

I Was Never a Slave

*It is not your duty to finish the work,
but neither are you at liberty to neglect it.*

– Rabbi Tarfon, *Pirkei Avot*, 2:16

How do we channel history
to make a mark in *this* world?
We were commanded to remember
our people were slaves in Egypt.
The memory of slavery
should elicit empathy.

A more recent recollection
pervades my mind and heart:
ancestors -- names we know --
the slaves of Europe.
They, too, made
bricks from straw.

Beaten, starved, tortured,
drowned, hanged, gassed.
Don't tell me
this cannot happen
in our lifetime ...
it has.

I read about a man of my own age
who, in his lifetime, in my own,
was forced into labor
for speaking his thoughts;
in his lifetime, in my own,
was hanged from a tree, and
only through God's gift
was his life saved.

This could be us.
This has been us.
This may be us again.

I take these words to heart:
אנחנו חייבים זה לזה
anachnu chayavim zeh lazeh.
We are responsible,
we are commanded,
it is our duty
to do this work.