

"FREEDOM -  
EARNED OR SPURNED"

A sermon delivered by  
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on

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One of the most significant insights into the lofty theme of freedom may be found in this morning's Haftarah, which tells of the first Passover celebration of our ancestors as a free people in their own land, Eretz Israel.

The Bible describes how Joshua led his people in this historic observance of the Pesah shortly before the battle of Jericho. Then, the next day, something surprising happened --- or, did not happen. Va-yishbot ha-man mi-maharat be'akhlam me-avur ha-aretz, ve'lo hayah ode li'vnei Yisrael man, va-yokhlu mi-tevuat eretz Kenaan ba-shanah hahi --- the next morning, the manna, which had fallen from heaven and miraculously provided the Children of Israel with food for their forty years in the desert, stopped coming. Never again did the mann<sup>a</sup> fall; from that day on, they ate of the fr<sup>r</sup>uit of the Land of Canaan.

This cessation of the manna at this particular occasion is remarkable. Here was a people who had faithfully followed Moses, now Joshua, through the treacherous wilderness of Sinai. This moment was the culmination of their long and bitter journey, the fulfillment of an ancient divine promise to Abraham. If anything, at this time the manna should have been doubled, not discontinued. This was a time the Israelites deserved a reward and encouragement, not a punishment and reprimand. Why, then, the end of the manna this morrow of the first Passover in the Land of Israel?

The answer, it seems clear, is that the end<sup>d</sup> of the manna, the free gift from Heaven, this indeed was their greatest reward! There could be no greater gift to the Israelites than the withdrawing of this heavenly hand<sup>n</sup>out on which they had been subsisting for forty years! At this moment, more than at any other time in the past, the Children of Israel had to learn the hardest but most vital lesson of all about freedom and independence --- namely, that it has got to be earned, not passively accepted as a prettily packaged present. For the forty years that they had to work off their centuries-old slave mentality, the manna was satisfactory. But no people can long remain free if they fail to appreciate that freedom -- indeed, anything worthwhile in life ---

requires hard work, sweat, toil. Lehem min-ha-shamayim, bread from Heaven, was appropriate for a desert generation; a free people can find a berakhah only when, with God's help but also with their own labor, it is motzi lehem <sup>it</sup> min ha-aretz, brings forth bread from the earth.

No wonder, then, that -- as one contemporary social thinker has put it -- people naturally desire to "escape from freedom." The process of achieving it is so long, so difficult, so tortuous, sometimes so painful, that they would rather dispense with it altogether. No wonder the Children of Israel rebelled against Moses and his demands throughout those four decades in the desert. They had the foresight to appreciate that freedom requires sacrifices; though they did not have the insight to understand that it is worth it, that a "hand-out" mentality breeds a "heart-out" morality.

It is this very thing that Moses warned his people about in one of his last discourses. Right after the Shema Yisrael, he tells them prophetically of their future entry into the Holy Land, and says: ve'hayah ki yeviakha ha-Shem el ha-aretz, it will come to pass that when the Lord brings you to the Promised Land, that you will find there arim gedol ot ve'tovot asher lo banita, great and good cities that you did not build, and batim mele'im kol tuv asher lo mileta, houses filled with all kinds of good things that you did not place there; wells which you did not dig; vineyards and olive-trees which you did not plant; v'akhalta ve'savata, and you shall eat and be sated.

One might think: what a wonderful thing! And yet the very next words of Moses reveal the danger in reaping pleasures for which we did not labor: hishamer lekha pen tishkah et ha-Shem asher hotziakha me-eretz Mitzrayim mi-bet avadim --- take heed lest you forget the Lord Who took you out of the Land of Egypt, the house of slaves! Once you get used to luxuries undeserved, to comforts and conveniences created by someone else -- then you will forget Egypt, you will forget God, and you will forget the price of freedom and thus forfeit it foolishly! When you indulge in pleasures and benefits you did not slave for,

then you may once again slave -- without enjoying the fruits of your own labor. What Moses is telling his people -- and us as well --- is that above all we must never ~~re~~linquish our dignity and self-respect. What he is reminding them -- and all men --- is that if freedom is not earned -- it is spurned. For, what comes effortlessly is surrendered thoughtlessly.

How sharply and poignantly this idea is expressed by R. Yirmiyah b. Abba in the Talmud (Hul. 17b) who, on the verse we have cited, batim meleim kol tuv, houses filled with "all kinds of good things" that you did not place there, asks, what are these kol tuv, these "good things?" He answers: kesilei de'hazeri, a large portions of forbidden food! When people begin to act and feel that life and freedom and happiness are their's for the asking, when they begin to imagine that the world owes them a living, that freedom is "for free," then they have opened the floodgates to a deluge of tumah, of impurity, then they have introduced into their lives all that is <sup>e</sup>trefeh, attitudes that are demoralizing and corrupting.

Once we thought that crime is the monopoly of the underprivileged. Today we recognize that crime and immorality are even more the consequence of being overprivileged. Those pampered and spoiled by batim mele'im kol tuv asher lo mileta are often the victims of the kesilei de'hazeri always available in cupboards stocked by the toil of others.

*It has*

~~Has it not~~ happened often: ~~that~~ a man spends his days and years carefully, thoughtfully, and laboriously building up a business. And then his son, who comes into easy possession of an enterprise all prepared for him, squanders <sup>mi</sup> ~~mindlessly~~ what his father accumulated so patiently.

In our prosperous society, therefore, with its consumer psychology and economy of abundance, thoughtful parents must conscientiously plan to make <sup>thier</sup> children earn their "advantages." The schemes may be artificial, and the parent may inwardly yearn to share the joys of life and abundance freely with his children. But we must remember that excessive manna may be a punishment,

not a favor to the child. What can we expect of our young people as adults if, as adolescents, they have already, without having worked and toiled for it in the <sup>e</sup>last, enjoyed all the luxuries -- from their own automobiles to cruises to world travel --- which other adults aspire to and work for all their lives? The fact is that, ~~and~~ inwardly, every young person prefers the sense of achievement to easy possession. That is why the idea of the Peace Corps has caught on so well even amongst those who could easily slide into a life of comfort. <sup>A</sup>The same truth applies to the whole gamut of religious life. I have noticed it, for instance, in Yeshiva University. There is a decided contrast between those who, like most of us, were born into traditional, observant homes and whose life of mitzvot comes somewhat naturally, and those youngsters -- and there are a considerable number of them in the "Jewish Studies Program" -- who come to Torah life from homes indifferent and often hostile to Orthodoxy. The young man or woman who had to struggle to be a Jew -- struggle with antagonistic parents, a sneering society, and patronizing peers -- brings zeal to his Jewish studies, appreciates the Yeshiva, and loves Torah with a fierce and unrelenting love that is naive, charming, and captivating.

This ought to be a lesson to all of us, especially those who observe Jewish practices -- whether tallit and tefillin or mezuzah or kashrut or "davenning" -- merely out of habit or sentiment, or because our parents or grandparents did so. There may be some Jews whose tie to Judaism is founded on the nostalgia for "Bubbe" and "Zaide." That is a beginning. But it is not enough. A religion that is only inherited can soon be disinherited. We must take this Jewish life and make it our very own by studying its laws and meanings, by intensifying it, and by surpassing the levels achieved by parents and grandparents -- even as we strive to surpass their standards in our worldly goods and scientific knowledge. It is not enough to worship Elokei Avotenu; we have got to make Him also Elokenu, our God.

In a little hamlet nestling high in the Adirondock Mountains in northern

New York State, there is a short stretch of road that is most beautiful:

magnificent scenery, and luxurious homes alongside it. It is called "Easy

Street." But in order to get there, you have to traverse treacherous roads

that are narrow, <sup>sometimes rocky and sometimes</sup> mud-soaked, and lie on the edges of deep precipices. It is a parable of

life. For <sup>indeed</sup>, it is only the hard, difficult, often dangerous roads that lead to  
a life "Easy Street," that can be enjoyed to the full.

Whether we speak of ourselves as a group or as individuals, of freedom as such or any other worthy human ideal, this great teaching of Passover must not be forgotten. And perhaps all of it can be summed up in the immortal words of King David in the Psalms:

Yegia kapekha ki tokhel, ashrekha ve'tov lekha ---

"When thou eatest the labor of thy hands,

Happy shalt thou be, and it will be well with thee."