

Parashat Ki Tisa 5777, 2017:

Torah and Freedom

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, Shayna Yehudit bat Avraham Manes and Rivka, the refuah shlaimah of Devorah bat Chana and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

One of the many well-known *pasukim* (verses) found in our *parasha* refers to the totally Divine nature of the first set of *Luchot HaBrit* (Tablets of the Law): “Now the tablets were G-d’s work, and the inscription was G-d’s inscription, engraved on the tablets (*charut al haluchot*).” (*Sefer Shemot* 31:16, this and all Bible translations translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, underlining my own) Among its many intriguing aspects, our verse contains the *Tanach*’s sole instance of the word “*charut*” (“engraved”).

The original Hebrew words in *Tanach* are written without vowels; therefore, they can be pronounced in a variety of ways that differ quite significantly from the Masoretic vocalized versions found in our standard texts. On occasion, *Chazal* (our Sages of blessed memory) homiletically utilize one of these potential alternative readings in order to underscore a major concept or idea. Thus, in a variety of Talmudic and Midrashic passages our *pasuk*’s words, “*charut al haluchot*,” receive the following reframe: “Do not read the word ‘*charut*’ (‘engraved’) as ‘*charut*,’ instead, read it as ‘*cheirut*’ (‘freedom’).” Therefore, rather than, “engraved on the tablets,” the reading becomes “freedom on the tablets,” i.e. the Torah is freedom.

What do *Chazal* mean when they say, “the Torah is freedom?” I believe we can begin to answer this question by examining two terms developed by Sir Isaiah Berlin (1909-1997) in his 1958 Inaugural Lecture delivered before the University of Oxford. In this celebrated presentation, published under the title, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” Berlin uses the terms “liberty” and “freedom” interchangeably (Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty*, Oxford University Press, 1971, page, 121, underlining my own). He begins by noting that: “Like happiness and goodness, like nature and reality, the meaning of this term [freedom] is so porous that there is little interpretation that it seems able to resist.” Therefore, in order to address the amorphous nature of the terms, “liberty” and “freedom,” he identifies and defines two categories of freedom, namely, negative and positive freedom. Berlin suggests the following definition for negative freedom:

I am normally said to be free to the degree to which no man or body of men interferes with my activity. Political liberty in this sense is simply the area within which a man can act unobstructed by others. If I am prevented by others from doing what I could otherwise do, I am to that degree unfree; and if this area is contracted by men beyond a certain minimum, I can be described as being coerced, or it may be, enslaved...Coercion implies the deliberate interference of other human beings within the area in which I could otherwise act. You lack political liberty or freedom only if you are prevented from attaining a goal by human beings (page, 122).

In stark contrast, he defines positive freedom in the following manner:

I wish my life and decisions to depend on myself, not on external forces of whatever kind. I wish to be the instrument of my own, not of other men’s acts of will. I wish to be a subject, not an object; I wish to be somebody, not nobody; a doer-deciding, not be decided for, self-directed and not acted upon by external nature or by other men as if I were a thing, or an animal, or a slave incapable of playing a human role, that is of conceiving goals and policies of my own and realizing them...I wish, above all, to be conscious of myself as a thinking, willing, active being, bearing responsibility for my choices and able to explain them by references to my own ideas and purposes (page, 131).

Like Berlin, our Sages viewed the Torah’s concept of freedom as being comprised of both negative (freedom from) and positive aspects (freedom to). The *Midrash Rabbah* on *Sefer Shemot* (32:1 and 41:7) and *Sefer Vayikra* (18:3) focus upon the freedom from

aspect of the Torah, in the sense that it will ultimately free the Jewish people from exile (Rabbi Yehudah), the Angel of Death (Rabbi Nechemiah), the hegemony of other nations (Rabbi Nachman) and from the trials and tribulations that we face on a daily and ongoing basis (the Rabbis). This eschatological vision is reminiscent of the prophet Isaiah's magnificent prophecy and all that it entails:

And many peoples shall go, and they shall say, "Come, let us go up to the L-rd's mount, to the house of the G-d of Jacob, and let Him teach us of His ways, and we will go in His paths," for out of Zion shall the Torah come forth, and the word of the L-rd from Jerusalem. And He shall judge between the nations and reprove many peoples, and they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift the sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore. (*Sefer Yeshayahu* 2:3-4)

In contrast to the *Midrash Rabbah's* emphasis, Rabbi Yehoshuah ben Levi's statement in *Pirkei Avot* 6:2 underscores the positive freedom that is inherent in the Torah:

It says in *Sefer Shemot* 32:16: "And the tablets were the work of G-d, and the writing was the writing of G-d (*charut*) engraved upon the tablets." Do not read the [non-vocalized] word as *charut* (engraved), instead read it as *cheirut* (freedom). [This is so] since there is no one who is truly free except for one who engages in Torah study.

For Rabbi Yehoshuah ben Levi, the study of the words of our Creator and *Chazal*, His earthly representatives, is the ultimate act in which a truly free individual can engage. Why? Perhaps it is because by challenging ourselves to understand His Torah, we encounter *Hashem*. With awe and humility we recognize the total otherness of our Creator, while simultaneously striving to comprehend His words and the thoughts and concepts they contain. Like *Yaakov Avinu*, we know that when we study Torah, we are entering into a place that is so holy and so filled with the Divine Presence, our innermost-

beings must declare: “*Mah norah hamakom hazeh*” (“How awe-filled and awe-inspiring is this place” *Sefer Bereishit* 28:17).

Torah study is the ultimate act of intellectual and spiritual creativity that enables us to hear and heed the word of our Creator. Thus, *Talmud Torah* (Torah study) emerges as the most positive of all conceivable definitions of freedom. Through it, lowly man is able to rise to the highest heights. Through *Talmud Torah*, we are able to actualize our true potential and enter into the grandest and most noble dialogue that is humanly possible; as such, “there is no one who is truly free except for one who engages in Torah study.”

May we be *zocheh* (merit) to have Hashem’s holy words of the holy Torah engraved upon our hearts, as they were upon the *Luchot Habrit*. Then, with G-d’s help and blessings, may we experience freedom in its most majestic sense, and finally be truly free. May this time come soon and in our days. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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They may also be found on YUTorah.org using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha’s name.

The email list, *b’chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Megillat Esther* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpd>

*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik’s](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.