

THE MEANING OF FREEDOM

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

The Meaning of Freedom

"And G-d said to Moshe, 'go to Pharoah, and say to him, 'thus says G-d: 'LET MY PEOPLE GO...''"
[Exodus 7:26]

This is, of course, one of the most famous quotes in the Bible.

It is also one of the most common half-quotes therein.

Verse 7:26 does not, in fact, conclude "let My people go," but "let My people go, and they will serve Me." This, even though Passover is the Festival of Freedom. What are we free to do? To serve G-d! And thus we come upon an entirely different understanding of freedom than the view of modern Western thought.

To be "free," as commonly understood, is to be free to do whatever one wishes to do. As long as you do not harm another person -- thereby interfering with his or her freedom -- you can do basically whatever you want. There are no borders, no limitations.

According to this view, of course, even a basic moral code -- something which claims to dictate that certain behaviors are "wrong" whether or not they harm anyone -- is an obstruction to freedom. For better or for worse, a moral code imposes borders and limitations upon an individual. This gives people a profound motivation to dismiss moral systems, and the underlying First Cause of a moral system. Or, as the scientist Aldous Huxley ("Brave New World") stated candidly in "Confessions of a Professional Free-Thinker," in 1966:

"I had reasons not to want the world to have meaning, and as a result I assumed the world had no meaning, and I was readily able to find satisfactory grounds for this assumption... For me, as it undoubtedly was for most of my generation, the philosophy of meaninglessness was an instrument of liberation from a certain moral system. We were opposed to morality because it interfered with our freedom."

If even a basic moral system is a limitation on freedom, then it follows immediately and logically that a system such as that Commanded by the Torah, with 613 mandatory and prohibited acts, with countless restrictions and sub-restrictions upon behavior, consumption of foods, sexual activity - "you name it, Judaism wants to control it" -- is repressive, restrictive, limiting. And this is the vision of Judaism which many of us have.

The Torah itself is uncompromising. Pesach is called "the time of our liberation," not "the time of exchanging one master for Another." This is not "basically free, but with other limitations." No -- the Torah calls all these laws and restrictions "freedom," and even has the chutzpah to claim that what the world calls freedom -- that is limited. As Rabbi Yehoshuah ben Levi says in the Chapters of the Fathers 6:2, "there is no free man like the one who is involved with the study of Torah."

In the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson wrote that we have rights, such as the famous "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." If we view this as an ascension from the most basic right (to life), to the ultimate towards which we all strive, if Liberty is supposed to make it possible for us to be happy, than the Torah's "freedom" seems to serve the purpose very well. Those who visit an active observant Jewish community do not find a restricted, shackled people, but one where sharing, generosity, and happiness are the order of the day. There was actually a Los Angeles Times survey that discovered that residents of religious communities were significantly more likely to describe themselves as "happy."

Nonetheless, something more than an experiential argument is required. Regardless of the sociological data -- how can this be? What is the vision of "freedom" that the Torah gives us?

To answer this question, we must begin by understanding mental bounds. While they are every bit as real as physical ones, they are not so easily perceived.

In the Chapters of the Fathers 4:28, Rabbi Elazar HaKappar says: "jealousy, lust and honor remove a person from the world." What does this mean? One explanation is that these things color a person's vision. Instead of dealing with the "real world," he or she instead sees the world from a distorted perspective. And, of course, this unrealistic perspective limits the person, preventing him or her from doing things which otherwise would be entirely possible and appropriate. The victim is shackled, regardless of his or her self-perception.

Sigmund Freud came close to this concept, saying that a person must continually battle primal urges for lust and power. But Rabbi Elazar HaKappar presents them as items which a person can far more easily set aside. They are the products of the Evil Inclination.

And what are we to do with the Evil Inclination? As the Talmud says, "drag it to the House of Study." "There is no free man like the one who is involved with the study of Torah." The study of Torah is the ideal "sublimation" of those urges which otherwise bound a person, shackle him to his drives and animal instincts. In a word, Torah gives a person perspective. It enables a person to step away from the pursuit of lust, power, or jealousy -- leaving him or her to pursue happiness instead.

There is yet another matter. We are creatures of accomplishment, creatures of purpose. Just as G-d is Creator, we are naturally driven to emulate G-dly traits, and to create, to do, to accomplish.

It should be obvious, yet it must be said: in order to accomplish, one must have a goal. For accomplishments to have meaning, the goal must have meaning. And if all life is meaningless, then

all goals will be lacking ultimate meaning as well.

If we accept this axiom that accomplishments bring true satisfaction, then Huxley, with all of his "freedom," can never achieve happiness. Because meaninglessness was his ultimate belief, he could not imbue his accomplishments with meaning.

This, too, is crucial to freedom, for freedom brings with it the pursuit of happiness.

Torah teaches meaning. Service of G-d imbues the most trivial of acts with sacred purpose. It says that a person can perfect him or herself, and the entire world, and sets out a path towards that destination. And this is why the Torah can claim that its adherents are truly, ultimately, happily free.

This Passover, may we truly celebrate and recognize what we have -- the tool for ultimate freedom!

With blessings for a happy and kosher holiday,

Rabbi Yaakov Menken