

Parshat Bo-Shemot 10:1-13:6 Freedom from and Freedom to...

In every area of our lives, we encounter murky transitions. As young adults, we don't know where we are going or what we will do. As mature adults we are often unsure whether we even want to take the trip that appears to be our path in life. That was the situation that Moses and the children of Israel faced when God liberated them from slavery to Pharaoh in Egypt. Yes, slavery was bad. The Israelites had suffered both physically and emotionally. They were degraded and debilitated from Pharaoh's oppression. On the other hand, it was a pattern of life that had endured for dozens of generations. It was grueling, but it was familiar. There were no surprises, no unpredictable moments and.... there were no choices to be made. But when Pharaoh finally released his claim on them, they were utterly clueless about what would become their new reality: God's claim on them.

This week's parsha is the Passover story. It is the story of the birth of the Jewish people. In the words of Avivah Zornberg, a contemporary Torah scholar: "In yielding mastery, Pharaoh loses not merely a workforce, but a significant narrative of meaning, a conviction that his words most truly describe the world." (close quote) As Pharaoh's slaves, his narrative was also the reality for the Israelites. "According to Rashi, biblical commentator of the Middle Ages, "Pharaoh's moment of defeat arrives when he relinquishes his own narrative and acknowledges the truth of Moses' narrative." In that moment the Israelites became liberated from the servitude and degradation of Pharaoh and they were absorbed into a new narrative; one of service to God.

If you are thinking: "What is the big deal about transferring our service as slaves from Pharaoh to serving God?" you are accompanied by several highly respected Torah scholars across many generations. There is however, a clear, interesting and informative response. It revolves around the Hebrew root: ע ב ד , basically the word eved, meaning slave. That root is seen more than 21 times in this parsha, presenting many different shades of meaning. The root ע ב ד presents a concept which charts the transition of the Hebrews from being Beit avodim, lowly slaves to Pharaoh, to doing avodat haShem, serving God and exalting Divine worship. (For the grammarians among you: The word avodim, is eved in the plural form and the word avodat is the possessive form-servants of God.) In the end, when the Hebrews were freed from the demeaning slavery of Pharaoh, they were freed to serve God. Service to God would empower and enable them, as it can for us.

Do you remember from the Passover story, that God, time and time again, hardens Pharaoh's heart? And that the result is that Pharaoh refuses to let the Israelite slaves go? Do you also remember the reason for God's repeatedly hardening Pharaoh's heart? In God's own words, God wants to be sure that Moses and Aaron, as well as parents for all generations, "may recount ...how I have been capricious with Egypt, and my signs, which I have placed upon them, that you may know that I am YHWH," (10:10) BUT do you also remember that when Pharaoh's heart is hardened, God punishes him with plagues for stubbornly refusing to let the Israelites go? Which, of course raises the question: How is that fair? If God hardens Pharaoh's heart, can Pharaoh be held responsible for refusal to let his slaves go free?

When we read the text carefully, however, we notice there is a significant shift in language

midway through the plagues. For the first five plagues, the text reads: “and Pharaoh hardened his heart”; or “Pharaoh made his heart heavy with stubbornness” (8:11, 9:7, 10:34). It is only after the sixth plague, the plague of boils, that the text tells us: “and God hardened Pharaoh’s heart.” About this transition of language, the medieval commentator Maimonides, astutely observes about the psychology of human nature, that when we transgress initially, it may be voluntary. We may consciously decide “I know what I’m about to do is not fair; or is morally wrong, but this is what I want to do.” Once we transgress repeatedly, however, it becomes habitual. “The behavior actually changes our moral compass; taking on a life of its own. It becomes nearly impossible to break.” When a bad habit becomes habitual, we have lost our ability to choose.

I don’t like the image of God as capricious and unfairly controlling the passions and responses of our hearts. Maimonides’ astute insight goes beyond the story of the liberation of our people from Egypt so long ago. It encompasses the reality of our everyday lives, now. It is possible, even likely, to conclude that it was Pharaoh himself, and not God, who is responsible for Pharaoh’s “hardened heart”; for his relentless refusal to let the Hebrew slaves go out to serve YHWH. God didn’t obstruct Pharaoh’s ability to be a compassionate human being. Pharaoh must own that responsibility himself. AND so do we.

The concept of “freedom to” is complicated. It has many levels. During the Seder, and as we read this parsha, we most often think of freedom in physical terms, as freedom from bondage. But there is an inner freedom, a psychological and emotional freedom, which Maimonides’ observed, that is even more fundamental than the physical kind. Each of us, enslaves ourselves, unless we maintain a psychological and emotional preparedness to be free.

Mitzrayim, the Biblical name for Egypt, comes from the Hebrew word meaning constriction. Each of us must free ourselves of our own Mitzrayim; of whatever it is that causes our spiritual and psychological bondage. The master that enslaves us can be many things. It can be our economy, our political perspective, a social prejudice or a personal bad habit. When a person becomes a habitual liar, he has lost his freedom to choose to tell the truth. Anything we internalize, which enslaves the body and devastates the heart and the soul, toward which we become passive or acquiescent, has become our master. It has enslaved us and caused us to lose our freedom.

The Torah tells us that “God saw the people of Israel, and God knew their condition”. (Ex. 2:25) What was it that God knew? What condition did God see? It was not only physical enslavement and suffering. God saw generations of Hebrews enslaved and God saw them becoming accustomed to their tasks, laboring without complaint. “And God knew” that it was time for them to be liberated. “For the worst slavery of Egypt is when we learn to endure it!”

Rachel Naomi Remen tells the following story in her book entitled, Kitchen Table Wisdom:

“Some years ago a young resident psychiatrist ...who wanted to learn more about people at the edge of life was observing one of my [therapy] sessions. A former gang member whose hands were covered with tattoos was speaking of the deep love he now felt for his young wife who was dying of cancer. This

capacity to love ...had caught him unawares and so had [helped him heal him from his ways of hate.]. As he shared insights about himself and experiences of intense intimacy and tenderness with his wife, I glanced over at the young Freudian psychiatrist. He had stopped taking notes. His eyes were filled with tears. After the patient left, I asked him if he had learned anything useful from the session. He smiled ruefully, 'We are all more than we seem,' he said." "Actually" she wrote following his comment, "we are all more than we know. Wholeness is never lost, it is only forgotten."

Dr. Remen is a physician, a therapist and a professor of medicine. She has heard thousands of personal stories and has witnessed the capacity of people to "harden their own hearts". Often such stubbornness is detrimental to our relationships with others, particularly our family, but equally as often, it is our own personally imposed self-hindrance. She is unusually insightful. Her lifetime of experience observing and working with people in the midst of severe emotional and physical crises, has brought her to a conclusion about human nature very different from that of Maimonides. Humankind does have the ability to liberate itself from long held beliefs we hold about who we are. "Even after many years of seeing, thinking and living one way, we are able to reach past all that to claim our integrity and live in a way we may never have expected to live." "There is rarely something that we need to fix or add to ourselves. It's sort of like 'patting our pockets to try to remember where we put our soul,'" " she writes.

The Passover story of our ancestors' liberation from slavery is more than an historical event that happened once, thousands of years ago. It implores us to strive, daily, for freedom from our own, self-imposed constraints. It is a spiritual task that every generation and each individual must confront. It teaches us that radical change is possible. Judaism insists that power need not be our ruler; that reality can be perfected. It is our right and our obligation to begin and continue striving for such a transformation. We must do it for ourselves, for our people, but also for all who are vulnerable and weak in every corner of the earth; because we were slaves in the land of Egypt.

We cannot afford to be passive. We must wake the dawn, rather than have the dawn wake us. This is the message of parshat Bo. This is why we read it in the middle of winter, several months before our celebration of Passover. "A willingness to wrestle with difficult questions, with imponderable mysteries and with the marvel of life itself is the prerequisite for spiritual Jewish growth." Our ancestors did not know enough even to ask, but we must: Are we willing and able to live with the burden of freedom? To embrace the opportunity to make choices that will enable us to be who we are meant to be? And to help each other become our whole-selves? The 20th century German philosopher, Franz Rosenzweig wrote : "The Jewish individual needs nothing but readiness." Are you ready?