

GETTING IN TOUCH WITH OUR INNER SLAVES

by Rabbi Avi Shafran

The word "slave" doesn't generally inspire positive feelings. For Jews, though, especially during the weeks after Passover, it should.

To be sure, the images evoked when we think of servitude tend to be of economically or racially oppressed classes, of men and women being treated as if they were something less than fully human.

There are other types of servitude as well that have little or nothing to do with class. For example, whether we choose to confront it or not, we are all servants - indeed slaves - to a considerable host of masters. Most of us are indentured to one or another degree to any of a number of physical and psychological desires. Some are relatively innocuous, like the craving for a particular food - or for food in general - or the yearning to be entertained or pampered or allowed to sleep late. Other desires are more sinister, like the compulsion to ingest some addictive chemical, or the lust to lord oneself over other people, or the coveting of property or persons.

In contemporary times, many of us are enslaved virtually without even knowing it - chained to our work, taking orders from advertisers, moving to the dictates of the arbiters of style, addicted to the media or to the Internet. Oddly, every modern opportunity seems to morph into a new master; new options pull us even further from true freedom.

It seems almost as if it is a hard-wired part of human nature that we serve. Indeed, Judaism maintains, it is, and for good reason: Because we are meant to be servants. We just have to choose the right master.

Most folks are aware that Passover is the Jewish holiday of freedom, commemorating how the distant ancestors of today's Jews, embraced by G-d and led by Moses, threw off the yoke of Pharaoh's enslavement. But there is something very essential to the Passover account that many

don't realize: Though Egypt was rejected, servitude was not.

"Let My people go!" God ordered Pharaoh. But the command doesn't end there. It continues: "... so that they may serve Me."

The Jewish concept of freedom, or *cherut*, does not mean being unfettered, but rather fettered to what is meaningful; it does not mean independence but rather subservience - not, though, to the mundane but to the divine.

Which is why Passover, in a sense, doesn't end after its seven (or, outside of the Holy Land, eight) days. On the second day of the holiday, following the Biblical command, observant Jews begin counting, marking each of the following forty-nine days by pronouncing a blessing and assigning the day a number. The fiftieth day, the day after the counting, or *Sefirat Ha'Omer*, is completed, is the holiday of *Shavuot* ("Weeks"); it is in a very real sense the culmination of Passover.

For according to Jewish tradition, *Shavuot* is the anniversary of the revelation at Sinai, of the day the Torah was given to the Jewish people. And there lies the secret of Jewish freedom.

The life of a libertine is not freedom but quite its opposite, enslavement to perceived pleasures, to substances and possessions, to the dictates of society. Meaningful freedom, paradoxically, is being indentured - but to the ultimate master, the Master of all. And so as we count the days, literally, from the holiday of freedom to the holiday of Torah, we express (and, hopefully impress on ourselves) just how inextricably the theme of Passover is linked to that of *Shavuot*, how the ultimate expression of true freedom is having the courage and mettle to throw off the yoke of temporal masters and commit ourselves to what is meaningful in the ultimate sense: the will and law of G-d.

The rabbis of the Talmud put it pithily, punning on the Hebrew word for "etched," used in reference to the words carved on the Tablets of the Law. The word is "*charut*," which the Rabbis compare to *cherut*, freedom.

"The only free person," they inform us, "is the one immersed in Torah."

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