

The Reality of Freedom

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Passover is often characterized in our liturgy as *'zman cheruteinu'*, the time of our freedom. How ironic, for the holiday is circumscribed and restricted with a myriad of rules, regulations, minute and painstaking requirements, more so than perhaps any other holiday observance in our religious calendar. This is freedom!?? Moreover, the Torah itself describes the Jewish people as "My servants, whom I freed from the land of Egypt" (Lev 25:55). How can a servant be considered free? Paradoxically, it almost seems as if the festival of freedom celebrates our trading in one form of servitude—to the Egyptians—for another—to the Almighty. And although an argument could certainly be sustained that G-d is a kinder, gentler Master than the Egyptians, nevertheless, why call it a festival of freedom?

Freedom and liberty are concepts which are particularly *au courant*. Last year, the "Arab spring" captured the hearts and minds not only of the Islamic world, where uprisings spread from country to country, leading to the stunning downfall of one dictator after another, but also of the entire global community, which watched the breathtaking events and was stirred by them. The quest for freedom and liberty are human strivings which strike a universal chord. Thus, as we approach our own holiday of freedom, it is appropriate to examine this goal more carefully.

The rebels in the many Middle Eastern countries who have been demonstrating and fighting valiantly for freedom almost certainly want to be free from oppression, from arbitrary cruelties, from government sanctions, from having their existence controlled by others. We in America can certainly identify with these hopes; we see them as a reflection of our own beliefs—"with liberty and justice for all." It would make sense that when, in bondage to Pharaoh and his followers, the Israelites cried out to G-d due to their bitter oppression, they too dreamed of being free to live their lives their own way, not to have to slave for others, to be able to savor for themselves the fruits of their labors.

While certainly these hopes are justified—we must realize that these dreams fall short of the Torah's definition of freedom; G-d did not take the children of Israel out of Egypt just to enable them to enjoy the good life, to live as free men in their own country. That was only part of the Divine plan. It was actually not even the primary goal per se, but rather the means to an end. As Hashem told Moshe Rabbenu at their very first encounter—when the Jewish people will leave Egypt, they will not go directly to their promised land. No, first "you shall worship G-d at this mountain" (Exodus 3:12). For it was the Divine intention that the Jewish people be transported not just to another country, but to another plane of existence altogether, the realm of freedom of the spirit.

Maharal develops this idea in connection with a fascinating homiletical interpretation. Exodus 32:16 describes the writing of the Ten Commandments on the tablets (*luchot*) as: והמכתב מכתב

אלקים הוא חרות על הלחת “and the writing was G-d’s writing, incised (*charut*) upon the tablets.” Explaining this verse homiletically, the Mishnah in Avot 6:2 comments, “... Do not read “*charut*” (incised) but rather “*cheirut*” (freedom), for the only truly free person is one who studies the Torah (אין לך בן חורין אלא מי שעוסק בתורה).”

Maharal notes that this rabbinic dictum is not just an irrelevant play on words, but rather conveys a remarkable idea:

The mind conceives a picture of an object, but that conceptual representation, of course, is not the object itself. Similarly, the Torah is a picture of the world—indeed, it is the blueprint of Creation and a prescription for how the world should be – but it is not the world itself.

*Script is a parallel Torah, for script is also a graphical representation of words, not the words themselves. Script is form, rather than matter. When script is written in ink, it has a minor physical aspect to it, but the letters of the Tablets of Law were not formed by ink. They were engraved right through the stone tablets and hence they were purely form without material. The very letters of the *luchot* reflect an essential characteristic of Torah; namely, that Torah is purely conceptual and its concepts stand independently of physical implementation. (i.e., the Torah’s mitzvot are practiced in the physical world, but the Torah’s truths are not dependent on actual practice.)*

*External forces act only upon substance, not upon form. Hence, only the physical can be subjugated and not the conceptual. Such is Torah, for even when the mitzvot are abrogated through neglect or persecution, the principles of Torah are unchanged... In summary, the word *charut*, meaning engraved, is truly connected to *cheirut*, freedom. True freedom comes only when the intellect is unencumbered by physical vulnerability and limitation.*

(Rabbi Tuvia Bassar, Maharal of Prague Pirkei Avos: A Commentary Based on Selections from Maharal’s Derech Chaim [Mesorah Publications, 1997], 380-1.)

According to this explanation, the connection between *charut* and *cheirut* is not only in the similarity of sound. Rather, the words of the Torah, which were *charut*, engraved, on the tablets—those words *had no substance*. The words of the Torah were created by the absence of anything physical—by being engraved right through the stone tablets; they were purely words without any substance at all, formed by empty space. In a most subtle way, the writing on the *luchot* demonstrates that true freedom [*cheirut*] exists when the physical is reduced to—nothing [*charut*]. And while, of course, we are not meant to eliminate our physical selves, the existential challenge is for the individual to minimize the physical demands of his/her existence. Freedom from slavery is one step, but it is only a prelude, a prerequisite, so that the person can then be free to choose to limit his physical desires, in order to apply his energies to a life focused on devotion to G-d.

Thus, the concept of freedom in the context of Judaism is quite different from others’ definition of it. In the modern world, we tend to think of freedom as freedom *from* some unwanted entity:

to paraphrase FDR, freedom *from* want, freedom *from* fear, freedom *from* oppression, etc. While these are undoubtedly elements in the freedom of an individual, Judaism sees true freedom not as freedom *from* but rather as freedom *for*. A truly free person is not simply someone without restraints; that condition more closely resembles hedonism or anarchy. Judaism sees freedom for an individual as arising from a person's not being constrained by his/her physical needs and desires, not being caught in a web of compulsions and cravings, but rather free to follow his/her spiritual and intellectual thoughts and act upon them. True freedom inheres not only in being free from physical oppression but being free, in mind and spirit, to fulfill the human potential without getting bogged down in the demands of the mundane. As far as Judaism is concerned, it is freedom of the spirit which is essential to achieving human potential. We are charged with developing the spiritual aspect of our beings, rather than scrambling for a bigger piece of the pie, for more food, more land, more money, more power, more luxuries, more satiation of physical needs and indulgences.

Yet, how can the Mishnah in Avot justify the statement that a person can only be considered free when he immerses himself in Torah? Torah is, after all, a demanding discipline; even the rabbis describe a religious person as constrained by the “yoke of Torah and mitzvot” (Eliyahu Rabbah 2). If so, how can only one who accepts this “burden” be considered “free,” when that which he is accepting is so palpably not freedom at all but rather a strict discipline? (See *Siftei Chaim, Moadim II*, pp. 323 ff.)

Judaism maintains that the most essential aspect of freedom is in its use, its application. The purpose of freedom for the soul—that most vital, precious and unique aspect of the human being—is to be able to freely choose how to act, what to do, and how to allocate one's time and resources. The opposite of freedom is coercion, compulsion. In reality, it makes no difference whether a person is forced to do an action because his master beats him with a whip or whether he is forced to do so by his inability to deny himself gratification of the desires of the flesh, by the force of his drive to advance himself in power, wealth, or influence. In either circumstance, he is coerced, regardless of whether it is a self-propulsion or external pressure that forces him to do things. But a person who freely chooses to follow a higher calling because of his belief that this is the Truth, that this is the path to holiness and eternal life—that person is exercising free will; he is truly free. Physical, material existence is ephemeral; spiritual life is a window to eternity. One cannot achieve this ability to have the mind and spirit rule the body without the guidance of the Torah, whose teachings free the person's psyche and intellect to rise above the mundane demands of material existence and enter the realm of the sublime.

It is in this sense that we conclude the *maggid* portion of the Seder with the avowal of our eternal gratitude to G-d, “Who redeemed us ... and took us from slavery to freedom ...” When the Jews, standing at the foot of Mount Sinai, willingly declared their readiness “to do and to listen” (Exodus 24:7) to whatever G-d might require of them, they were freely accepting their new status— their realization that the reverse of the coin of redemption from Egyptian slavery was the opportunity to take on the “yoke of Torah”. That is the message of the first Commandment— Hashem freed them from bondage in Egypt, and thereby they became His servants rather than the servants of flesh and blood. This elevation to being G-d's servants they accomplished at the moment when they totally accepted the Torah *carte blanche*, without knowing what it would

entail. Thereby they were exercising their ultimate freedom—the freedom to choose life on a lofty, spiritual dimension. Even though there is hardly a more rigid, tightly programmed scenario in the Jewish lifestyle than the preparations for Passover and the Seder, not only do these preparations commemorate our liberation; in and of themselves, they actually manifest our freedom to choose the spiritual path of service to the Almighty.

Siftei Chaim (336) points out a contradiction between two biblical verses: Deut. 16:1 speaks about offering the Passover sacrifice, “for it was in the month of Abib, **at night**, that the L-rd your G-d freed you from Egypt.” On the other hand, Deut. 16:3 cautions against eating leavened bread for the duration of the holiday “so that you may remember **the day** of your departure from Egypt as long as you live.” *Siftei Chaim* notes that this seeming contradiction alludes to the two-fold reality of the redemption from Egypt, which was experienced in two phases—when the first born Egyptians died, the Jewish slaves were freed from their physical bondage. But it was not the Divine plan to extricate them only from their lowly servitude. In the morning, when they marched out of Egypt, they became free in spirit, no longer subjugated to Egyptian culture and civilization, at liberty to fashion their own unique and enduring world built on obedience to a higher calling.

Maharal notes that the festivals mandated by the Torah are not merely commemorations of historical events in the past (*Tiferet Israel*, chapter 25). Eccles. 3:1 states, “A season is set for everything, a time for every experience under the sun.” This verse adumbrates a metaphysical phenomenon--that Providence has provided certain times of the year with a heightened spiritual dimension, a particular essence which can be accessed most readily at that season. In that sense, in Passover, the “festival of our freedom,” there inheres a special proclivity for the soul to rise above the daily demands upon its energy and thoughts. Passover is a time designated, since the Exodus, as the ideal opportunity to avail oneself of the spiritual legacy which the Jewish people experienced and which is renewed yearly in the cycle of our observance. Thus, as we celebrate the holiday, we can hope, through our observance and commemoration, to tap in to the spiritual reservoirs available at this particular time of year.