

FREEDOM OF RELIGION

by Rabbi Dovid Green

Toward the end of World War II, the German armies were retreating. Still, even to the end they managed to hold on to their Jewish prisoners. One such battalion of prisoners was used to dismantle anything that the advancing allied army might be able to make use of. When the fast day of Yom Kippur came that year, the Jewish prisoners decided that come what may, they were not going to eat on that holy day. When the Germans got word of this the men were warned that if they knew what was good for them, they would not consider this "folly." Nevertheless, they did manage to fast for the entire day of Yom Kippur, and they quietly ate their meager rations after the day had come to an end.

Unfortunately, after the fact they were exposed, and all of the men were summoned to a roll call. "We know that you ignored our strict orders and you are deserving of punishment, but we are willing to be benevolent. Anyone who will step forward and express regret will be pardoned." No one moved. We will give you another chance to step forward and express regret for what you have done." Still no one moved. "Then you are forcing us to punish you." They were taken to the top of a muddy hill, and forced to slide down the hill on their bare stomachs. Over and over they were given the chance to express their regret, and over and over they refused. Repeatedly, they were forced to slide down the muddy hill on their stomachs. Still, the prisoners did not step forward to express their regret.

So I ask you, according to our concept of freedom, what category would we place these Jewish prisoners in? Is it feasible to call men in their shoes free men?

In today's world, we are rightfully very preoccupied with procuring our rights and freedoms. We want to be free to pursue our priorities, live according to our convictions, and pursue what makes us happy. We don't want anyone limiting us or imposing on us his concept of how we should live. These are our entitlements as human beings, and no one should have the right to take them from us.

Nevertheless, even though we would not have it any other way, we must be cognizant that freedom is a double-edged sword. It is possible to live with total freedom, and still be very far from free, and vice versa.

In this week's parsha the tablets containing the Ten Commandments are described. "And the tablets were made by G-d, and the writing was G-d's writing, engraved (Heb. Chorus) on the tablets." (Exodus 32:16). Our sages (Chapters of the fathers 6:2) comment on this "do not read 'chorus'

'engraved,' but rather 'chairus,' 'freedom,' for no one else is free but he who occupies himself in Torah learning." The words 'Chorus' and 'Chairus' are spelled the same way with different vocalization. (Note that a Torah scroll does not contain the actual vowels that go under the words, and it actually lends itself to this kind of interpretation. Nevertheless, this is not a random form of interpretation, and in order to be employed there needs to be an actual connection between the simple and the homiletic explanation.)

Rabbi Sampson Raphael Hirsch explains the words of the sages as follows. "Even as the Torah ennobles us, so a truly devoted study of it also makes us free, free from error, free from the temptations of physical lusts and desires, and free from the crushing and degrading power of the multitude of worries and troubles of daily living."

In other words, it is very easy to be a slave to our desires, and emotions. How many people in the free world are drowning in debt because they are literally slaves to their desires for material things? How many people are slaves to anger and other emotions, which cause them to act in destructive and regrettable ways? It is even possible to be a slave to an ideal that leads a person to ruination. Nazism is a perfect example of just such an ideal. To the uninitiated, it appears that many people are fortunate, and living a life afforded them by their freedom. It is true, but obviously not the whole story.

Just as a three-piece suit would feel to Tarzan the first time he would wear one, we might tend to think that the commandments of the Torah are constricting and repressive. This, however, is a superficial view. On further examination of the mitzvos, and the veracity of the Torah, we may come to conclude that the Jewish "prisoners" in our story are truly free, and their German oppressors are the real prisoners.

Freedom alone is an opportunity to exercise free choice. However, the Torah teaches us that paradoxically, a commitment to its ideals and commandments are the source of true freedom. That is the connection between the Hebrew words 'engraved,' and 'freedom,' that one who sincerely engraves the words of Torah on his heart, and reflects them in his actions has achieved true freedom.

Good Shabbos!

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