

Freedom? Yes, But Gently Please

A few years ago, I was invited to teach a class on the Torah portion at the Herzog College, in the religious kibbutz of Ein Tzurim. It was on Parashat Teruma, which opens the discussion of the Mishkan in the desert. I chose to focus on the importance of accuracy. Without accuracy - I argued, backed by the Sages - the Divine Presence will not be able to dwell in the tent that was built in Its honor.

At the end of the lecture, Tova Ilan z"l - the "queen" of the religious kibbutz movement, and one of the pioneers of religious feminism, who died exactly a month ago - approached me and told me something I would never forget.

Out of profound wisdom, she very gently suggested that perhaps it was worthwhile to be a little careful with the idea of accuracy. Precision, she said, could easily become a dangerous idolatry.

Many years have passed, and with every new wrinkle on my face and the abundance graying hair, I understand more and more how right she was.

Beware of excessive accuracy!

And now Pessach is upon us, and I want - in the spirit of Tova Ilan's wisdom, and in her memory - to warn us of excessive zeal for freedom.

For two weeks now, along with the cleaning, the shopping and the cooking, a lively discourse on the topic of freedom is being surrounding us. Many recite and recycle beautiful freedom texts in the social media. On the radio we hear songs written by our best poets and lyricists about the challenges of slavery and the hardship of freedom. In recent days our phone is buzzing with whatsapps from a friend or from a business - wishing us this year the desired freedom (of course, with the help of one product or another, currently on sale in honor of the holiday).

We were slaves, now we are free!

But perhaps, as with accuracy, we have also been a little too obsessive with the idea of freedom?

Those of us who teach the subject in Batei Midrash throughout the country, or write posts on Facebook and Twitter, or conduct educational Seders in schools and other institutions before Pessach, and generally preach freedom to anyone who is willing to listen - perhaps we need to take a step back?!

How judgmental this discourse is! We promised ourselves last Pesach, and also the one before, that this year we will finally get out of the shackles that are stifling us, drop the addictions that torture us, get rid of the laziness that is holding us back, outgrow the procrastination that characterizes us ... and woe unto us, this Passover will pass and nothing will change...

Therefore, this year I am inviting myself and anyone else interested in trying, to be ever so gentle with the quest for freedom!

The era of great revolutions has passed, and with it the illusion that revolutions (aggressive or quiet) really change something. George Orwell taught us that every revolution ends in a new variation of the same thing that we tried to rid ourselves of.

Freedom, it turns out, is a process - a long, gradual process. No one can fundamentally gain true freedom by the use of force, contrary to everything we've been taught.

I am a great believer in evolution, and what drives everything forward in the evolutionary spiral is not the theory of "the survival of the fittest", but something much more powerful. And this "something" - which is intrinsic in its essence - is transparent and invisible.

The exodus that we celebrate on Passover - and in fact on all the Jewish holidays and all the Sabbaths, even the weekdays - is the joy of becoming, the exodus from potential to realization.

And freedom? We are free to be realized, be manifested, become more and more ourselves. Or we can refuse and resist this inner calling!

Freedom is not to be found "out there". The outside is "just" the playground on which our inner drama plays itself out.

The Exodus, in essence, is stepping from the outside in!!!

Freedom is what drives evolution. It is a deep, yet almost invisible process. True, at the end of this inner process an external, finished and impressive outcome appears, but what preceded it was a quiet, gentle, slow, subconscious process. Excessive effort and force are signs of impatience, where the cart insists on bypassing the horse.

This mysterious force, which gives birth to "some-thing" out of "no-thingness", "has no image and is not corporeal" (Rambam). It is invisible. And although it is the power that drives the

universe since its creation, since the Big Bang, it is nameless. Tradition calls it "God," or "The Lord," or "the Holy One, Blessed is He," or simply "Hashem."

What do you call it?

This year, as the festival of freedom is approaching, let's consider slowing down, quieting our speech, revering the gentle inner process, that which never stops ("the Guardian of Israel never sleeps and never rests").

Perhaps if we slow down just enough to direct our attention inwards, we will hear the quiet, soft whisper of the God of Freedom, who breathes life into every atom and molecule, saying: "come on... come on out ... come out from the outside world and come inside ... Get out of Egypt and come back to yourself No revolutions, please ... no loudspeakers... no violent ideologies ... no ideologies at all, for that matter ... just a whisper... a still silent voice".

Oh, and be careful not to be over-accurate about it.

It is OK to hesitate. To be uncertain. It is good to fail sometimes.

Teach me, my dear God, to bless and to pray
The inner secret of a dying leaf, of a ripe fruit
Teach me this freedom: to see, to feel, to breathe,
To know, to beg, to fail.
(Leah Goldberg)

May it be a gentle holiday of freedom and Shabbat Shalom!

Elisha