

INSPIRE

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10TH SHEVAT - 23RD JANUARY 2021

FINDING FREEDOM

By Rabbi Yossi Goldman



Free at last, free at last, thank G d Almighty we are free at last. Who said these words? No, it wasn't Moses but American civil rights leader, Dr. Martin Luther King. But it could have been Moses – or for that matter any one of the millions of Jews who were liberated from Egyptian bondage.

This is the week when we read of the great Exodus. Let my people go that they may serve Me was the Divine call transmitted by Moses to Pharaoh. Now, if the purpose of leaving Egypt and Pharaoh's whip was to be able to serve G d, so where is the freedom? We are still slaves, only now we are servants of the Almighty!

Indeed, countless individuals continue to question the merits of religion in general. Who wants to submit to the rigors of religion when we can be free spirits? Religion, they argue, stifles the imagination, stunts our creative style, forever shouts instructions and lays down the law. Thou Shalt do this and Thou Shalt better not do that, or else! Do's and don'ts, rules and regulations are the hallmark of every belief system; but why conform to any system at all? Why not just be "me"?

Many Jews argue similarly. Mitzvahs cramp my style. Keeping kosher is a serious inconvenience. Shabbat really gets in the way of my weekend. And Passover has got to be the biggest headache of the year.

Long ago, the sages of the Talmud said it was actually the other way around. There is no one as free as he who is occupied with the study of Torah. But how can this possibly be true? Torah is filled with rules of law, ethics and even expectations and exhortations that we take the high road and behave beyond the call of duty. How could they say that Torah makes us free? Surely it is inhibiting rather than liberating? Let me share an answer I once heard on the radio while driving in my car. It was during a BBC interview with Malcolm Muggeridge, the former editor of Punch, the satirical British magazine. Punch magazine was arguably England's most irreverent publication. It mocked and ridiculed the royal family long before they did it to themselves. In his latter years, Malcolm Muggeridge became religious and the interviewer was questioning how the sultan of satire, the prince of Punch could make such a radical transformation and become religious? How could he stifle such a magnificent free spirit as his?

Muggeridge's answer was a classic, which I still quote regularly. He said he had a friend who was a famous yachtsman, an accomplished navigator of the high seas. A lesson he once gave him in sailing would provide the answer to the reporter's question. The yachtsman taught him that if you want to enjoy the freedom of the high seas, you must first become a slave to the compass.

A young novice might challenge the experienced professional's advice. But why should I follow that little gadget? Why can't I go where I please? It's my yacht! But every intelligent person understands that without the navigational fix provided by the compass we will flounder and sail in circles. Only by following the lead of the compass will the wind catch our sails so we can experience the ecstasy and exhilaration of the high seas. If you want to enjoy the freedom of the high seas you must first become a slave to the compass.

The Torah is the compass of life. It provides our navigational fix so we know where to go and how to get there. Without the Torah's guidance and direction we would be lost in the often stormy seas of confusion. Without a spiritual guidance system we flounder about, wandering aimlessly through life. Just look at our kids when they're on vacation from school and are "free" from the disciplines of the educational system. Unless they have a program of some kind to keep them busy – like a summer camp – they become very frustrated in their "freedom."

Within the Torah lifestyle there is still ample room for spontaneity and freedom of expression. Not all rabbis are clones. To the untrained eye every yeshiva bochur looks identical – a black hat, glasses and a beard. The truth is that every one is distinctively different; an individual with his very own tastes attitudes, personality and preferences. They may look the same but they are each unique.

We can be committed to the compass and still be free spirits. Indeed, there are none as free as they who are occupied with the Torah.

FREEDOM AND TRUTH

By Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

The American writer Bruce Feiler recently published a best-selling book entitled *The Secrets of Happy Families*. It's an engaging work that uses research largely drawn from fields like team building, problem-solving and conflict resolution, showing how management techniques can be used at home also to help make families cohesive units that make space for personal growth.

At the end, however, he makes a very striking and unexpected point: "The single most important thing you can do for your family may be the simplest of all: develop a strong family narrative." He quotes a study from Emory University that the more children know about their family's story, "the stronger their sense of control over their lives, the higher their self-esteem, the more successfully they believe their family functions."

A family narrative connects children to something larger than themselves. It helps them make sense of how they fit into the world that existed before they were born. It gives them the starting point of an identity. That in turn becomes the basis of confidence. It enables children to say: this is who I am. This is the story of which I am a part. These are the people who came before me and whose descendant I am. These are the roots of which I am the stem reaching upward toward the sun.

Nowhere was this point made more dramatically than by Moses in this week's parsha. The tenth plague is about to strike. Moses knows that this will be the last. Pharaoh will not merely let the people go. He will urge them to leave. So, on G d's command, he prepares the people for freedom. But he does so in a way that is unique. He does not talk about liberty. He does not speak about breaking the chains of bondage. He does not even mention the arduous journey that lies ahead. Nor does he enlist their enthusiasm by giving them a glimpse of the destination, the Promised Land that G d swore to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the land of milk and honey.

He talks about children. Three times in the course of the parsha he turns to the theme:

And when your children ask you, 'What do you mean by this rite?' you shall say . . . (Exodus 12:26-27)

And you shall explain to your child on that day, 'It is because of what the Lord did for me when I went free from Egypt' (Exodus 13:8)

And when, in time to come, your child asks you, saying, 'What does this mean?' you shall say to him . . . (Exodus 13:14)

This is wonderfully counterintuitive. He doesn't speak about tomorrow but about the distant future. He does not celebrate the moment of liberation. Instead he wants to ensure that it will form part of the people's memory until the end of time. He wants each generation to pass on the story to the next. He wants Jewish parents to become educators, and Jewish children to be guardians of the past for the sake of the future. Inspired by G d, Moses taught the Israelites the lesson arrived at via a different route by the Chinese: If you plan for a year, plant rice. If you plan for a decade, plant a tree. If you plan for a century, educate a child.

Jews became famous throughout the ages for putting education first. Where others built castles and palaces, Jews built schools and houses of study. From this flowed all the familiar achievements in which we take collective pride: the fact that Jews knew their texts even in ages of mass illiteracy; the record of Jewish scholarship and intellect; the astonishing over-representation of Jews among the shapers of the modern mind; the Jewish reputation, sometimes admired, sometimes feared, sometimes caricatured, for mental agility, argument, debate, and the ability to see all sides of a disagreement. But Moses' point wasn't simply this. G d never commanded us: Thou shall win a Nobel Prize. What he wanted us to teach our children was a story. He wanted us to help our children understand who they are, where they came from, what happened to their ancestors to make them the distinctive people they became and what moments in their history shaped their lives and dreams. He wanted us to give our children an identity by turning history into memory, and memory itself into a sense of responsibility. Jews were not summoned to be a nation of intellectuals. They were called on to be actors in a drama of redemption, a people invited by G d to bring blessings into the world by the way they lived and sanctified life.

For some time now, along with many others in the West, we have sometimes neglected this deeply spiritual element of education. That is what makes Lisa Miller's recent book *The Spiritual Child*, an important reminder of a forgotten truth.

Professor Miller teaches psychology and education at Columbia University and co-edits the journal *Spirituality in Clinical Practice*. Her book is not about Judaism or even religion as such, but specifically about the importance of parents encouraging the spirituality of the child.

Children are naturally spiritual. They are fascinated by the vastness of the universe and our place in it. They have the same sense of wonder that we find in some of the greatest of the psalms. They love stories, songs and rituals. They like the shape and structure they give to time, and relationships, and the moral life. To be sure, sceptics and atheists have often derided religion as a child's view of reality, but that only serves to strengthen the corollary, that a child's view of reality is instinctively, intuitively religious. Deprive a child of that by ridiculing faith, abandoning ritual, and focusing instead on academic achievement and other forms of success, and you starve him or her of some of the most important elements of emotional and psychological well-being.

As Professor Miller shows, the research evidence is compelling. Children who grow up in homes where spirituality is part of the atmosphere at home are less likely to succumb to depression, substance abuse, aggression and high-risk behaviours including physical risk-taking and "a sexuality devoid of emotional intimacy". Spirituality plays a part in a child's resilience, physical and mental health and healing. It is a key dimension of adolescence and its intense search for identity and purpose.

The teenage years often take the form of a spiritual quest. And when there is a cross-generational bond through which children and parents come to share a sense of connection to something larger, an enormous inner strength is born. Indeed the parent-child relationship, especially in Judaism, mirrors the relationship between G d and us.

That is why Moses so often emphasizes the role of the question in the process of education: "When your child asks you, saying ..." – a feature ritualized at the Seder table in the form of the Mah nishtanah. Judaism is a questioning and argumentative faith, in which even the greatest ask questions of G d, and in which the rabbis of the Mishnah and Midrash constantly disagree. Rigid doctrinal faith that discourages questions, calling instead for blind obedience and submission, is psychologically damaging and fails to prepare a child for the complexity of real life. What is more, the Torah is careful, in the first paragraph of the Shema, to say, "You shall love the Lord your G d ..." before saying, "You shall teach these things diligently to your children." Parenthood works when your children see that you love what you want them to learn.

The long walk to freedom, suggests this week's parsha, is not just a matter of history and politics, let alone miracles. It has to do with the relationship between parents and children. It is about telling the story and passing it on across the generations. It is about a sense of G d's presence in our lives. It is about making space for transcendence, wonder, gratitude, humility, empathy, love, forgiveness and compassion, ornamented by ritual, song and prayer. These help to give a child confidence, trust and hope, along with a sense of identity, belonging and at-home-ness in the universe.

PARSHA SUMMARY

The last three of the Ten Plagues are visited on Egypt: a swarm of locusts devours all the crops and greenery; a thick, palpable darkness envelops the land; and all the firstborn of Egypt are killed at the stroke of midnight of the 15th of the month of Nissan. G-d commands the first mitzvah to be given to the people of Israel: to establish a calendar based on the monthly rebirth of the moon. The Israelites are also instructed to bring a "Passover offering" to G-d: a lamb or kid goat is to be slaughtered, and its blood sprinkled on the doorposts and lintel of every Israelite home, so that G-d should pass over these homes when He comes to kill the Egyptian firstborn. The roasted meat of the offering is to be eaten that night together with matzah (unleavened bread) and bitter herbs. The death of the firstborn finally breaks Pharaoh's resistance, and he literally drives the children of Israel from his land. So hastily do they depart that there is no time for their dough to rise, and the only provisions they take along are unleavened. Before they go, they ask their Egyptian neighbors for gold, silver and garments—fulfilling the promise made to Abraham that his descendants would leave Egypt with great wealth. The children of Israel are commanded to consecrate all firstborn, and to observe the anniversary of the Exodus each year by removing all leaven from their possession for seven days, eating matzah, and telling the story of their redemption to their children. They are also commanded to wear tefillin on the arm and head as a reminder of the Exodus and their resultant commitment to G-d.

HAFTORAH SUMMARY

Jeremiah 46:13–28. In this week's Torah reading, we read of the devastation of the Egyptian nation through the final three of the Ten Plagues. In the haftorah we read of the punishment G-d visited upon Egypt centuries later, through the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon. G-d reveals Egypt's fate to Jeremiah: "Proclaim it in Egypt and let it be heard in Migdol, and let it be heard in Noph and in Tahpanhes. Say, 'Stand fast and prepare yourself, for the sword has devoured round about you.'" The prophet then goes on to describe Egypt's helplessness and the destruction that it will incur at the hands of the Babylonians. The haftorah ends with G-d's assurance to the Jewish people not to fear, for though they too will be punished and exiled, ultimately they will be redeemed: "You fear not, O Jacob My servant, and be not dismayed, O Israel! for behold, I will redeem you from afar, and your children from the land of their captivity, and Jacob shall return and be quiet and at ease, and there shall be none who disturb his rest. You fear not, My servant Jacob, says the L-rd, for I am with you, for I will make a full end of all the nations where I have driven you."

WISHING ALL THOSE WITH YARTZEIT THIS WEEK CHAIM ARUCHIM

Allen, Dawn sister Bond, Aidelaide (Dell) Aidelaide bas Leib Friday 22/01/2021 Shevat 9, 5781

Weigler, Mark mother Weigler, Sarah Sheva bas Mordecai Tuesday 26/01/2021 Shevat 13, 5781

Laderman, Cyril brother Laderman, Harry Chaim Avram ben Moshe Wednesday 27/01/2021 Shevat 14, 5781

Lewis, Merle mother Cohen, Claire Chaya bas Avraham Hillel Thursday 28/01/2021 Shevat 15, 5781

Fagelson, Ian mother Fagelson, Esther Esther bas Avraham Friday 29/01/2021 Shevat 16, 5781

Lieberman, Heather father Simmons, Abraham Avraham ben Benyomin Friday 29/01/2021 Shevat 16, 5781

JEWISH HUMOUR

Little Moishe Epstein was used to being the center of attention, so understandably he was a little more than jealous of his new baby sister Rivka. Moishe's parents sat him down and said that now that Rivkah was getting older, the house was too small and they'd have to move. "It's no use," Moishe said. "She's crawling now. She'll probably just follow us."

RIDDLE OF THE WEEK

2, 3, 5, 9, 17, _ What is the next number in the sequence?

Answer for last week by

The man did exactly as he said he would and wrote "your exact weight" on the paper.

STORY TIME

The great scholar Rabbi Yonatan Eibeshutz (1695-1764) was known far and wide for his enormous erudition and remarkably sharp wit. The governor of the city of Metz took great pleasure in testing the rabbi's intellect. He would make a decree against the Jewish residents, knowing full well that Rabbi Eibeshutz would dash to his palace to intercede for his brethren. Then, the governor would pose some difficult puzzle or riddle to attempt to stump the great scholar. As history records it, fortunately, Rabbi Eibeshutz always succeeded in besting his foe and having the evil decree nullified. Once the governor issued a decree proclaiming that the Jews of Metz would be given a deadline by which they would all be required to submit to baptism. If they refused, which he knew they would, they would be forced from their homes into exile. The governor also knew from his past experience that Rabbi Eibeshutz would present himself at the governor's palace in order to plead for his people. Then, he would snare the rabbi in his plot, for this time, the rabbi would surely fail. The Jews of Metz were thrown into turmoil. None would consider conversion, but what were they to do, where could they turn? Rabbi Eibeshutz immediately went to the governor. "Your excellency," he began, "how can you punish an entire community of innocent souls. I beg of you not to inflict this terrible suffering upon innocent women and babies." A cold smile passed across the governor's face. "On the contrary, my dear rabbi, I am merely helping to fulfil a prophecy which is stated in scripture: 'A great trouble will ensue, so terrible as never before experienced and never to be repeated again.' This passage is interpreted to refer to the Jews. I consider it my great privilege to help bring it about." Now came the moment the governor had waited for with such delight. With suppressed glee, he turned to Rabbi Eibeshutz and continued: "But, my dear friend, I will give you the opportunity of nullifying my decree." "And how may I do that," the rabbi asked. "All you have to do is to answer a few questions which I will pose to you. Are you agreeable to this arrangement?" asked the governor. "Yes, what are the questions?" "First, tell me immediately and without hesitation how many letters there are in the [Hebrew] sentence I just quoted to you?" "With not even a pause, Rabbi Eibeshutz replied, "There are the same number as the years of your life, 60." The governor was astounded, but not deterred. He continued with his next question: "Now, how many words did the same sentence contain?" The rabbi answered with the same swiftness, "There are 17 words - the same as in our famous saying, 'The people of Israel lives forever - Am Yisrael Chai L'Olmah Ad.'" The governor couldn't contain his admiration. "Wonderful! Now, tell me how many Jews live in Metz and its surrounding areas?" Again Rabbi Eibeshutz didn't hesitate: "There are 45,760 Jews in the city of Metz and all of its suburbs, Your Excellency." The governor was momentarily thrown off guard by the rabbi's brilliant answers. But he soon regained his bearings and threw out the last, and impossible demand. "I want you to write 'Israel lives forever' 45,760 times, on a parchment no larger than the ones you use for your mezuzah scrolls." This time he knew he had won and he smirked with satisfaction. Rabbi Eibeshutz paled when he heard this absurd and impossible order. "How long do I have to fulfill your command," he asked. "I give you one hour," was the triumphant reply. "And remember that the fate of your unfortunate brethren is in your hands." Rabbi Eibeshutz disappeared, but when one hour had elapsed he presented himself at the governor's palace. "Your Honour, I have in my hand a parchment with the dimensions of 2" by 4". On it is written an anagram with the solution to your puzzle. My drawing contains 15 Hebrew letters across and 19 letters down." The governor couldn't believe his ears. He reached out his hand to take the parchment from Rabbi Eibeshutz. As he stared at it, uncomprehending, the rabbi continued to explain: "When you read this you will see the words, 'Am Yisroel Chai L'Olmah Ad,' written in every direction. It is spelt out 45,760 different ways." The governor was too shocked to reply, and the rabbi continued. "I request of Your Honor to cancel the decree pending your deciphering this code, since it may take you some time to work it out." The governor agreed. It is said that the governor worked at Rabbi Eibeshutz's anagram a full year before he was able to decipher all the combinations of words. When he completed his study of it, the governor summoned the rabbi to his palace. He embraced the scholar and said, "I can truly see that your G-d has imparted His wisdom to his followers." The governor no longer tormented the Jews of his city and until the end of his life held Rabbi Eibeshutz in the highest esteem.

FOOD 4 THE SOUL

every day, transcend the limitations and boundaries set for you by this world. Make every day another Exodus from Egypt. But with two distinctions: Egypt had to be broken. The world must be repaired. We left Egypt. We must stay within the world. This is the paradoxical path of inner truth: Remain within the world, but escape its grasp. Because in truth the world is good. But as long as you allow the world to dictate your boundaries, it will not show you its truth.