaves as punishment for disobedience."

FOR SEVEN years, Jacobs and the AASG have supported the work of Christian Solidarity International, a Zurich-based organization. One Christian community donated the money it had raised to build a church and used the funds instead to buy back slaves. Typically a slave can be bought for \$50.

"What that parish did was very Jewish," says Jacobs. "The Rambam [Maimonides], back in the Middle Ages, wrote that if Jews are kidnapped it is an obligation for the community to purchase them back but

religious groups about the atrocities of modern-day slavery.

AASG can hardly be called a groundswell movement: The New York protest numbered about a dozen people with an even larger number of media and police personnel covering the event. Even so the organization is making significant strides: In addition to the State of New York, AASG has persuaded the states of Wisconsin, California, and New Jersey, as well as TIAA-CREF, the world's largest pension fund, to divest of Talisman Energy.

"We also got [president Bill] Clinton to speak out publicly about Sudanese slavery during his last month in office," says Jacobs proudly. "Now we are making efforts to get the Bush administration to evade the UN-imposed food blockade and deliver food directly to the Dinkas in the south. The UN is a membership organization that cares about the Arab League vote. Slaves, unfortunately, don't have a seat in the UN."

Recently, the US was thrown off the human-rights commission of the UN while China and Sudan remain on it.

Jacobs's crusade seems to be having a ripple effect: The issue of Sudanese slavery is becoming more prominent in the US media and many politicians have taken it up as a cause.

Jacobs raises money for his organization from membership fees on his Web site, [www.iabolish.com](http://www.iabolish.com), that range from \$25 to \$1,000, donations from private individuals, and grants from funds such as Reebok Human Rights.

"Jews and Israel should get involved because of our history," says Jacobs. "The Dinkas are the Jews of today because the world has turned its back on them. Don't forget we became the People of Israel after an act of divine abolition."