

Bo 5778

Two Steps To Liberation

With this parashah we truly begin the story of ourselves as a nation.

Rabbi Arthur Green teaches that liberation, though, is only a first step in our journey. The exodus from Egypt has an initial destination - Mount Sinai, where the people as a community will directly hear the voice of God speaking from the heavens. And Rabbi Green argues that it is impossible for there to be revelation without liberation having happened first. The covenant of Sinai can only be made by a free people - prisoners or slaves do not enter into such relationships.

And this is why in our tradition we count the days between Pesah and Shavuot. We are to notice the relationship between these two cardinal events - our freedom on the one hand and our achieving an understanding of how we are to live our lives and our true purpose on the other.

Sadly that narrative has not infused our world. We only have to open a news page on our laptops to see see many examples of slavery. There are tyrants like Pharaoh; there are populations that are forcibly subdued and abused, from the persecution of whole nations to the individual stories of the victims of trafficking and the women who are trapped as servants to the wealthy and indifferent, working endless hours and living in pitiable conditions.

In the light of those horrors, it is easy for us to say 'but none of that applies to us, because we are free.'

The truth is more complex, as is often the case with the truth. Yes, we appear to have control over our lives, choices about where to live, what our jobs will be, what we do with our leisure time and so on. But internally, we are often out of control.

The truth is that we are subjugated to our bad habits. They seem innocuous, but they pervade our lives: our news addictions, our grabbing sugary or stodgy food to comfort ourselves without even noticing what we are consuming, our late-night forays on to Amazon or Ebay...if we each take a moment we can each begin to identify at least one habit that while giving us some superficial comfort, actually works to undermine our sense of purpose, our self-respect and ultimately our identity. This translates into damaging stories we tell not only about others but about ourselves. We walk through the world shrouded in our assumptions - "I've got no willpower," "I can't find a way to be happy," "I'm too weak to get over the damage that was done to me in my childhood," and thus we put up barriers between our selves and the critical step of starting our journey to wisdom and insight. As I said above, slaves don't make covenants. If we can't get ourselves free, we block ourselves off from our own futures.

The Jewish mystical tradition reads the Exodus narrative not just as a story of a nation's liberation but also of the liberation of the self. Bob Marley possibly put it best:

*"Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery.
None but ourselves can free our minds."*

According to the mystics, what has been enslaved is our knowledge, our *da'at* – the part of ourselves that realizes that it is our right and our destiny to be free, subject only to our profound connection to God, and that rejoices in that knowledge.

And the opening of this week's Torah portion gives us, in very short form, a technique for liberating the self, for casting off our own chains of mental slavery.

There are two steps.

Bo el Paroh, says the Torah. On the face of it, this is a strange commandment, since what Moses is really being told is to *go* to Pharaoh and not to come to him. But it is significant. When we say to someone, 'go!' we can imagine ourselves standing behind them and propelling them forward. But if we tell them 'come!' they have to get to wherever-it-is under the influence of their own energy.

So *bo* represents a very purposeful coming forward. And it's in the direction of Pharaoh.

Pharaoh represents everything that we put up barriers against because it's too painful to see. Pharaoh is what I call my internal Ayatollah, the voice inside us that makes ridiculous demands, shaming and abusing in order to retain its hold, making us helpless and unable to break away. We can't get free just by deciding we are going to be free. It's more complicated than that. We have to first confront what is keeping us enslaved. We have to confront the tyrant, name it, acknowledge its control over us and then engage with it in whatever way is necessary in order to take away its power.

If we can do that, we can move on to the second step.

Vayifan Moshe, says the Torah. Moses turns away from Pharaoh - just as, in the recounting of the first plague, Pharaoh himself turned away:

Pharaoh turned and went into his palace, paying no regard... {Shemot 7:23}

But these are two different types of turning. In Pharaoh's case, it is wilful, a sign, ultimately, of his weakness. But when Moses does it, it is decisive, a show of real strength rather than a petulant walking out. It takes *chutzpah* to turn your back on a king.

We have a Hebrew word for this process. It's called *teshuvah* - not in the sense we normally encounter it, meaning repentance, but a true turning, making an actual change in our lives. We set our intention and translate it out into action. We put the TV in another room. We reset our home page to a different website. We take facebook off our phone. We stop buying low-quality food. We set a shopping budget to stick to. We decide we will reach out for professional help...or whatever it is that means that we can walk away from that habitual behavior that is holding us back and standing in the way of our growth.

And the thing about teshuvah is that it's not a one-off thing. Breaking the habits that enslave us usually takes more than one try, or two, or several. But we keep turning. *Vayifan*, over and over again. We practice and practice until one day we get it right and are able to walk away, like Moses, with our heads held high.

And once we are free of our enslavements, we can turn our faces towards revelation.

Shabbat shalom.