

# YES LIMITS

*by Rabbi Yaakov Menken*

*"G-d said to Moshe, 'Come to Pharaoh and speak to him: "So says HaShem, G-d of the Hebrews: Send out My people, that they may serve Me."' [9:1]*

In this week's reading, we find one of the most famous of Biblical quotations: "Let my people go!"

But in actuality, it is one of the most infamous of half-quotes. It is a distortion of the truth -- for the message G-d told Moshe to deliver to Pharaoh was "Let my people go -- that they may serve Me!"

The Western world's image of freedom is based upon our "unalienable right" to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" -- especially the latter. Self-governance, US-style democracy, is the ideal. We seek as few boundaries upon individual behavior as possible. Or as Madison Ave. presents it, we want "No Limits."

Most of us realize that "total freedom" is impossible -- it leads to anarchy and benefits no one. If we legislate no limits on personal behavior, it is impossible for us to prevent this behavior from interfering with the liberty and pursuit of happiness of others.

So, in fact, limits are necessary. But are they merely a necessary evil, or are they a positive good?

A distant relative, I am told, decided to raise her son by allowing him to discover his own boundaries -- meaning to say, she laid down no rules. Since I do not know the situation personally I do not know details, such as whether there was so much as a "suggested" bedtime.

What I do know is that this lasted no more than five years. Finally this mother realized that while overly harsh rules can hamper a loving relationship, some rules are in fact necessary.

This is something which I observed time and time again when I was a yeshiva student, and joined many different families for their Shabbos meals. It could hardly have been more obvious that the happiest children were not found in families with no rules, no limits, no guidelines. On the contrary, the happiest children were most likely to be found in families where the guidelines were clear, unmistakable, and fairly applied.

But, we say, we are different from children! We are adults, and capable of making our own decisions. We know what is right, and what is wrong.

Do we? Is there anyone who can say he or she really knows how the world works, and what is good for us? Or is it not clear to us that guidelines would help us as well -- if we only knew who we could

trust?

That is why we have the Torah. Judaism recognizes that no person knows everything that the world has to offer -- but the Creator of the world certainly does!

So it is not simply "let my people go" but "that they may serve me" -- that they have no human master, but rather the guidance of a loving father. And this, in truth, is the greatest freedom of all!

Good Shabbos,  
Rabbi Yaakov Menken

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*This week's class is dedicated to the speedy healing of Azriel Yitzchak ben Chaya Gitel.*

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