

Parshiot Ki Tisa - Parah, 5773, 2013:

*Judaism and the Concept of Freedom*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

Now the tablets were G-d's work, and the inscription was G-d's inscription, engraved on the tablets. (*Sefer Shemot* 32:16, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Rabbi Yehoshuah ben Lavi noted: 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. Moreover, anyone who involves himself with Torah on an ongoing basis will be elevated... (*Pirkei Avot* 6:2)

Rabbi Yehoshuah ben Lavi's Midrashic-level understanding of our verse equates engagement in, and loyalty to, the Torah with the highest heights of human freedom. This, in turn, leads us to ask a crucial question: “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 the course of 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.” He 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, he defines positive freedom 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,” coerced. We were trapped 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, a necessary step toward 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 lens through which all of our desires, hopes, and dreams could be viewed: the Word of G-d Himself. This was, and is, the most positive concept of freedom that one can imagine.

For Rabbi Yehoshuah ben Lavi, the study and practical application of the words of our Creator and His earthly representatives (*Chazal*, our Sages) 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, and live by its precepts, we are entering into a place that is so holy and so filled with the Divine Presence that our innermost-beings must declare: “*Mah norah hamakom hazeh*” (“How awe-filled and awe-inspiring is this place,” *Sefer Bereishit* 28:17).

Rav Tzadok HaKohen Rabinowitz of Lublin (1823-1900), in his work, *Pri Tzaddik*, offers a fascinating understanding of our initial *pasuk* (verse):

When the Torah states: “...engraved – *charut* - on the tablets,” we should interpret this as meaning to have freedom – *chairut* - from the Angel of Death (*Midrash Shemot Rabbah*

32:1). The Angel of Death is explicitly identified in *Talmud Bavli, Baba Batra* 16a as the Evil Inclination... As it is stated in *Pirkei Avot* 6:2: "... there is no one who is truly free except for one who engages in Torah study. Moreover, anyone who involves himself with Torah on an ongoing basis will be elevated..." [Why did Rabbi Yehoshuah ben Lavi make the preceding statement? This is because] beyond a shadow of a doubt, the moment of Giving of the Torah was equivalent to the Creation of all creatures - when the Almighty fashioned man in absolute moral perfection. This is the case since, at the time the Jewish people heard the first utterance of the Ten Commandments, "*Anochi*" ("I am the L-rd your G-d"), the Torah became permanently affixed in their hearts (*Midrash Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 1:15), and they achieved the final stage of perfection. From this point onward, the Jewish people's hearts would constantly be joined to the recognition of Hashem's awesome stature and to His love – may He be blessed. Moreover, henceforth, the Jewish people would no longer need physical tablets of stone – since, all the words of the Torah were now engraved forever on the tablet of their hearts.

May we all be *zocheh* (merit) to have the words and concepts of our holy Torah engraved upon our hearts. Then, with G-d's help, we will be truly free. May this time come soon and in our days. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* for Women on "*Tefilah: Haskafah and Analysis*," may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

\*\*\* I have 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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