

Freedom

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The New York Review of Books has recently devoted a lot of space to a review of "The Sword and the Shield: The Revolutionary Lives of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King" by Peniel E. Joseph. In the current context of Black slavery and its ramifications, I found some interesting parallels (and differences) between the Jewish and the American Black experiences.

On one level, the confrontation between Martin Luther King and Malcolm X was over tactics rather than the common end goal of rectifying the evils of prejudice and discrimination. King believed in avoiding outright conflict. He was a disciple of peaceful protest and the moral righteousness of the cause. He was anxious to involve support and participation from beyond the Black community and was grateful for the overwhelming support of the Jewish community in his cause.

The photographs of him marching together with Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (and other Jews) from Selma to Montgomery, *Alabama*, on March 21, 1965, are iconic. They had a profound influence on me and led me to get involved as a student and later as a rabbi in opposition to racism wherever it existed. Another influence was the great jazz singer Billie Holiday. Her dramatic song "Strange Fruit" was written by a Jew, Abel Meeropol! It is about the curse of lynching Blacks in the USA. And it has just been brought back to our attention in a new release you can see on HULU, "The US v Billie Holiday" about the disgusting machinations of the FBI to hound her, under the guise of her drug addiction. But really to try and silence her for singing about the horrors of lynching and discrimination. And for those who like to idolize some American presidents, I must mention the fact that the agent who persecuted her remorselessly was later honored by none other than JFK!

On the other hand, stood Malcolm X the spokesman of Black violent opposition. Whatever sympathy I may have had for his argument that only violence can bring about change, the moment he joined the Nation of Islam with its disgusting anti-Semitic racism, I lost whatever admiration I had of his fearless stand. The conflicts between them were the unsavory underbelly of all revolutionary movements. And whereas King supported Jewish self-determination and Zionism, Malcolm X was strongly opposed. How can we explain this? Is freedom only permitted to some ethnicities and not others? Like the BBC recently and the Left generally, did he not comprehend the idea of Jewish ethnicity and Jewish rights to self-determination? Was it Malcolm X's belief that we were Christ Killers or his conversion to Islam that led him to his

anti-Zionism? This ambivalence and ambiguity continue to divide the African American community of the USA to this very day.

This dichotomy between the two men, of course, has always existed in the Jewish world as well. It set the Jewish Agency against Jabotinsky's Irgun, and Ben Gurion, the first Prime Minister of Israel against Menachem Begin (the sixth) over how to achieve an independent State of Israel for the Jewish People and defend it. This distinction between peaceful negotiation and violence is a universal challenge for anyone seeking radical change. I am not sure we can always say that one is right and the other is wrong. It is a moral challenge that was raised first in the Bible when Jacob's two sons massacred the men of Shechem over the rape of their sister Dinah.

The Black experience of slavery looked for solace and hope in the Bible and the Exodus. Negro spirituals drew constant parallels between Moses and the Children of Israel and the Israelite aspirations for deliverance. Even so, no two experiences of suffering can ever be exactly the same. One cannot even compare one person's pain to another's. Just as one cannot compare the cruelty of evil masters to the genocide of gas chambers. On the other hand, the Jew can usually disappear, disguise or assimilate if he wants to, whereas the person of color is always identifiable.

But there is another subtle difference that emerges from the language of the Exodus story and Passover. And it lies in how we understand the word free, freedom. The keyword in Martin Luther King's famous quote "Free at last, Free at last, Thank God almighty we are free at last." But what does freedom mean?

The Modern Hebrew word for freedom is *Herut*. This is a word that is not found in the Torah at all. In the Talmud where it is used for the first time, it is used as a pun. *Harut* means engraved. The Tablets of Stone were engraved. So the Mishna (Avot 6) says that real freedom, *Herut*, is the acceptance of *Harut*, self-control, and discipline which the commandments engraved in stone represented.

To think that all one needs is freedom is not enough. One needs to think about what one will do or how one will use that freedom. Hence the rabbinic liturgy we use today talks about Pesach as *Zeman Heruteynu*, the time of our freedom. But it is more than that. It is the occasion of our aspirations. *Herut* is an aspiration, not just a release.

The word in the Bible for freedom as a release is *Chofshi*. Servants are freed

from their obligations to serve. Ironically this is the word in modern Hebrew for someone secular, released from the obligations of religion. Moses did not just ask for freedom from slavery, he asked for freedom to worship, freedom to live a better life. In fact, he wanted to impose restrictions of obligations to our family, to our people to humanity.

It is a feature of the Seder night that we are asked to “ feel as if we ourselves have been freed from slavery.” A piece of theater that underlies the whole Seder experience. In the way, we act out the idea of being judged by a Divine Tribunal on Yom Kipur. But surely one cannot really feel what they felt. Or what slaves today feel? No, of course, one cannot. Theater is not life. But it can remind us of life. It can inspire us when just words are dry, repetitive, and often lose their impact. We need to employ our intellect, emotion, and aesthetic sensibilities. Which is what the seemingly banal rituals of the Seder are designed to achieve. They make more of a lasting impression.

This is why neglecting ritual and focus only on a general universal concept (which most modern Haggadot tend to do), important as that is, misses the point of the Seder. It is to emphasize the specifically Jewish understanding of freedom from slavery. Sadly, in our modern society, all the emphasis is on freedom alone, on compensation, and not enough on the struggle to be a better person and to find ways of striving upwards instead of just amelioration. This is why the Seder starts with an invitation to the poor, the hungry, and the disadvantaged. We are encouraged to think of freedom from, rather than freedom to. Freedom not just from authority, but also from the materialism that suffocates our souls.

This is what we celebrate on Pesach, not the freedom so much as the goal, to use that freedom to become better, more successful caring human beings and committed to our religious heritage and culture. And we end the Seder meal by looking forward to creating a just society in our homeland as well as in the world at large. We Jews can do this through our tradition. Otherwise, Pesach becomes just a gourmet experience that owes more to the cookery book than to the Torah.