Freedom and Happiness: Thoughts on Behar-Behukkotai, May 16, 2009

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"And you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof." (Vayikra 25:10)

"And I have broken the bars of your yoke, and made you to go upright." (Vayikra 26:13)

The Torah reading this Shabbat (Behar-Behukkotai) reminds us of the importance of human freedom. Freedom does not mean license; rather it entails a proper philosophy of life and a righteous regimen of living. We cannot be really free if we are enslaved to our material needs and desires. Mitzvoth are not burdensome obligations, but keys to genuine freedom--they help us transcend the mundane by keeping our lives in context of a relationship with God, the Author of human freedom.

Freedom engenders a feeling of self-respect and happiness with life. It also prods us to help others who do not enjoy the full benefits of freedom. The natural mindset of a religious Jew should be optimistic and happy, with the desire to spread optimism and happiness within society.

Maimonides, in his Guide for the Perplexed (III: 43), makes a significant comment about religion and happiness: "The festivals are all for rejoicings and pleasurable gatherings, which in most cases are indispensable for man; they are also useful in the establishment of friendship, which must exist among people living in political societies." Happy occasions are indispensable. Pleasurable gatherings are vital to the wellbeing of the human spirit. The rejoicings of the festivals create a spirit that should carry into every day of our lives. Children are very fortunate who grow up in homes where every Shabbat and festival is characterized by celebration, where happiness is the dominant mood. Such children are likely to maintain their religious traditions when they grow up, because these traditions are so intertwined with happy experiences and happy memories.

Experiencing religious life not only generates personal happiness and satisfaction. It also sensitizes us to help others, to develop meaningful friendships, to work for the betterment of our communities. A happy and free religious individual assists

in creating a happy and free religious community.

With the rise and spread of religious extremism, it is all the more important to keep in mind the genuine religious values of personal freedom, happiness and social responsibility. Judaism is sometimes presented in very austere terms, dark and restrictive. It is as though to be religious one must live in a narrow intellectual, social and spiritual framework. The truth is that Judaism is far grander than this: it values our individuality and our freedom; it broadens our worldview; it engenders real happiness and self-fulfillment.

The Ethics of the Fathers teaches that one cannot be truly free unless he/she engages in serious study of Torah. Interestingly--perhaps even ironically-- the more gladly we cling to Torah and mitzvoth, the greater our level of human freedom--the greater our ability to be free, happy and constructive people.

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