

Shabbat Vaera 5784
Freedom's First Step
Rabbi Alex Freedman

Shabbat Shalom.

One of the greatest sports movies ever made was “Hoosiers,” the 1986 classic where Gene Hackman plays a coach that inspires a small-town, Indiana high school basketball team to compete against the very best ... and win. It's a movie where after you watch it, you just want to dream big and go shoot some hoops.

Years later I saw a magazine ad featuring a picture of this coach with the words: “he taught them the first rule of being champions: believe.”

There is much wisdom in that statement, both about sports and in life. The road to any championship has many steps, and were I to name them, I don't think I would have started with “Believe.” It's not obvious. But after thinking about it, it is *fundamental*. Of course that's the first step. Without self-belief, there is no chance at reaching success.

In gyms across the country, this cold weather means it's basketball season. But in synagogues across the world, the chilly temperatures mean it's time to read about the Exodus in the Torah. This week, Parashat Vaera, is the second of four Torah portions that spell out the Passover story in full. Everybody knows that the story ends with freedom, but the process to achieve freedom is just that. It's a *process* that takes time, much longer than the minutes for G-d to split the sea and the Israelites to cross through safely.

At the beginning of the Torah reading, G-d tells Moses that it's finally time to end slavery. G-d identifies five steps toward freedom, and I will count the five verbs here in the verses. Moses is to speak to the Israelites in G-d's name and say, “I am the Lord. I will *take you out* from under the burdens of Egypt, and I will *rescue you* from their bondage. I will *redeem you* with an outstretched arm and through extraordinary chastisements. And I will *take you to be My people*, and I will be your G-d. And you shall know that I, the Lord, am your G-d Who took you out from under the burdens of Egypt. I will *bring you into the land* [of Canaan]” (Ex. 6:6-8).

The first four verbs are known as *Arba Lshonot Shel Geulah*, the four expressions of redemption. *Vhotzeiti*, *Vhitzalti*, *Vgaalti*, *Vlakachti*. The fifth one, about entering the land of Canaan, *Vheveti*, had a different status at the Seder because the return to Israel was incomplete while the Jews were in exile.

Rabbi Shai Held writes, “There are five crucial terms here, suggestive of five stages of divine redemption. These verses are crucial to Passover, and yet at the Seder, we drink four cups of wine, which are said to correspond to the four staged redemption promised by G-d.” The fifth verb, “I will bring you into the land,” is marked by a fifth cup of wine at the Seder that is poured but not drunk, Elijah's cup.

Let's zoom into the first step in this march toward freedom. It's *Vhotzeiti*, I will take you out of slavery. Certainly this happened in a physical sense, but even before that could happen, G-d had to take the Israelites out of slavery *psychologically*. It was similar to the basketball coach teaching his team to believe before anything else could be possible.

When we continue to read the Torah, the action-packed narrative comes to a screeching halt at the beginning of Exodus chapter 12. We interrupt the story to introduce the first commandment given to the entire Jewish people, Rosh Hodesh, the instruction of the new moon. Here is what the Torah says: “The L-rd said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: ‘this month shall mark for you the beginning of the months. It shall be the first of the months of the year for you’” (Ex. 12:1,2). What's the big deal with this instruction? The Mitzvah of Rosh Hodesh is the creation of the Jewish calendar. Only when we know the beginning of each month, can we celebrate all the Jewish holidays (except for Shabbat, which is based on the sun). In other words, G-d gifted the Jewish people the Jewish calendar *even before* they left Egypt. The import is that for the Jews to be free, they needed to be *in control of their own time* and set their own schedule, not to continue at the mercy of Egyptian time, a schedule of slavery. If they had walked out of Egypt and still operated on Egypt time, they would not have been fully free. The commentary Iturei Torah adds that the Mitzvah of Rosh Hodesh was not only the first in number given to the Jewish people as a whole, it was also first in importance, for all the Jewish holidays depend on knowing when the Jewish month begins.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks quotes Rabbi Abraham Pam in his Passover Haggadah commentary: *“The difference between a slave and a free human being does not lie in how long or how hard they work. Free people often work long hours doing arduous tasks. The difference lies in who controls time. A slave works until he or she is allowed to stop. A free person decides when to begin and when to end. Control over time is the essential difference between slavery and freedom. The determination of the calendar gave the Israelites the power to decide when the new moon occurred, and thus when the festivals occur. They were given authority over time. The first command to the Israelites was thus an essential prelude to freedom. It said, learn how to value time and make it holy.”*

One reason we read about Passover *now*, even though it's not springtime, is because *freedom* is far too important to limit its discussion to one week a year. Its paramount importance requires us to speak of it all year round. And control of our time was and is the first step toward freedom.

For the Israelites of old, once they switched their minds to Jewish time, they were psychologically free even before they walked through the split sea. And for the Jewish people since then and through today, what brings us together is the same emphasis on Jewish time. It's the *holidays* that bring us together as family, friends, and community. Sometimes at home, sometimes at synagogue, but always together. Imagine Jewish life without the holidays. There's something there, but the skeleton has been removed. Before the state of Israel was revived, it was the Jewish calendar that connected Jewish communities all over the world for 2,000 years. Jewish families in Europe and Africa and Asia and North and South America could probably not have had a conversation with each other, as they all spoke different languages. But they all ate Matzah on the same night. They all lit Hanukkah candles for the same week. They all heard the Shofar on the same day. They all celebrated Shabbat at the same time. It was the Jewish calendar that binded our people when nothing else did. *Time* remained the first step toward being free as Jews. And it still does today.

I think this lesson goes even further, towards something universal and personal. Each of us is in pursuit of self-actualization, of identifying who we want to be and then reaching our potential based on our values, commitments, habits, and actions. There too, control of our time is the first step. Those who align closely how they spend their time with who they truly want to be are more likely to reach their personal goals. I know that some of us have much free time on our hands, and others really don't. But I do encourage each of us to reflect on how we use the free time that we have. Are we really in control of that time? Are we spending time with the people we want doing things that we deeply value? If not, maybe we should recalibrate. When we closely align our time with who we want to be, we too will reach a deeper level of personal freedom.

The story of Passover is not just about those people then, but about all of us for all time. Unlike a basketball game, in the pursuit of freedom there is no final buzzer

Shabbat Shalom.