Coercion and Freedom: Thoughts for Passover

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by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Some years ago, I served as scholar-in-residence on a trip to Spain and Israel sponsored by the American Friends of the Technion. The closing event was a dinner at the Technion in Haifa. It was a week or so before Passover. One of the Israeli participants in the program--I believe she was a teacher or administrator of the school--noticed that I was wearing a kippah, and she came to speak with me.

She said: "I see that you are a religious Jew. Next week is Passover. Do you know what I do in honor of Passover? I go to a nearby Bedouin village and buy pita bread! I do not eat matzah!"

I politely asked her why she felt the need to share this information with me, a total stranger. Why would I be interested in knowing what she planned to eat on Passover? She answered: "I wanted to tell you this, because it is your fault that I eat bread on Pessah! I grew up in Argentina in a moderately religious home, and we always ate matzah and never ate bread on Pessah. But when I came on aliyah to Israel, I became disgusted with the religious establishment here--it is coercive, intrusive, hateful. The religious extremism is so repulsive to me, that I decided I would not be religious--that I would even eat bread on Pessah, just to make clear that I reject everything the religious stand for."

I calmly reminded her that I was not part of the "religious establishment" in Israel, and that I shared her disgust for religious extremism and coercion. But then I asked her: "If you are so repelled by the religious extremists, why do you let them control your life? You really want to eat matzah and follow the traditions of your youth in Argentina. The only reason you eat bread is to spite the "religious establishment", most of whom couldn't care less what you eat or don't eat. Why should you let their extremism determine what you eat on Pessah? Why don't you just eat matzah as an expression of your own freedom of choice?"

She raised her eyebrows, and then walked away. I don't know what she ate that Pessah, or if my words had any positive impact on her.

Pessah is called "zeman heiruteinu", the time of our freedom. It recalls our liberation from slavery in Egypt. But freedom is a much larger concept than merely attaining physical redemption from slavery. It also includes intellectual and emotional freedom--the freedom to make independent choices, the freedom to define our own goals, the freedom to act autonomously. When our actions are determined by others--especially by those who do not have our interests at heart--we are not totally free. If our actions are simply "re-actions", then we are not totally free. Why should we surrender our freedom to others? Why should we act against our own best judgment, simply out of defiance or spite? Why shouldn't we make our decisions in freedom and independence?

There are always people who want to define us, to limit us, to rule over us autocratically. When we succumb to them, we lose our own autonomy. We become free, unique and universal, when we insist on defining ourselves and being true to ourselves.

The ideal of Judaism is for us to understand that the Torah and mitzvoth were given to us for our benefit and for our happiness. We should choose to be religious because our religion is a source of truth, compassion, spiritual fulfillment--because it is so meaningful to us. The goal is to be religious--through free choice, through independent judgment. Those who present Judaism in a coercive and extremist mode are, in fact, pushing people away from Judaism at its best. They deny us our freedom.

May we celebrate this "zeman heiruteinu" as a time for the physical redemption of the Jewish people everywhere, a time for freedom and security in the State of Israel--and a time to foster genuine internal freedom for each individual.

***The Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals (www.jewishideas.org) wishes you and your loved ones a happy and meaningful Passover festival. Moadim leSimha.

Angel for Shabbat