

Choices and Freedom

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The backbone of democracy in the United States and many other countries is the freedom of the individual. In these places, man has the ability and the right to make his own choices in life. But what does this really mean? Can a person do anything he wishes? Certainly not. Clearly, man's freedom is limited. He is not free to choose to break laws or yell "fire" in a crowded theater. What then is meant by choices and freedom? Judaism discussed this important concept long before the United States became a country founded on the principles of freedom. The Jewish definition of freedom differs considerably from the political definition.

FREEDOM IN A JEWISH SENSE IS BASIC TO HUMAN EXISTENCE

That which separates man from all other creatures in the universe is his ability to choose his own path in life. Unlike the animals (that can only do what is instinctive) and even the angels (that can only do good), only man has free choice. This is what is meant by the Torah phrase "man is made in G-d's image"¹ as explained by Seforno.² Just as only G-d has freedom in the universe, so does G-d grant freedom only to man, i.e. in His image. The very first story in the Torah demonstrates man's ability to choose. G-d commands man not to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge but man defies Him and eats anyway.³ Of course, there are always consequences to the choices man makes, whether in the moral or amoral areas of life. But choice is granted as part of daily existence. Just as the Torah begins in the first story with a commandment, but, at the same time, it stresses man's freedom to choose, at the very end of the Torah, after almost all of the 613 commandments are given, G-d reaffirms man's right to choose his own path in life.⁴

Maimonides⁵ spells out the specifics of how man's choice operates in the moral sphere. No matter how badly a person acts and thinks, the ability to choose and, hence, reverse his behavior, always remains within him. In fact, in order to preserve man's free choice, G-d must permit evil to exist in the world. If G-d were to prevent evil each time someone would do something improper (or even immediately punish the perpetrator for an immoral act), then there would no longer be free choice. Therefore, G-d prefers to tolerate evil rather than limit man's freedom and his ability to choose freely.

The concept of totally free choice, did not really exist for the Jewish people until much later in its history. While the Jewish people in the desert had the choice whether to sin or not sin (and they often did sin), the choice wasn't totally free as long as G-d performed open, supernatural miracles. There would always be people who saw the glory of G-d and this in itself would prevent their sin. Thus, their free choice was not free in the ultimate sense. This is symbolized, says the Meshech Chochma⁶ in interpreting the meaning of the famous Midrash⁷

¹ Genesis 1:26-27

² Seforno commentary on Genesis 1:26

³ Genesis 2:16-17 and 3:1-6

⁴ Deuteronomy 30:15 and 30:19

⁵ Hilchot Teshuva, chap. 5

⁶ Meshech Chochmah, Parshat Yitro

where G-d held Mount Sinai over the people and said either you accept the Torah or this will be your burial place. He explains that this was psychological pressure on the people, because after witnessing the Ten Plagues and the Splitting of the Sea, it was difficult for them to oppose G-d, and thus their choice was not completely free. It was only later in Jewish history, after events which led to Purim, and G-d's miracles were no longer so obvious (because they became natural, not supernatural – see chapter about “Miracles”) that the people truly had free choice. Thus, it was when the people reaffirmed accepting the Torah after the events leading up to Purim,⁸ the first natural miracle in Jewish history, that their acceptance was out of total freedom.⁹ We can now readily understand how important freedom and choice are in Judaism, and the extent to which G-d even changes the nature of the world so that man can have the unique quality of freedom.

SLAVERY IN EGYPT AND JEWISH FREEDOM LEARNED ON PASSOVER

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik has explained that a slave has no sense of time. He has no past because he does not want to remember what happened. He has no present because every day is the same drudgery, without anything different. And he has no future, no aspirations, subjected totally to the will of the master. A slave has no sense of control. This lack of a sense of time is reflected in Jewish law. In order to testify in a Jewish court, a witness must have a sense of time to indicate exactly when an event occurred. Therefore, a slave, who necessarily lacks a sense of time, cannot testify in a Jewish court.¹⁰ Similarly, a non-Jewish slave living in a Jewish household performs all the commandments (if he so desires) in Judaism, except those positive commandments that are time-bound.¹¹ Why not? He has no sensitivity to time.

Therefore, in order to attain freedom in Egypt and leave, the Jews had to first develop a sensitivity to time. Thus, the very first commandment that the Jews received as a people, while still in Egypt, was to set up a Jewish calendar and develop a sense of time.¹² But this was not enough. The entire preparation for the night before they left Egypt, Pesach night, involved an understanding of time. The Jews had to take a lamb on the specific day of the tenth of the month and watch it for four days before sacrificing it specifically in the afternoon.¹³ Then, when they ate the Pesach meal and the sacrifice, they had to be careful to complete it at night before dawn.¹⁴ And the entire evening they had to be in a state of readiness to leave, in haste, in order to be ready to leave at a moment's notice.¹⁵ All this taught the Jews a sense of sensitivity to time, which is a necessary component for freedom. And this was passed on to future generations as well. Both Matzah that is obligatory to be eaten on Pesach, and Chametz (leaven) which is forbidden on Pesach are made of identical components – the five grains and water. The only difference between them is that of time (baked longer than 18 minutes in Chametz, less in Matzah).¹⁶ Maimonides stresses that the idea of heightened readiness and sensitivity to time at every Seder, according to his Haggadah, when Jews must recite “we left Egypt in a hurry” before taking the Matzah.¹⁷ The greatest sense of freedom is achieved when a person needs to worry about every future minute. Only someone who has this quality of readiness to act is truly free and can influence the future. Thus, the Hebrew word for “ready” is

⁷ Midrash Tanchuma, Noach 3

⁸ Megillat Esther 9:27

⁹ Shabbat 88a

¹⁰ Rosh Hashana 22a, Maimonides, Hilchot Kiddush HaChodesh 2:1

¹¹ Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 17:2

¹² Exodus 12:1-2

¹³ Exodus 12:3, 6

¹⁴ Exodus 12:10

¹⁵ Exodus 12:11

¹⁶ Maimonides, Hilchot Chametz Umatzah 5:1, 6:4

¹⁷ Maimonides, Hilchot Chametz Umatzah 9:1

“*Mezuman*”, which is derived from the Hebrew word for time, “*Zeman*.”

WHAT IS THE DEFINITION OF JEWISH FREEDOM?

When discussing freedom in any context, the definition cannot really be "the ability to do whatever one wants." In addition to the legal impediment discussed above, there are other restrictions society and human nature has imposed on freedom. A dog or any other untamed animal is "free" to relieve itself wherever it pleases, but we do not call a dog "free." And, in reality, man then places restrictions where a dog may relieve itself anyway. What, then, is real freedom?

In Jewish terms, there are three words to describe different kinds of freedom. The first word is *Chofesh*. This is lowest form of freedom. In modern Hebrew, this word means vacation. Like the modern meaning, the Torah uses this word to mean a stoppage of physical labor, a break from the routine of daily work. When a servant went free, the Torah calls this *Chofesh*.¹⁸ This word is also connected to the Hebrew word “*Chapeis*,” which connotes searching, as a person freed from slavery has the “freedom” to pursue one’s desires. Thus, all that *Chofesh* implies is a cessation of physical toil, which has nothing to do with morality and spirituality.

The second Torah reference to freedom is the word *Dror*. This word is also the name for a bird. Like the bird who is free and migrates to a warmer climate in winter and returns in summer, this type of freedom refers to a return to a freer status. That is why the context for this type of freedom is the Jubilee year when Jews in the Land of Israel return to their land at the end of the fifty-year period.¹⁹ Jews who had sold their land now get a chance to start over. This is certainly a valuable type of freedom that many in today's society would envy – the ability to start over. This, however, is not the highest form of freedom in Judaism.

The highest type of freedom in Judaism is *Cherut*. This implies spiritual freedom, not merely a cessation from work or a chance to start over, but a feeling of freedom and a higher purpose in life. This is a psychological concept that implies a certain attitude to life and its activities. This is a sense of spirituality that goes far beyond cessation of work. That is why Passover is called *Zeman Cherutainu*, the holiday of freedom. This is not merely the freedom from the bondage of Egypt, but, as we can infer from the Passover Haggadah, this refers to the Jewish people becoming a nation. The phrase in the Haggadah that G-d took us out of from bondage to freedom is *Hotzi-anu Mei'avdut LeCherut*,²⁰ and not the other forms of the word freedom. When Moses (and later other freedom-seeking people) uttered the phrase "Let my people go,"²¹ he did not mean to go on a vacation from slavery but to form a nation with its own culture and religion. Pesach is a celebration of spiritual freedom, not mere physical freedom.

In truth, the holiday of Passover culminates on Shavuot, seven weeks later, with the giving of the Torah. Like Sukkot has a last day called *Shmini Atzeret*, so, too, the holiday of Passover has its own eighth day called **Atzeret**, another name for the holiday of Shavuot. The 49 day count between Passover and Shavuot also shows the connection between the two. Only on Shavuot did the Jews truly become free. By accepting a new lifestyle²² which gave them a moral set of laws to live by, they achieved **Cherut**, true freedom. That is why the Mishna says that in

¹⁸ Exodus 21:2

¹⁹ Leviticus 25:10

²⁰ Passover Haggadah, *Lefichach* paragraph immediately preceding the *Hallel* and second cup of wine

²¹ Exodus 5:1

²² Exodus 24:7

giving the two tablets of the Ten Commandments,²³ the Hebrew word *Charut* should be read freedom (*Cherut*), and not "hewn out of stone," the simple meaning of *Charut*.²⁴ When people engrave ideas and laws upon their hearts and internalize those concepts, this is true freedom. Unlike laws that are obeyed because they are written on paper, internally engraved laws show true freedom and a belief system that is integrated into one's very being. That is *Cherut*.

This is part of the definition of freedom that can be demonstrated on a political level today as well. Freedom is the ability to choose which system of laws to live by. This is what newly developing countries fight for. Once that choice has been made, each person is obligated to uphold the laws chosen by the people as a whole. It is the same with the Jewish people who consciously chose to keep the Torah and reaffirmed their choice in the time of Mordechai and Esther (see above). This is when true freedom was achieved. To understand this phenomenon with the Jews, one only has to look at the history of the black people in the United States. In the 1860's, they received their legal freedom through Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. The fourteenth amendment to the constitution gave blacks the legal right to vote and equality before the law. But that did not make the black Americans feel free. They only began to feel free in the 1960's when the marches and leaders inspired black pride, black studies and a feeling of belonging to something special. This is the freedom that approximates *Cherut*.

This understanding of freedom also helps us understand a very difficult phrase in the daily evening prayer.²⁵ In it, traditional Jews recite that the Jews achieved an everlasting freedom when they left Egypt. But we know that Jews were persecuted many times in history after Egypt and often suffered in slave conditions many times in their history. How could the Jew declare every evening that the freedom after Egypt was everlasting? The answer is that if the freedom is physical freedom, then indeed, it is not permanent. But the freedom stemming from pride of spirituality, cannot be taken from the Jew even when he suffered under the worst conditions. In fact, this may be one of the secrets of the survival of the Jewish people in the Diaspora. No matter what the conditions, the Jews had the knowledge that he was given the Torah to live by. This special feeling helped them fight not only oppression but pressure to assimilate and give up Judaism entirely. Thus, the Jews chose to keep the Torah under the worst conditions. That feeling of freedom is everlasting and no one could ever take it away from the Jewish people.

THE AGE OLD PROBLEM: FREEDOM vs. G-D'S PRIOR KNOWLEDGE

If freedom is indeed totally unconstrained and G-d went to great lengths to insure this ability to choose the proper path in life, then how could a Jew believe in this and also believe in Omniscience, that G-d knows all. If G-d knows what I will choose, my choice is no longer totally free.

Many systems of understanding G-d will resolve this difficulty by stating that one of the premises is not true: either G-d does not really know all in advance or man is not totally free. Judaism maintains both positions at the same time. This is clearly stated in Pirke Avot,²⁶ as it says, "All is known (by G-d) yet choice (by man) is given." The entire concept of Mitzvot, referred to above, demonstrates this. Mitzvot are commands which a Jew "must" do. Yet, at the same time, each time a person goes to perform a Mitzvah, it is his choice, even though G-d

²³ Exodus 32:16

²⁴ Avot 6:2

²⁵ Evening service, the *Ve'emunah* paragraph following the *Shema*

²⁶ Avot 3:19

knows what that choice will be. Maimonides²⁷ also discusses this apparent difficulty and resolves it in a similar manner, emphasizing that we cannot really understand how G-d's knowledge works. It seems clear, though, that as long as the person making the choice is not aware of what G-d knows, from his perspective, it is a completely free choice.

ON A PERSONAL LEVEL AS WELL, THE CHOICE IS OURS

Until now, the Torah references discuss the national future of the Jewish people. But on a personal level, each person has to choose the path he or she wants to lead as a Jew. Just because parents have told children what is right and set an example for them is no guarantee that children will follow. At one point, everyone must decide for himself or herself. This is expressed in the Mishna which says that the Torah is not an automatic inheritance.²⁸ There are those who do not follow in the Torah path even if their parents did. Even in the Bible, many great leaders (Moses, Joshua, Samuel,) had children who were nothing out of the ordinary, and did not follow the greatness of their parents. But it works both ways. The sons of Korach also did not follow in the evil ways of their father who rebelled against Moses, as they repented and did not die.²⁹ King David even composed a Psalm said by or in honor of the sons of Korach.³⁰

This idea, that there are no guarantees that children will follow in the religious path of their parents, is alluded to in an enigmatic phrase of the beginning words of every Amidah prayer (and many other prayers). The prayer begins by saying that we bless our G-d and the G-d of our fathers. Since Judaism believes in only one G-d, this double phrase must refer to the same G-d. Why not suffice with just "our G-d?" It has been said that this shows that each person has a dual relationship with G-d. A parent who teaches a child to believe in G-d and follow Jewish tradition is represented by the "G-d of our fathers." But there comes a time in every Jew's life then he or she must make a choice to accept G-d for himself or herself. This is "our G-d." Hence, each person has to make his or her own moral choices in life, irrespective of upbringing.

HOW TO ACHIEVE TRUE FREEDOM

With all these ideas, how can a person truly feel free inside? The Mishna gives us a formula for achieving Jewish freedom. The Mishna in Ethics of the Fathers³¹ says that the truly free person is one who learns Torah. From our discussion, we can understand why following and observing the entire Torah system is a part of spiritual freedom. But why should learning Torah help achieve freedom? Apparently, learning Torah makes a person aware that he is not really free and independent. No one is. Even the wealthiest people need doctors to heal them when ill, and need friendship that cannot be bought with money. A person who learns enough realizes that all things in life are ultimately dependent on G-d (except moral choice, as noted above). When this is realized, the worries and pressures of life seem diminished and one can achieve a more full and "free" life.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik expressed this idea when he said that contemporary man is unfree because he is insecure. He is tied to the moment, never knowing whether disaster will strike the next second. There is only one way for man to free himself from all his restrictions, from all his fears, from all his phobias. That is by surrendering to G-d, which frees man from his serfdom to his fellow man. Man thus rids himself of his fright by faith in G-d and surrender to Him. But surrender to G-d is very hard indeed. This may be the idea alluded to in yet another

²⁷ Hilchot Teshuvah 5:5

²⁸ Avot 2:12

²⁹ Numbers 26:11

³⁰ Psalm 48

³¹ Avot 6:2

Mishna in Avot.³² When a person learns Torah (takes upon himself the yoke of Torah), says the Mishna, the yoke of government and worldly cares are removed from him. Does this really happen by magic? Will an individual learning Torah no longer have to worry about making a living? No, a person will still have to earn an income. But this signifies that the person will no longer feel the same yoke, the strong pressures to succeed, when he realizes that ultimately it is in G-d's hands. This is personal Jewish freedom that can be achieved through Torah learning.

Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel currently works with Rabbi Berel Wein and the Destiny Foundation as the Director of Education, whose mission is "to bring Jewish history to life in an exciting, entertaining and interactive way." Rabbi Amsel has also served as a teacher, a school principal, and an adjunct professor. He has also taught over 2000 educators how to teach more effectively. Rabbi Amsel has worked in all areas of formal and informal Jewish education and has developed numerous curricula including a methodology how to teach Jewish Values using mass media. Recently, he founded the STARS Program (Student Torah Alliance for Russian Speakers), where more than 3000 students in 12 Russian speaking countries learn about their Jewish heritage for five hours weekly. Rabbi Amsel previously served as the Educational Director of Hillel in the Former Soviet Union. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife and has four children and four grandchildren.

³² Avot 3:5