

Spiritual Slavery and Freedom: Thoughts for Parashat Va-era, January 1, 2011

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"The Mitzvot are the dictates of God, and we are bound to obey them as a servant obeys his master." This is the topic of a paper assigned to a cousin of mine, who is taking a class in Jewish studies. The class is studying various religious movements within Judaism, and the above statement was meant to characterize the Orthodox view. Obviously, the way the statement is phrased paints a narrow picture of Orthodoxy-- implying that we are compelled to do mitzvot unthinkingly, and we function essentially as mindless, mechanical slaves.

While the Torah and rabbinic literature certainly contain sources that refer to the people of Israel as "avadim" (slaves) to the Almighty, the actual meaning of the term is far more nuanced than the English word "slave" connotes. For example, Moses is called "eved", but this is a term of high praise. It means that Moses had risen to the highest spiritual level possible for a human being. When the Israelites are told that they were no longer slaves to any human beings, but were only "avadim", this was a great moment of redemption and inner freedom for Israel. Yes, the mitzvot are dictates of God; and yes we are bound to obey them; but the relationship of Israel to God--as mediated through mitzvot--is not meant to be one of blind subservience. We are not to see ourselves as victimized slaves who are compelled to slavishly fulfill the whims of our master.

What is the status of a slave? Haham Solomon Gaon, whose death anniversary we observed this past week, commented on the hard work and lack of spirit which overtook the Israelite slaves in Egypt. "Hard work, when undertaken for the sake of achieving a certain aim can prove inspiring, but when such an aim is lacking in our endeavors, they then become a source of demoralization. The children of Israel in Egypt could not understand the meaning of the forthcoming redemption as announced by Moses because they had lost the spirit which had animated the undertakings of their forefathers. They were without courage, without faith, and this situation was aggravated by the fact that they had to do work under cruel conditions and under aimless pressure which did not give them any sense of achievement." Slavery is equated with powerlessness, futility, total subservience to cruel, unfeeling masters.

This is radically different from the "slavery" imposed on the Israelites by God. By being servants of God, the Israelites became free from domination by human beings; they found a clear focus and meaning in their lives. God did not impose mitzvot on us in order to crush our freedom and autonomy, but rather to give us Divine guidance on how best to live our lives. The mitzvot are basic sources of freedom and spiritual blessings--not heavy, mindless burdens. As Maimonides explained, each of the mitzvot was given by the all-wise God in order to perfect us. The mitzvot were given with love and wisdom by our Creator who loves us and who wants us to find the highest fulfillment in our lives. The mitzvot provide us with aim and focus in life; they enable us to escape the ennui and futility that characterize so much of humanity.

I told my cousin that I would rephrase the title of the paper he was assigned: The mitzvot are commandments of God, and we have the privilege of fulfilling them as a means of coming closer to God.

The Pirkei Avot teaches that no one is as free as one who occupies him/herself with Torah. Those who truly experience Torah and mitzvot are blessed with an incredible inner freedom, autonomy, and meaning in life. It is a supreme honor and privilege to be called "eved Hashem", a servant of God.

The great 17th century figure, Dr. Isaac Cardoso, said it well: To those who despise Torah, six commandments seem like 613. To those who love Torah, 613 seem like only six. Whether Torah and mitzvot are a blessing or a burden--this is very much in the eyes of the beholder. We are on the side of blessing.

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