



5 Facets of Freedom

Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson

Freedom Emerges from Authenticity & Integrity

The children of Israel were redeemed from Egypt because of four meritorious acts: they did not change their names, they did not change their language, they did not reveal their secrets, and they did not abandon circumcision. Midrash Tehillim 114:4; Tanna deBei Eliyahu, p.123

Freedom is Something We Can't Do Alone

It is taught in the school of Rabbi Ishmael: To what may Israel when leaving Egypt be compared? To a dove who fled from a hawk and was about to enter a cleft in a rock when it came upon a serpent nesting there. If it enters the cleft, the serpent will hiss at the dove threateningly. If it turns back, the hawk stands outside ready to seize the bird. What did the dove do? It began to cry and beat its wings, so that the owner of the cote would come and deliver it. Israel at the Red Sea were in a similar plight. They could not go down into the sea, because the sea had not yet split. Nor could they go back, because Pharaoh had already drawn near. What did they do? *They were sore afraid; and the children of Israel cried out unto the Holy One (Exodus 14:10). At once, the Holy One delivered Israel that day (Exodus 14:30).* Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah 2:14, Para.2; Mekhilta Be-shallah, Va-yehi, 3 (La 1:211)

Freedom is Justice & Mercy

When the Holy One was about to drown the Egyptians in the sea, Uzza, heavenly guardian of Egypt, rose up and prostrated before the Holy One, saying: Master of the universe, You created the world by the measure of mercy. Why then do You wish to drown my children? The Holy One gathered the entire heavenly household and said to them: You be the judge between Me and Uzza guardian of Egypt. At that, the heavenly guardians of the other nations began to speak up in behalf of Egypt. When Michael perceived this, the Archangel gave the sign to Gabriel, who in one swoop darted down to Egypt, pulling out a brick with its clay enclosing a [dead] infant who had been immured alive in the structure. Gabriel then came back, stood before the Holy One, and said: Master of



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the universe, thus did the Egyptians enslave Your children. Whereupon the Holy One sat in judgment over the Egyptians in accord with the measure of justice and drowned them in the sea. In that instant the ministering angels wished to utter song before the Holy One, but God rebuked them, saying, “The works of My hands are drowning in the sea, and you would utter song in My presence!” Midrash Avkir; BT Sanhedrin 39b

Freedom Is Self-Surpassing

Rabbi Yosi the Galilean expounded: When Israel came out of the sea, they gazed upward to chant their song. But how were all of them – even the infant lying upon its mother’s knees and the suckling feeding at its mother’s breast – able to do so? When they saw the Presence, the infant raised its neck, the suckling let go of its mother’s nipple, and all said, *This is my God, Whom I will glorify (Exodus 15:2)* It is taught that, according to Rabbi Meir, even fetuses in their mothers’ wombs chanted the song. But were they [being in the womb] able to see [the Presence]? Yes, said Rabbi Tanhum, the wombs became as transparent as glass, so even the fetuses were able to see the Presence. BT Sotah 30b-31a; Yerushalmi Sotah 5:6, 20c

Freedom Must Be Learned

Then sang Moses and the children of Israel (Exodus 15:1). Rabbi Avin the Levite said: When Israel stood up to chant the song at the sea, Moses did not let them chant it by themselves, but like a teacher who recites a portion in Scripture with a child in its infancy, so did Moses recite it with Israel – *then sang Moses and the children of Israel*, they being like a child who repeats after the teacher. But after forty years [in the wilderness], Israel matured and on their own proceeded to chant the Song of the Well, as is said, *then sang Israel (Num. 21:17)*. Yalkut, Hukkat, Para.263