Torah Is Freedom

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> And it says, “And the tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, graven upon the tablets” (Exodus 32:16). Read not *harut* [‘graven’] but *herut* [‘freedom’]. For there is no free man but one that occupies himself with the study of the Torah (Mishnah *Avot* 6:2).

This midrashic re-reading of God’s engraved tablets has intrigued me for years. The image of God’s words engraved in stone sounds rather permanent and unchanging. Yet, the Sages find an opening to promote one of their cornerstone values, namely, the Torah brings to its adherents true inner freedom and nobility.

In his classic commentary on the Mishnah, Rabbi Yisrael Lifshitz (1782-1860, *Tiferet Yisrael*) suggests that the Torah offers freedom from enslavement to one’s bodily desires. Offering a more expansive definition of this freedom, Rabbi Marc D. Angel comments that “God did not impose mitzvot in order to crush freedom and autonomy, but to give divine guidance on how best to live one’s life” (*Koren Pirkei Avot*, 156).

Anyone who engages meaningfully with the sacred texts of our tradition is immediately transported into a millennia-old dialogue and debate regarding the meaning of God's word. It is precisely this pursuit of divine truth that brings the Torah to life, and makes its learners active recipients of God's engraved words.

When Torah instead becomes about control and uniformity, its spirit is eviscerated. Authoritarian interpreters who stifle or willfully ignore valid alternatives within tradition veer from the very idea of Torah, even when such individuals speak in the name of Torah.

Since its founding in 2007, the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals has been motivated to fight for these inherent Torah freedoms. We have been animated in particular by two unsettling trends in our community: (1) A right-wing authoritarian voice that tends to stifle and ignore many valid alternatives, proclaiming that it alone has the truth. (2) A widespread tendency within many aspects of Yeshiva education that tends to ignore Sephardic and other non-Ashkenazic voices of the previous 500 years.

Through our writings, website, classes, programs, and teacher trainings, we reach tens of thousands of people annually, including hundreds of rabbis and educators. We promote diversity and inclusion, and the freedom of an authentic encounter with the wholeness of Torah.

One additional threat that requires immediate attention is an equally disturbing trend of tyranny from the left—both in our broader society and especially within the Jewish world. A growing number of voices subscribe to the repugnant idea of "cancel culture," in which any dissent or questioning can result in people losing their jobs, reputations, and even ability to publicly "exist."

Over the years, I have attended rabbinic meetings of more "right-wing" and "left-wing" orientations. While each meeting had its own distinct agenda, votes often ended up "unanimous," at least in the sense of nobody publicly disagreeing. This shocking unanimity over legitimately debatable points is extremely unlikely to occur among large numbers of diverse, thoughtful, and learned people. Nevertheless, a prevailing culture has emerged: dissent, questioning, critical thinking, or challenging would not be tolerated. We live in a world where such intellectual timidity and cowardice grows exponentially and aggressively. We

have an extra obligation to provide meaningful discourse so that the entire panoply of Jewish opinion shines forth.

At the Institute, we are proud to present a wide diversity of voices in our journal, *Conversations*; our website; and all of our programs and writings. These teachings educate and inspire Jews of all backgrounds to find avenues of entry to tradition that resonate most with them. Thank you for promoting and supporting this noble endeavor.