

FREEDOM AND SELF AWARENESS

by Rabbi Shimon Apisdorf

SCENARIO #1

"I can do anything in the world I want. There is just one problem - I don't know what I want."

Question: Is this person free?

Answer: Yes, and no.

Yes, she possesses the freedom to do whatever she wants. But then again no, for she is trapped by the stifling parameters of limited self-awareness. Though totally unrestrained to go any place at all, she is unable to take even the smallest step, for lack of knowing where she wants to go.

SCENARIO #2

"Sometimes I get so frustrated. I know exactly what I want, but I still can't seem to achieve my goals. Halfway through one project my motivation wanes and I'm on to something else. I get distracted, caught up in other things - I just can't seem to stay focused."

Question: Is this person free?

Answer: Yes, and no.

Yes, because he knows what he wants to accomplish and possesses the resources necessary for success. But then again no. For some reason he has become paralyzed by forces he seems unable to control. Is he afraid to take risks or is there an underlying lack of self-confidence? Is he still waiting for someone to take care of him or is he just plain lazy?

Yes, he is free, but unable to harness the inner strength to actualize his freedom; sadly, he is also a slave.

SCENARIO #3

Now, let us look into the mirror of irony. The year is 1978 and the man's name is Yosef Mendelovich. The setting: a dank cell deep within the bowels of the Christopol prison in the Soviet Union. The date is April 12. On the Jewish calendar it is the 14th of Nisan, one day before the start of Passover.

Yosef is a prisoner. He is a gaunt human shell, and he is about to light a candle. Made of hoarded bits of string, pitiful droplets of oil, and stray slivers of wax, this is a candle fashioned by Yosef's own hands.

The candle is lit - the traditional search for chometz (leaven) begins.

Sometime earlier Yosef had complained of back problems. The infirmary in hell provided him with mustard to serve as a therapeutic plaster. Unused then, this mustard would later reappear as maror - bitter herbs - at Yosef's seder table. A long-saved onion bulb in water had produced a humble bit of greenery. This would be his karpas. And the wine? Raisins were left to soak in an old jelly jar, water was occasionally added, and fermentation was prayed for. This was wine. The Haggadah which Yosef transcribed into a small notebook before being imprisoned had now been set to memory. The original was secretly passed on to another dangerous enemy of the state, Natan Sharansky.

Question: Is Yosef free?

Answer: Yes, and no.

No, he cannot do whatever he wants. He has been denied even the liberty to know when the sun shines and the stars twinkle. For Yosef the world of free men doesn't even begin to exist.

But then again, yes. Yosef, perhaps, is more free even than his captors. Clearly self-aware, he knows exactly who he is, what he wants, and is prepared to pay any price to have it. Today he walks the streets of Israel, studies Torah, and buys box after box of matzah to serve at his Seder. He is a free man now, just as he was even behind those lifeless prison walls.

WHAT IS FREEDOM?

Freedom is the capacity to express in one's life those values and ideals which stem from the essence of the human soul.

The Talmud says, "Precious is the human being who was created in the image of G-d. And an even greater sign of this preciousness is that man was informed that he was created in G-d's image."

That all human beings are created in the image of G-d does not mean that there is a bit of Aphrodite and Adonis in all of us, but that we all have free will. All human beings possess the ability to make meaningful and substantive choices which have a direct impact on their lives, as well as on the lives of others. It is these choices which determine the ultimate moral and spiritual quality of every human being's existence.

SELF-AWARENESS

Self-awareness means that we are able to stand outside of ourselves. In so doing we are able to look within and, to a degree, to assess our own inner workings. How do we react to people and situations, and why? When are we at ease, when are we tense, and when do we feel a sense of balance? What are our goals and priorities, and what are the values reflected in those goals? Are those values ours, or are they someone else's? Where are we strong and where do we need to grow? What comes naturally and what requires great effort? Who do we love, what is it we love in them, and are we able to express that love? Are we being honest with ourselves, with others, and with G-d? Are we headed in the right direction? If not - why not, and if yes, to what do we attribute our success?

Unaware of all these things, we remain mired in a dense fog of confusion and doubt. Can we ever be fully self-aware? Probably not. But aware enough to set ourselves free? Yes, and this is one of life's most pivotal challenges.

The achievement and maintenance of freedom is available only through the ongoing struggle for self-awareness. This process of clarification, coupled with the conviction to follow wherever it may lead, is the only way to achieve a spiritually sensitive, value-driven life of liberty.

Ironically, this freedom can land you in a prison where you are the captor, while your guards are the

prisoners. Just ask Yosef Mendelovich - one of the freest people who ever walked this earth.

FREE WILL AND RESPONSIBILITY

Everyone knows that people have the ability to make choices.

If you ever did something wrong - and later regretted it - then you believe you had a choice. If you ever felt that a criminal deserved to be punished - despite the socioeconomic factors he was subjected to - then you believe in free will. If you believe that Raoul Wallenberg was a noble and righteous human being, then it's because you believe that he made a choice where so many others failed. And, if you ever yell at your kids for leaving their room a mess, then you most definitely believe in free will.

What you do not believe is that people are bound by the fatalistic chains of familial circumstance, socioeconomic condition, genes, or Divine predestination. Thus, you are not prisoner to an attitude of indifference, resignation, and melancholy. Instead you are animated by an abundantly optimistic outlook which sees self and others as shapers, creators and captains of great ships of potential.

You believe - as Judaism asserts - that people are people and not psychological robots. That the existence of free will automatically creates human responsibility. And, that the most precious gift a person can receive is the freedom to make their own choices, and to be responsible for their own actions.

May we all merit to absorb this important lesson on Passover - the Holiday of Freedom!

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