

The Pursuit of Freedom

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, my sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, and Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Yehonatan Binyamin Halevy ben Golda Friedel, and Moshe Reuven ben Chaya.

The beginning of Parashat Behar focuses upon the laws of *Shemittah* (Sabbatical Year) and *Yovel* (Jubilee Year). In the context of these *halachot* (laws), we encounter the following verse: “And you will sanctify the 50th year and declare liberty (*d’ror*) throughout the land for all of its inhabitants...”(*Sefer Vayikra* 25:10) Beyond the literal meaning of this verse, that mandates the return of ancestral lands to familial ownership and the setting free of all Jewish slaves, what does the Torah mean by the term “*d’ror*?” *Chazal* (our Sages of blessed memory) explain that *d’ror* is synonymous with *cheirut* (freedom). Thus we find in Talmud Bavli, *Rosh Hashanah* 9b:

D’kulai alma d’ror lashon cheirut. Mai mashma? D’tanya ain d’ror elah lashon cheirut (Everyone agrees that “*d’ror*” means “freedom.” From where may this be derived? From the following *Beraitta* [Mishnaic period text]: The only meaning of “*d’ror*” is freedom, translation my own)

This explanation, in turn, leads us to ask: “What is the Torah’s idea of freedom?”

I believe that our understanding of the Torah’s concept of freedom may be advanced by two terms developed by Sir Isaiah Berlin (1909-1997), in his 1958 Inaugural Lecture delivered before the University of Oxford. In this lecture, published under the title “Two Concepts of Liberty,” Berlin uses the terms “liberty” and “freedom” interchangeably (Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty*, Oxford University Press, 1971, page, 121). In his

discussion, he identifies and defines “negative freedom” and “positive freedom.” He begins by noting that: “Like happiness and goodness, like nature and reality, the meaning of this term [freedom] is so porous that there is little interpretation that it seems able to resist.” Therefore, he continues and suggests the following definition for negative freedom:

I am normally said to be free to the degree to which no man or body of men interferes with my activity. Political liberty in this sense is simply the area within which a man can act unobstructed by others. If I am prevented by others from doing what I could otherwise do, I am to that degree unfree; and if this area is contracted by men beyond a certain minimum, I can be described as being coerced, or it may be, enslaved. ...Coercion implies the deliberate interference of other human beings within the area in which I could otherwise act. You lack political liberty or freedom only if you are prevented from attaining a goal by human beings (page, 122).

In stark contrast, positive freedom is defined in the following manner:

I wish my life and decisions to depend on myself, not on external forces of whatever kind. I wish to be the instrument of my own, not of other men’s acts of will. I wish to be a subject, not an object; I wish to be somebody, not nobody; a doer-deciding, not be decided for, self-directed and not acted upon by external nature or by other men as if I were a thing, or an animal, or a slave incapable of playing a human role, that is of conceiving goals and policies of my own and realizing them.... I wish, above all, to be conscious of myself as a thinking, willing, active being, bearing responsibility for my choices and able to explain them by references to my own ideas and purposes (page, 131).

I believe that we can utilize Berlin’s concept of negative freedom to help us understand what the servitude in Egypt, and the Exodus therefrom, represented. As slaves to Pharaoh, we were “unfree” and coerced. We were in a ceaseless cycle of misery and angst wherein others interfered with our most basic activities. We were obstructed by our taskmasters and prevented from attaining nearly all of our goals. The Exodus from Egypt, therefore, allowed us to enter into negative freedom wherein: “no man or body of men interferes with my activity.” In short, we were no longer coerced; we were no longer slaves “incapable of playing a human role.” We were free from the misery and servitude imposed upon us by our merciless Egyptian overseers. Yet, this political liberty was just

the beginning of Hashem's plan for our people's pursuit of the next stage of freedom: positive freedom.

As a nation, we achieved positive freedom when we received the holy Torah. Suddenly, by the grace of *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* (the Holy One Blessed be He), we were transformed into a nation of subjects instead of objects. After 210 years, we were finally able "to be conscious of [ourselves] as thinking, willing, active being[s], bearing responsibility for [our] choices." We became capable of "conceiving goals and policies of [our] own and realizing them." Most of all, we had a litmus test by and through which all of our desires, hopes, and dreams could be judged: the Word of G-d Himself. This was, and is, the most positive concept of freedom that one can imagine.

Rabbi Yehoshuah ben Lavi's statement in *Pirkei Avot* 6:2 underscores the relationship between positive freedom and the Torah:

It says in *Sefer Shemot* 32:16: "And the tablets were the work of G-d, and the writing was the writing of G-d (*charut*) engraved upon the tablets." Do not read the [non-vocalized] word as *charut* (engraved), instead read it as *cheirut* (freedom). [This is so] since there is no one who is truly free except for one who engages in Torah study.

For Rabbi Yehoshuah ben Lavi, the study of the words of our Creator or His earthly representatives is, by definition, the ultimate act in which a truly free individual can engage. Why? Perhaps it is because by challenging ourselves to understand His Torah, we come to encounter *Hashem*. With awe and humility we recognize the total otherness of our Creator, while simultaneously striving to comprehend His words and the thoughts and concepts they contain. Like Yaakov *Avinu*, we know that when we study Torah, we are entering into a place that is so holy and so filled with the Divine Presence, our

innermost-beings must declare: “*Mah norah hamakom hazeh*” (“How awe-filled and awe-inspiring is this place” *Sefer Bereishit* 28:17).

Torah study is the ultimate act of intellectual and spiritual creativity that enables us to hear and heed the word of our Creator. Thus, *Talmud Torah* (Torah study) emerges as the most positive of all conceivable definitions of freedom. Through it, lowly man is able to rise to his highest heights. Through *Talmud Torah*, man is able to actualize his true potential and enter into the grandest and most noble dialogue that is humanly possible: He is free to encounter the Almighty Himself.

May it be His will, and the deepest desires of our hearts and souls, that we will be able to recognize the ultimate positive freedom that is embodied in being “*osak b’Talmud Torah*” (“completely engaged in Torah study”). If we can achieve this goal, we will surely be *zocheh* (merit) to understand that this, and only this, is authentic freedom.

Shabbat Shalom

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My audio *shiurim* on *Tefilah and Haskafah* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/7sp5vt3>

*** I have recently posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik’s** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

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