

# Real Freedom

America is obsessed with slavery and its ramifications and rightly so. But it is less concerned with the idea of freedom and what that means. Both these ideas, slavery and freedom are crucial to the significance of Pesach or Passover as it is more commonly known in English. They are two sides of one coin, that of the human condition. But there is a difference between freedom **from** and freedom **to**.

For thousands of years, humans have been enslaved in one way or another, by their own leaders, abused, consigned to inferior status, forced to work, captured in wars, or bought and sold like chattels. Every single culture (I hate to use the word civilization) from Asia to the Americas, every skin color, has bought and sold its own. Many still do. No power in history can claim to be innocent. Some cultures had laws protecting slaves, but most did not. Jews were enslaved in Egypt, and throughout the Roman, Christian, and Muslim empires.

In another way, people have been enslaved by superstitions, customs, and ideologies that either were imposed on them, think of the feudal system, or they chose to adopt. In our day of greater freedom, most people are enslaved in different ways, by their ambitions, passions, fashions, and greed. They may think they are free when in fact very few are.

At university, we used to discuss the definition of freedom. We were given an exercise. Who is freer, the man who is shipwrecked on a desert island and can do whatever he wants and is not constrained by time, laws, or other people? Or the person living in the middle of a huge metropolis, where actions are constantly supervised, controlled by traffic lights, signs, regulations, laws concerning dress and behavior in public, constrained by petty bureaucracy, and condemned to wait in lines, not to mention taxes and fines?

If you define freedom as having no restrictions whatsoever, then somebody living in a city has many more limitations and is hardly free at all. But if freedom means having choices, living in a city one has so many more opportunities to meet people and do things. The person who lives alone on an island doesn't have to pay any taxes. But on the other hand, having to pay taxes provides you with, in theory, at any rate, certain benefits like protection, health, unemployment, public services, and helping those in need help.

There are three words used in the Bible for freedom. *Cherut* and *Chofshi* are the most common and *Dror* occurs only once. Both *Cherut* and *Chofshi* mean being released from an obligation. *Dror* signifies starting again, cleansing, and is only used for the land, and society in general. But what is the difference between the other two words?

The Hebrew *Chofshi* is used nowadays in modern Hebrew to mean a holiday, and also someone who is not religious, free **from** any religious obligation. The religious person will argue the very restrictions of religion are liberating

in the sense of enabling one to see and experience that otherwise, one might not have been able to appreciate. But the old political party in Israel of the late great Menahem Begin was called *Cherut* because he not only wanted Jews to be free of non-Jewish antisemitism but also from Marxist dogmas.

*Cherut* or *Chorin* are words not mentioned in the Torah at all. Only in Roman times does the Mishna use these words. Probably because the idea of a free citizen emerged from the Graeco Roman world. Hitherto, as in parts of the world today, one was part of a tribe or a community. One didn't want to be liberated from it probably because the alternative often was worse. The Bible admires the ant as the epitome of hard work and foresight. "Go the ant lazy one and study it and learn. It has no leader, officers, or rulers. It prepares its bread during the summer and gathers its food during the harvest." We now know ants do have rulers and enslave each other ants. They can only function with their hierarchies and worker ants. That was the model for all early societies.

The idea of individuality is relatively recent. The Torah uses the word *Charut* to mean engraved. To describe the writing on the Two Tablets of Stone. The Mishna ( Avot 6.2) says " The writing was that of God engraved on the stone tablets," do not read the word *Charut*, engraved, but rather *Cherut*, free, because only someone who accepts Torah can be free." They mean by this that someone disciplined and constrained by self-control and positive habits is freer in this sense than someone without, and ruled by instinct, passions, and selfishness. The two words are spelled differently so it's a play on the sound, not the etymology, but this is typical of the rabbinic method of homiletics, playing with the text to make an important moral point rather than linguistic accuracy. So that they understood freedom as the freedom **to** do something, **to** improve oneself. Not simply to escape, to be free from. Ancient Israel was the first to give all its members equal status and legal protection as a nation of priests.

Now let's look at the question of *Eved*, which is normally translated as a slave. But the term *Eved* was used in the Bible to mean an indentured employee or a faithful employee. Although the Torah did differentiate between members of the community and those from outside it. Service can denote compulsion, but not necessarily so. It can mean doing something positive. Something we are providing for somebody, an act of love not necessarily an obligation. When we say that we serve God we don't mean that we are slaves to God in the literal sense. It means we choose to do something of our own free will. On the other, if we live in a society where we are governed by their rules and regulations, and conventions, then in a sense we are very much enslaved to that particular society.

In the context of Passover, the Torah wants us to remember that we were taken out of Egypt not just to free us **from** slavery but to free ourselves from an Egyptian cultural system of thought and action, but rather **to** enjoy the benefits of a different kind of behavioral and ethical system. In Exodus, the Torah says that we should remember the Sabbath to keep it holy. "Six days you can work and on the seventh day you should take a break," (which is sometimes translated as "take a rest,") "because God created the heavens and the earth and then rested." In other words, living the ideal life combines activity and

creativity with rest and a break in routine. In the Book of Deuteronomy, it says, "Keep the Sabbath day because you were slaves in the land of Egypt." On the face of it, this looks like two contradictory explanations as to why we keep Shabbat. But together they reinforce a single message. The purpose of creation is so that a human being should be able to fulfill as much of his or her potential as they possibly can. that's the gift of life to humanity. To maximize our autonomy as well as our ability to experience as much of life as possible. The Biblical slave wants to be set free to make the most use of the freedom to live a spiritual life dedicated to good deeds and other people, not just oneself.

One starts by being free *Chofshi from*, but then one can graduate **to** a meaningful life of *Cherut*. And the way we do this is by discussing, debating, and educating. This is why the Talmud says that if you do initiate a discussion and challenge, there is no need to repeat the Four Questions and that you have to imagine that you are being freed now!

Happy Passover, Chag Pesach Sameach.

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