

# WHY TORAH SPELLS FREEDOM

*by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein*

*The writing was Divine writing, engraved on the tablets.*<sup>[2]</sup>

Chazal<sup>[3]</sup> urge us to find the word *cheirus*/ freedom in place of *charus*/ engraved. Only those who involve themselves deeply with Torah are truly free.

Chazal here are not conveying some mysterious, profound message leaked on the other side of the divide between earth and the Heavenly courts. There is nothing mysterious about this position at all. To the contrary, it makes perfect and obvious sense. It could not be otherwise.

In the conversation with HKBH that launched Moshe's leadership career, Hashem assured him, "This will be the sign that I sent you! When you take the nation out of Egypt, you will serve G-d on this mountain."<sup>[4]</sup> This seems like a good idea at a bad time. After Moshe turned the laws of nature topsy-turvy on the Egyptians, forcing them to relent, and setting the stage for the Jewish escape to freedom, what further sign was needed?

The societies that we are aware of organize themselves around some predictable elements, like a common land, culture, language, and economy. But we detect an element that is not so predictable. In each case, the society was enamored of a particular ideal or goal. We can point to older societies that cherished philosophy, devoted itself to the arts, or venerated strength. In modern times, the pursuit of wealth is a common thread in many countries.

A common denominator of all these ideals is that valuing any of them assures the subjugation of a sub-class. The reason is quite simple. Whatever it is that society values is always distributed unequally. There will those who have far more than others, and those who will come up short. This inequality allows those with a surfeit to control those with a deficit. Those who are the smartest, strongest, or richest are positioned to wield power over those who are less richly endowed. Given Man's *yetzer hora*, it is virtually a certainty that the power will be used for less than holy objectives.

Modern European habit continues the pattern. We have witnessed the backlash against countries that elevated acquisition of wealth – with their concomitant abuse of the poor - as their highest ideals. Countries that rejected the old ideals tried to replace them with notions of equality and freedom. In fact, all they did was introduce new systems of inequality that oppressed different people.

Is there any way to escape what seems to be a fixture of civilization? It will not happen so long as any earthly pursuit or endeavor is the focus of Man's fascination. Only when Man looks beyond himself and his abode to something higher can human society break the shackles of oppression. When that higher element is available to all people equally, there will be no possibility of the haves enslaving the have-nots.

This, then, is the plain sense of Chazal's insistence that only the words of Torah offer human freedom. They decidedly meant all of humanity – not just the Jewish people. The gift at Sinai of a Divine message offered all of mankind the chance to shatter their lesser gods and their ignoble preoccupations, and to build societies of men of true equality.

Moshe asked two questions of HKBH when he was chosen to become the leader of Bnei Yisrael.

"Who am I that I should go to Paroh?..."<sup>[5]</sup> Moshe, in his humility, thought himself unequal to the job. But then he continued, "...and that I should take the Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt." Here he challenged Hashem concerning the value of the entire project. What good will it do to take them out of Egypt? In the long run, will this bestow freedom upon them? It is in the nature of things that humans simply pass from one form of servitude to another!

Hashem responded to Moshe. Your point is well-taken. I am preparing something for them that will make their freedom permanent and essential, rather than ephemeral and imagined. "When you take the nation out of Egypt, you will serve G-d on this mountain." On this mountain, I will give them the Torah. In it they – and all of humanity – will find real freedom.

We are used to midrashim that examine the plene and deficient forms or words, i.e. why a word is spelled with a *vav* or *yud* that is sometimes absent. Generally, the fuller form adds or enlarges. So it is puzzling to note that two *pesukim* reverse our expectation. In "Hashem will rule forever!"<sup>[6]</sup> *yimloch* lacks a *vav*. Surprisingly, it shows up in "a servant who rules." Should it not be Hashem's rule that is fuller, and the servant's that is deficient?

The answer is related to the discussion above. In fact, the servant's rule is more extensive than Hashem's! The servant will impose his authority every place that he can. HKBH is much more judicious about limiting our freedom. He allows us to exercise freedom of choice. He stands back, so to speak, and allows us to act as we choose, without instantly striking down the evildoer. His overt kingship, then, is more limited than the human form of monarch. His *yimloch*, then, is the one spelled more compactly.

We are still curious. Why does the Torah convey this lesson through a word that means rule in the future, rather than the present or past?

We would suggest that there are skeptics unprepared to accept what we spoke about above. How is it any better or more liberating to accept the authority of the Torah, and to agree to become G-d's slaves? Our lives are still not our own. We are burdened with the countless requirements of Torah

law, with not possibility of opting out.

To this we respond, "*Hashem yimloch l'olam va'ed*." Some people initially ask this question. It is not unreasonable to ask it, at the very beginning of a person's discovery of his connection to Hashem and His Torah. With the passage of time, however, a person learns of the sweetness of Torah and its lifestyle, and the ecstasy of dwelling in the presence of the Creator. He discovers his essential freedom. It is over time, i.e. in the future, that a person comes to understand what freedom is, and that Hashem's *yimloch* – His forcing Himself upon us – is very, very small.

1. Based on HaMedrash V'HaMaaseh, Naso, by R. Yechezkel Libshitz zt"l.
2. Shemos 32:16.
3. Avos 6:2.
4. Shemos 3:12.
5. Shemos 3:11.
6. Shemos 15:18.