

Free Speech (Shavuot 2008)

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

You might think there is little left original to write about Shavuot. We know its Biblical, agricultural origins, the importance of nature without the subservience to it, and the celebration of the seasons with without worshipping them. We know of its umbilical 49-day connection to Pesach, from barley to wheat. We also know how the rabbis emphasized the Torah and revelation and decided, not unanimously, that this was the anniversary of Sinai. "Torah" is the practical initiative that focused on study as the centre of our religious life in compensation for the Temple. "Revelation" is a theological concept that has underpinned the continuity of our constitution and given authority to the very specificities of it that have, in fact, kept our tradition alive.

But keeping a tradition alive and healthy requires more than just obedience. Like liberty, it requires eternal vigilance; otherwise one looks around too late and it is gone. It requires free expression and free thought, the essential ingredients for a healthy human mind and soul.

There are features of the English and the Jewish worlds I was born into that I dislike intensely. One is the idea that one must not express one's opinion. Of course I was taught not be rude, to try to learn to express my views calmly, rationally, and respectfully. But I grew up in a society where one did not say what one thought. Certain subjects were not to be brought up in polite conversation. One did not disagree with one's superiors or betters. The other was that one knew one's place. One did not rock boats or express private feelings or wash dirty laundry in public. Thank goodness my father rebelled against these constraints and taught me to follow him.

My weekly pieces, some intentionally light, are dedicated to free expression, association and fanciful things to show the delights of open enquiry as well as a desire to rock boats. I can leave scholarship to the many specialists that now abound on Jewish cyberspace. But someone needs to keep two flames alight, the flame of free speech, even contrarianism, and the flame of intellectual curiosity. God loves "light". Only some men fear it.

The Bible has God communicating to humans in words, whether in dream states or as in the case of Moses, awake and conscious. God speaks. And man speaks. The Zohar described man as the creature who speaks, long before some evolutionists described him as "the talking animal".

In my philosophical youth we debated the issue of whether there could be "private languages". The fascinating issue was whether it is possible for everyone to agree on a meaning or a usage of a word. To understand what words signify and how another person uses them, one must be familiar with words, and one must be open to listening and understanding precisely—because words are so easily misheard, misunderstood, and misrepresented. The only way to ensure that one hears and understands correctly or creatively is if one has

the freedom to explore, to wander in and out of the halls of comprehension and experience. Otherwise, one trains the mind to grow restricted, the way some primitive cultures constricted the skulls of children so that they would grow in misshapen ways.

I concede that belonging to a close-knit social community has great benefits and may be the necessity of the hour. But if thinking is restricted then the result eventually will be intellectual and moral distortion.

A Jewish school in Brooklyn wishes to close one campus and enlarge another. Some parents object, The Jewish Press reports them as wishing to remain anonymous for fear of retaliation. This happens in most places I have lived, including Antwerp and North London. Parents were and still are frightened to speak their minds for fear of consequences. What a reflection on a community and a religion if one is unable to speak one's mind. But this is increasingly true on religious matters where if one actually said some of the things that Maimonides dared to say he would be all but excommunicated. It is sad, but the only place where Orthodox thought can flourish, without fear of ostracism or retaliation is in academia.

Shavuot and Sinai celebrate words. Words liberated us from paganism and the randomness of irrationality. Freedom did not mean having no constraints, saying anything and everything. God, in the Torah, started creation by looking, observing, and then saying "Let there be". In some versions the word was there even before the process began. Indeed, in Greek, "logos" means not just the word but the capacity to reason. So we too must observe, reason, question, and have the freedom to say what we think without fear. Of course, if words are not linked to actions, and if we do not make choices that impose restrictions, then we are failing as any kind of creature, let alone a talking one.

According to the Talmud the words of God are like a hammer smashing a rock into a myriad pieces; each piece is special, hence the other famous dictum that there are seventy faces to the Torah. Each of us hears words through our own filters. That is why barely days after the Sinai revelation the same people who experienced it could turn their backs on Moses and God. They must have heard different things. Even Moses needed clarification.

This does not mean that all and any explanations are valid. Tradition plays an important part. And we do make our own choices as to whether we prefer a mystical, non-rational explanation to a logical one. But if we do not allow ourselves to even hear another point of view, how will we know if we have not missed or misrepresented what we thought we heard?