

PESAH 5768/APRIL 2008

We will soon celebrate the festival of Pesah, *z'man heruteinu* (the season of our freedom), in which we will once again be redeemed from the enslavement in Egypt. But what is freedom, really?

Secular society equates freedom with being a sovereign self. Freedom, we are told, is an inalienable right which guarantees our liberty as individuals to exercise our will without coercion, to make our own choices, to do whatever we please, and to engage in the pursuit of personal happiness.

The Jewish understanding of freedom is very different. The Exodus narrative does not tell the story of a people redeemed from slavery in order to be completely at liberty. On the contrary, each Pesah we re-live the drama of being redeemed from servitude to a human king in order to serve the Divine. "Let My People Go" is a wonderful song, but the Torah's actual message is ever so much richer and more challenging: "Let My people go *that they may serve Me*" (שְׁלַח אֶת־עַמִּי וְיַעֲבֹדֵנִי) (see, e.g., Exod. 7:16, 26, 8:16, 9:1, 9:13, 10:3).

How can we understand this? In the words of Abraham Joshua Heschel, "the world is not a vacuum. Either we make it an altar for God or it is invaded by demons. There can be no neutrality. Either we are ministers of the sacred or slaves for evil." The same is true of the human will, the exercise of which is never simply neutral, but always in the service of *something*. In a very real sense, the question we confront on Pesah is not *whether* we will serve, but *who* and *what* we will serve. Inevitably, we serve a master; we cannot opt out of service, but we can choose whether to be "ministers of the sacred or slaves for evil." Ideally, we serve God, at least most or some of the time. All too often, however, we end up serving our appetites and lusts, our ambition, our emotions, our possessions, our egos, our habits, or even the narrowness of our own thinking and our need to be right.

Indeed, one of the central lessons of Pesah is that the idea of a completely autonomous, sovereign self is but an illusion, the search for which leads only to further enslavement. The Exodus narrative, and the festival of Pesah, are grounded in the realization that true freedom can be achieved only with great effort, and only by making holy commitments -- commitments to God, to community, to *tikkun atzmi* (repair of the self) and to *tikkun olam* (repair of the world). The path to freedom thus requires disciplining ourselves to make more conscious choices regarding our service. Do we live our lives in service to our noblest values, or our baser desires and needs? Do we serve God, or our egos? To move toward freedom, we must challenge our personal pharaohs with God's command, "Let My people go that they may serve Me."

Pesah thus invites us to embrace freedom as a responsibility rather than a right, an engagement for service rather than an opportunity for self-satisfaction; it reminds us that true freedom lies not in the pursuit of happiness, but in the pursuit of purpose and meaning.

The road to freedom is long and hard-won. Freedom is indeed an "inalienable right," but only in the most basic, physical sense. In a deeper sense, freedom must be chosen, earned; we are born not free, but with the capacity to acquire our freedom. Ultimately, we are all (individually and collectively) obliged to free ourselves, and to rigorously safeguard the freedom we are able to acquire. It is a journey which lasts a lifetime, but which we are blessed to begin anew each Pesah.

וַתִּתֵּן לָנוּ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ בְּאַהֲבָה . . . אֶת יוֹם חַג הַמִּצּוֹת הַזֶּה, זְמַן חַרּוּתֵנוּ מִקְרָא קֹדֶשׁ, זֶכֶר לִיציאת מִצְרָיִם.

Lovingly, Adonai our God, have You given us . . . this Festival of Matzot, the season of our freedom (*z'man heiruteinu*), a day of sacred assembly, recalling the Exodus from Egypt (from the Amidah for Pesah).