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## FREEDOM

*When we know our purpose, commitment  
is an engagement, not a constraint.*

### PROGRESS AS A MEANS AND AS AN ENDS

“Death,” said the American political activist Norman Cousins, “is not the greatest loss in life. The greatest loss is what dies inside us while we live.”

We see our world progressing—more modern this, more cutting-edge that. Looking back in time, it is clear that humanity has come a long, long way. But where is this all going? What is it exactly that progress is bringing to the quality of mankind? Is it to live longer and healthier, with more heating and air-conditioning and connectivity?

Those cannot be the answers to this question, because they are simply means, and when we confuse means with ends, we start dying on the inside. We want to live longer and more comfortably—to do *what*? We want to have more air-conditioning—to achieve *what*? What legacy do we want to leave? What is worthy of our attention, time, and effort? Presumably, if we are serious about life, we are not simply looking to be more comfortable. Yet that is exactly what most of the things we buy are claiming to do.

## THE JEWISH IDEA OF FREEDOM

The contemporary concept of freedom is based on the possibility for each to express his or her desires, creativity, and productivity. It stresses the maximum removal of external restraints. It is a combination of autonomy and means. In essence, it is a freedom from constraints—do what you want—as opposed to freedom *to* become something.<sup>1</sup> Yet, this contemporary framework of freedom is half-baked. It ignores the question of where this all takes us. It is “freedom from” without the idea of “freedom to.”

The Jewish concept of freedom proposes a radical theology. It begins with the understanding that the freest being in existence is God. Therefore, the metric for freedom is likeness to God. It is not a freedom from, but rather a freedom to—to become as Godlike as we possibly can. It is not an emphasis on what constrains me, but rather what commitments and obligations I can make in the process of transcending myself. There is a common misconception that aligns freedom with the maximization of choices—that the more one has from which to choose, the greater his freedom. Yet, we are not free when we keep our choices open. Having an abundance of choice and failing to use that choice to commit to something produces paralysis, not freedom.

For sure, we need freedom *from*—freedom from hunger and illness, oppression, and war. But this is not the end goal. If everyone is truly free, why are we here? What do we do with our lives?

Freedom makes the journey possible; it is to allow us to choose the path that will be most meaningful to our lives.<sup>2</sup> Perforce, that path will require commitment, limitations of options, and the undertaking of responsibilities. But this is the only

*The freest being in existence is God, and therefore, the more Godlike we are, the more free we will be.*

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1 The Jewish-English philosopher, Isaiah Berlin, made this distinction in his book, *Two Concepts of Liberty*.

2 Freedoms *from* include from being censored, from unjust incrimination, from forced religion, respectively. It is arguable that some of the higher freedoms, like freedom of speech, the right to remain silent, and religious freedom are also essentially freedom *from*s. They are there to allow us to actualize ourselves as we see fit.

way we can release the opportunities to fulfill our potential, and that, after all, is what everyone wants from freedom.

#### INTERNAL VS. EXTERNAL FREEDOM

One who allows his weaknesses and whims to control him is essentially enslaved to his cravings and desires. He may be free of external constraints but feel shackled by internal ones. The same is true of someone who is given everything on a silver platter and owes nothing to his own efforts. Such a person has no control and no freedom, as his life is not driven by his personal will. He has everything but his own real self. As long as the will driving his actions is dictated by something external to himself—e.g., fashions, advertisements, and consumerism—he has not yet achieved the dignity of true freedom.

Human grandeur cannot be expressed by “Level One” freedom. Rather, we are on this earth to achieve “Level Two” freedom—of allowing our freely chosen values to define our lives and channel our actions.<sup>3</sup>

The way the Torah enables this is by first establishing each individual’s profound worth and potential. It then provides us with a system for self-mastery. It teaches us how to control, direct, and channel our passions, drives, and compulsions.<sup>4</sup> It teaches us to harness our physical desires in the service of sanctity.<sup>5</sup> Through the Torah, we learn how to get in touch with our higher selves and connect with God, the One being that is truly free.

The Torah tells us that the Tablets were engraved with the letters of the Ten Commandments, inscribed by God Himself.<sup>6</sup> The Hebrew word for “engraved” is *charut* (חרות), which are the same letters that comprise the Hebrew word for “freedom”—*cheirut* (חירות).<sup>7</sup> (On the Tablets, as in the Torah, the vowels are not written.) The point is that to obey these commandments is to get close to the Source of freedom and to rid ourselves of the shackles of petty desires and whims. God’s own engraving

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3 *Collected Writings of Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, Passover.*

4 See Section 4.

5 See Section 2.

6 Exodus 32:15–16.

7 *Tanna d’Bei Elyahu Zuta* 16.

(*charut*) of the letters on the Tablets is our true liberation (*cheirut*) and empowerment.<sup>8</sup>

## FREE TO SERVE

When God redeemed the Jews from Egyptian slavery, the pivotal moment of freedom in Jewish history was achieved. In Egypt, the Jews were a slave nation that was physically, socially, and emotionally oppressed by their Egyptian overseers. Yet, when God sent Moses to Pharaoh to demand the Jews be set free, He instructed Moses to add a vital phrase. Not just, “Let my people go,” but also “*that they may serve Me* (i.e., God).”<sup>9</sup> But this was also a message to the Jewish People. It was as if God was saying: “If you are simply going *from* the slavery of Egypt, you will remain slaves in your heart. Your thinking will be Egyptian. Your values will be Egyptian. Your bodies will be freed, but your minds will not. The inner call of your humanity will go unanswered.” Therefore, free yourself to become obligated—not as a burden but as a privilege. The privilege of responsibility.

The Jewish demand of the Pharaohs of the world is never just a release from servitude. It is the yearning for the freedom to stand at Sinai and commit to the vision and mission of God!

To our modern minds, this may seem paradoxical. How can freedom be equated with being a servant of God? But God clearly had in mind a liberation theology. Serving Him did not mean replacing one slavery with another—Pharaoh’s with God’s. Rather, God’s message to the Jewish People is, “Serve Me and you will be free, because by following My commandments, you will unleash enormous power. You will become My partner in completing the creation of the world.”<sup>10</sup>

## THE DISCIPLINE OF FREEDOM

Have you ever witnessed a world-class pianist glide across the keyboard with absolute mastery, producing the most perfect sound? So

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8 Talmud, Tractate *Kallah*, chap. 8.

9 This message is delivered repeatedly by Moses to Pharaoh: Exodus 7:16; 8:16, and more.

10 See Chapter 10 for a discussion of this at length.

many of us would love to be able to do that—to have that freedom to produce whatever sound we wish. But the pianist spends three to four hours a day (and a minimum lifetime of ten thousand hours) to achieve that “freedom.” If I were to sit at that keyboard, I would just produce noise. I am not free to glide across the keyboard because I have not subjected myself to the *discipline* of freedom.

Take, for instance, language. “The capacity to use language” says psychologist Barry Schwartz, “is perhaps the single most liberating characteristic of human beings.”<sup>11</sup> What is more freeing than the ability to express one’s thoughts and feelings tangibly? Yet, Dr. Schwartz pins the possibility of linguistic freedom on the very fact that there are structured constraints and limitations to any given language. “The reason people can say anything and be understood is that they can’t say everything.”

Self-determination, he continues, also requires significant constraints, without which it can be shown that people don’t function optimally.<sup>12</sup> We have to see this discipline as our friend, as the enabler not only to the musician and our language but also to our greatest spiritual aspirations.

The key to true freedom, the means through which we can actualize our potential to become something, is commitment. Just like the pianist commits hours upon hours to master his craft, a person who seeks to become something must dedicate himself to his values and exclude all extraneous pursuits. As mentioned previously, the Torah is the spiritual guide for achieving moral and spiritual freedom. But the Torah will not yield this freedom without commitment. This is what the Sages meant when they stated: “No one is free except he who busies himself with Torah.”

For this reason, there were two stages to the Sinaitic experience. The Jews of course accepted the Torah at Sinai—or, more accurately, the

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11 Barry Schwartz, “Self Determination: The Tyranny of Freedom,” *American Psychologist*, 55 no. 1(2000), p. 80.

12 *Ibid.*

Ten Commandments engraved on the Tablets.<sup>13</sup> But for the whole chapter prior to this event, the Torah deals with the Jewish covenant with God.<sup>14</sup> “You shall be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation,”<sup>15</sup> i.e., you shall become not the chosen nation with a right to privileges, but the obligated nation—a nation I have chosen because of your commitment to Me and My laws.

With their redemption from Egypt, the Jewish People achieved Level One freedom. However, they can only embark on the journey to embrace Level Two freedom—the moral and spiritual vision that is the Torah—by entering a covenantal relationship with God. Though paradoxical, the commitment that paves the way for higher freedom simultaneously presents significant obligation and duty.

#### JUDAISM BEGINS WITH DUTIES, NOT RIGHTS

When the French Revolution announced a Bill of Rights, it also announced a Bill of Duties. The former became famous. The latter was forgotten.<sup>16</sup>

All societies have rights and duties. However, Western societies begin with rights and end with duties. In these societies, the first question one asks is, “What are my rights?” To preserve my rights, you—the other—have a duty not to trample on them:

- I have property. You have a duty not to trespass on my property.
- I have a right to freedom of speech. You are not allowed to shout me down.

Your duty is a consequence of my right.

In Judaism, we begin with duties, not rights. If my starting point is rights, then I need not have a vision for myself, and I don’t have to have my values clear. I can choose moment by moment or year by year. My

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13 Exodus, chap. 20.

14 Ibid. 19:5–6.

15 Ibid. 19:6.

16 In 1795, the National Convention produced a new constitution called the “Declaration of Rights and Duties of Man and Citizen.” It was put to referendum and implemented.

rights grant me that and more. But if my starting point is obligation, I have to know what I am committing myself to...and why.

As a nation, we might be said to be the obligated people. As individuals, we view our personal destinies in terms of our responsibility toward ourselves as well as to the broader world. We have to develop our own potential, and by so doing we make the world a better place.

#### THE PRIVILEGE OF OBLIGATION

There is a fascinating blessing that mitzvah-observant Jews wish others when they see them doing a kindness or some other virtuous act. They say, “*tizku le’Mitzvot.*” This translates as, “May you merit to

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fulfill many commandments.” A mitzvah is a commandment. It is an obligation. The nicest thing you can bless a fellow Jew with is to wish him to have further opportunities to be obligated! This is the Jewish paradigm: Obligation is far from a burden. Rather, it is a privilege. How is this so?

According to Bruno Bettelheim, a Jew who survived the Holocaust, “Our greatest need and most difficult achievement is to find meaning in our lives.”<sup>17</sup> Without meaning, there is no thread that connects all the points of my life, and I remain a fragmented being. If I do not find my past meaningful, I will not know how to achieve my future. And if I have no past and future, my present is meaningless. Meaning is what strings the fragments of our lives into a unified existence, “in true consciousness of our existence.”

When someone asked Einstein what question he would ask God if he could ask one, he replied, “How did the universe start? Because everything after that is just math.” After thinking for a while, he changed his mind. He said, “Instead I would ask, ‘Why was the universe created?’ Because then I would know the meaning of my own life.”

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17 Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (Thames and Hudson, 1976), Introduction.

Uncovering the meaning of one's life is the most important pursuit for man. Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzatto, also known by the Hebrew acronym *Ramchal*, was a prominent 18th century Italian Jewish Kabbalist and philosopher whose books are considered indispensable classics of Jewish thought.<sup>18</sup> In the opening statement to his work, *Path of the Righteous*, he states:

*The foundation of righteousness and the root of pure service require that man clarifies and integrates<sup>19</sup> what his obligation in his world is and toward what he should focus his vision in all that he exerts himself all the days of his life.<sup>20</sup>*

The *Ramchal's* words may appear to be the same as those of Bettelheim and Einstein, but there is a crucial difference. The *Ramchal's* statement is couched in the language of obligation. According to the Jewish perspective, the very same goal that Bettelheim phrases as our greatest need and achievement is considered an obligation! However, this is only logical, as if one understands his purpose, how could he not feel obligated to fulfill it? This obligation is far from a burden. Rather, it is a privilege.

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18 See Appendix for more.

19 Lit., understands to be true.

20 *Ramchal, Mesilat Yesharim*, chap. 1.