

Ki Tisa: Corona Diary #23 - Free Your Mind

Moshe Taragin

Moshe descending from the mountain, clutching the Divine tablets is one of the most iconic images of the entire Torah. Finally, after close to two thousand and five hundred years, the word of G-d was written and delivered to humans; Heaven and earth merged. Sadly, the luchot would not long endure human disobedience. Witnessing the golden calf and the carnival of depravity, Moshe shattered the heavenly stones and the eternal word of G-d soared back to its Heavenly origin. It took months of uncompromising prayer to reverse this tragedy and introduce a second pair of luchot back into our world.

The word of G-d wasn't actually printed upon the stone tablets but was engraved. The Torah employs an interesting term to describe this carving into stone: "The text was 'charut' on the luchot". The word 'charut' or 'engraved' sounds very similar to the term 'cheirut' which means freedom or liberty. Noticing the similarity between the word charut and cheirut, our Chazal (in Pirkei Avot) announced: "true freedom (cheirut) is only achieved through submission to Torah law (charut)."

This association appears very enigmatic. We certainly embrace the value of religion and the importance of submission to Divine command. We are born into this world as summoned individuals, 'called upon' to fulfill the will of G-d and to live as His servants. This lifestyle can be called many things such as pious, or virtuous, but how exactly are we considered 'free' through absolute submission to a comprehensive system of

Torah law? How exactly does religion liberate us and convert us into free men? How does 'charut' provide 'cheirut'?

Firstly, and most obviously, Torah frees us from the most intrinsic and basic limitation- our mortality. We all pass through this world, entering with great potential and leaving with unfulfilled accomplishments. Despite our best dreams and hopes, we all pass from this world unremembered and barely noticed. Man has always been frustrated by this basic condition of defeat; we appear to live freely but, in reality, are handcuffed to our own mortality. Religion emancipates us from this captivity. A religious life, is lived for something larger than ourselves; religion links us to the eternal- the word of G-d which transcends time and the eternal afterlife. We occupy a fleeting world but while we inhabit this transience we taste from eternity. The luchot brought Heaven down to Earth; by adopting the contents of the luchot we, ourselves, ascend to Heaven even while inhabiting this Earth.

However, this is only a partial answer. Judaism doesn't emphasize the afterlife while ignoring this world. We don't view Torah law as a sellout or suppression of this world just to punch our ticket to eternity. Of course, our world is an entrance to the ultimate palace, but we all realize the impact of religion upon life 'in the entranceway'. A religious life frees us from the curse of mortality but how does it liberate us while we still walk on this earth?

It all depends upon how you define freedom. We typically define freedom as lack of restraints or limitations. A free life is one which isn't curbed or coerced by external factors limiting our activity or conduct. It is this freedom which has become enshrined and protected in modern democracies. Religion

respects that form of freedom or liberty, but certainly 'encroaches' upon it by dictating a life of commandment. A religious person isn't absolutely free to behave as they wish and without restraints.

However, there is a second and more significant freedom which religion actually empowers. Life is a constant search for meaning and for purpose. We have been granted life and we have been vested with great faculties, but there must be some larger purpose for our existence. We dream of being architects of something larger- families, relationships, communities, national achievements and historical impacts. We find great 'purpose' in our dreams and great satisfaction when these dreams are even partially fulfilled. We sense deep purpose to life.

However, we are also subject to urges, desires, pettiness, pressures and weaknesses which threaten these achievements. We are trapped in a battle between two versions of ourselves: the better version of yourself, which hopes to lead a meaningful life, and the lesser version of yourself which can suffocate those achievements. We believe that Torah unlocks and empowers that better version and allows it to author and control our lives. Torah teaches us how to calibrate the swirling forces in our world and the powerful desires in our hearts while leading a lifestyle of purpose and meaning. This is a higher and more elusive form of freedom – one which submission to G-d's word provides. We may be restrained by halacha and its mandates, but our better self becomes liberated in ways that we may not always fully even comprehend.

This 'corona-year' has certainly forced us to reimagine much of our lives and, in particular, how we view our freedom. We have forfeited much of the first form of freedom; we have suffered

necessary, but restrictive limitations upon our lifestyles. Our freedom of movement and social freedom have each been severely obstructed. For many, economic hardship has further restricted our lifestyles.

How the pandemic has affected the second variety of freedom is a more nuanced issue. A year in to this pandemic, do we feel greater purpose and meaning to our lives or less purpose and meaning? The pandemic has made us all more grateful for the simpler aspects of our lives which may have been previously underappreciated. We have greater appreciation for life itself, for our families and for our most immediate communities. Sometimes the struggle to reach our dreams provides a sharper sense of what those aspirations are, and how they define us.

Everything in this world can be taken from us except our relationship with G-d. For many, this year of 'loss' has sharpened that relationship. As the surrounding noise in our lives has been muted have we felt closer to G-d or more distant? If we have felt G-d more deeply, and sensed our core dreams more acutely, this has been a year of freedom. We may have traveled less, and shopped less but may be more aware of how religion is meant to amplify purpose to life. Ironically, in many ways, we may be closer to freedom than in past years.