

The Forgotten Word in Exodus
Shabbat Vaera 5780 – 1/25/20
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The Book of Exodus contains a verse as well-known as the American Pledge of Allegiance. Let me remind you of both.

First the Pledge: “I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation under G-d, indivisible, with liberty and justice.”

Next the verse: “Let My people go.” The context, of course, is that Moses repeatedly demands that Pharaoh release the enslaved Jews. Pharaoh vigorously refuses, the Ten Plagues follow, Moses and G-d save the Jews, and so today, for one week in the spring, we all eat a little Matza and too many Manichewitz cake mixes!

If you’re paying attention, you caught my two mistakes above. No, my reference to Manichewitz is not one of them!

First, I misquoted the Pledge. I left out the final words, “for all.” We know the Pledge of Allegiance concludes, “With liberty and justice *for all*.” Those two brief words, two simple syllables, are crucial. Our country was founded on the premise that not just some but *all* its citizens would stand equal before the law. While this doesn’t always happen, it remains an ideal. These two words comprise a key component of the Pledge and ultimately, of American values.

Do you know what the equivalent is of lopping off the words, “for all”? It’s like saying “Let My people go” and cutting off the rest of the verse. This was my second misquote above. The complete verse reads “*Shalach Et Ami VYaAvduni* - Let My people go *so they may worship Me*” (Ex. 9:1). Don’t forget the second half of the verse - *VYaAvduni* / so they may worship Me. This word is vital to fully understanding Passover, freedom, and ultimately the Mitzvot. I know “Let My people go” makes for a better song. But “*VYaAvduni* / so they may worship Me” is the Jewish story.

If the Jews had merely escaped Pharaoh, our ancestors would have disappeared into the desert sands of history. On the second side of the Red Sea, the Jews would have enjoyed their freedoms as they lasted before splitting up amid the chaos and anarchy that inevitably occurs with unrestricted freedom.

The early Americans gained freedom when they won the War of Independence. But they *preserved* that freedom only with the Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution, one document that articulated their collective values and aspirations and a second document that enshrined them into law.

For the Jewish People, our Torah is both. Like the Declaration of Independence, our Torah, from start to finish, gives voice to our unique destiny. Specifically, as Abraham’s family on a mission. And like the Constitution, our Torah translates these values into law and ideals into actions.

Freedom without a Constitution or Torah is not genuine freedom.

Only with restrictions can freedom truly be free.

This is somewhat counterintuitive. Look at the word we will all know by heart by the end of this sermon - *VYaAvduni* - that they may worship Me. The *Shoresh* three letter Hebrew root is *Ayin Vet Dalet*, or *Eved*. Which means, to worship.

But the root *Ayin Vet Dalet* is also the word for *Eved*, slave! As we sing at the Seder, “*Avadim Hayinu LFaroh BMitzrayim* - We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt.” In the Exodus story, we left one master - Pharaoh - and attached ourselves to a new Master, G-d.

The Torah teaches in Leviticus that G-d says, “it is to Me, [G-d], that the Israelites are *Avadim* - servants” (Lv. 25:55). In the Talmud, Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai shares that the Jews are to be servants to G-d but never servants to servants (Kiddushin 22b).

For the Torah, freedom is not the absence of a master but the distinction that we are serving G-d directly without any corrupting human interference.

I know the following will sound very Christian, but I firmly believe it’s a Jewish idea: Precisely because G-d loves us and wants us to maintain a unique identity, do we have the myriad rules of the Torah.

Let me pause to do a short thought experiment with you. Consider a way you love to express yourself creatively. Which activity best showcases your personality and originality? (PAUSE) Maybe it’s through creative writing, or singing, or playing an instrument, or taking photographs, or creating art with your hands, or cooking, or dancing, or playing a sport. Or it’s something else. Take your answer and think about how you got to this point of feeling “free” in this given craft. I bet, for most of us, we got there only through following a structured set of many rules and having coaches who taught us. (Or in some cases like cooking, learning indirectly from cooks in recipes and videos).

Our teachers and coaches didn’t teach us by letting us run wild, but by giving us prompts, exercises, drills, *rules*. Rules make us free.

My own answer to this question would be creative writing. In high school I wrote and edited for my school newspaper, and that was really the first time I realized that I could use the English language to say what I wanted to about anything. On the newspaper staff, I had my first chance to write about what I really wanted: sports and what they say about our society. Do you know what got me to that point, where I felt *free* as a writer? A thousand spelling tests, hundreds of vocab quizzes, dozens of papers, plenty of first drafts and rewrites, lots of Bic mechanical pencils and blue Paper-Mate pens, and lucky for me, teachers who cared. And do you know what the ones who cared about me the most did, like my newspaper advisor? They pushed me harder. They gave me feedback that made me think and try again. They gave me more books and articles

to read. They made me work. Only as a result of all this *structure* did I gain the *freedom* to be a creative writer. I hope we all had at least one teacher or coach like that.

In our tradition, Moses is lovingly referred to as *Moshe Rabbeinu*, Moses our teacher. But I like to think of G-d as a teacher. The Torah's set of Mitzvot is G-d's structure for teaching humans how to build an ethical society. Talk about a challenge.

Parents of children are teachers too. We're all working so hard just to show a couple *individuals* how to be a Mensch. We all utilize rules to move our kids in that direction. And when we are away from our kids, there's always a structure in place, like at camp. Good thing we had Lori Stark watching our kids at Ramah Day Camp! But G-d's project is to elevate an entire society, to sustain a whole world of Menschens. That requires a lot of structure.

Let's return to where we began. "VYaAvduni / so they may worship Me." G-d freed the Israelites from Pharaoh's authority in order to serve G-d directly, and become a nation that - by obeying the Torah - models morality and justice.

Later in Exodus, the Torah says that Moses came down from Mt. Sinai carrying the Ten Commandments. It says, "The tablets were G-d's creation, the writing G-d's autograph, incised upon the tablets" (Ex. 32:16). The word "incised" or "engraved" is *Harut - Chet Raysh Vav Taf*. The early Rabbis made a play-on-word for this verse, suggesting in Pirkei Avot (6:2): Don't read "incised (Harut)" but, rather as though the verse says "freedom (Herut - spelled with the same consonants but different vowels)." With this interpretation, the Torah teaches that, there was freedom upon the tablets. For no person is free unless they are involved in the study of the law."

Rabbi Burt Visotsky of JTS explains, "By playfully suggesting the change of one vowel of the Hebrew, *Harut* to *Herut*, the Rabbis explain that the essence of freedom, paradoxically, lies in the rule of law. The Torah teaches that the law is the guarantor of freedom, and that freedom is the guarantor of the rule of law."

Without the Torah, which represents Israel's worship of G-d, there would be no Jewish identity, no Jewish values, no lasting Jewish People. This is precisely why Moses insisted from the very start that Pharaoh let the Israelites go, in order to worship G-d. "VYaAvduni / so they may worship Me." Crossing the Red Sea was not merely the finish line of slavery. Rather, it was the starting line for the Jewish People with an enduring identity and Constitution.

The Torah's soaring verses about freedom inspired the early Americans. Not for nothing is a verse from the Torah etched onto Philadelphia's iconic Liberty Bell. Leviticus 25:10 says "Ukratem Dror BaAretz, Lchol Yoshveha." The translation on the bell reads, "Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof." Or in my own words, Let there be liberty and justice...for all.

Shabbat Shalom!