

Pesach: Freedom - Duties, Not Rights

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Idea of Freedom for Jews is liberty to do what we ought to do. Difference between rights and duties. America, rights expanded as time went on. Till even rudeness and abuse, violence and property destruction, called "Rights" by some. "Right to do one's own thing". Torah differs. Freedom = responsibilities. Tzedaka, labor laws, love of stranger, family, connection to Synagogue people consider what it gives us instead of what we can do for Synagogue and community.

PESACH: FREEDOM - DUTIES, NOT RIGHTS

Let us understand the Jewish idea of freedom: The Exodus is the symbol of liberation for the entire world. We gave the world that symbol. So our tradition can best explain it.

Nowadays, people usually define freedom in terms of human rights. In America they have the Bill of Rights, but the tradition of rights goes back to the Magna Carta, and like in America, these rights are held sacred. Thus, the inalienable rights of each man and woman to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are almost taken for granted and unalterably fixed in the civilization that is here created and thriving.

In the course of history, these rights began to assume broader and broader meanings. Thus, they were extended to civil rights, to women's rights, to students' rights.

As the country became freer, more and more rights were defined and defended. Freedom of travel, speech, religion, press, protection of the employee, tenant, consumer, even the criminal, and in the process a strange thing happened: The more rights, the greater the thirst for rights. It grew to a point where even rudeness, abuse of teachers, destruction of property, violence, were also called rights by some.

The right to "do one's own thing" entered the speech of a culture and became part of society. Now some think it is an inalienable right. There was even an item in the paper that I once saw about a strike by students somewhere, for the right to cheat on examinations! They demanded the permission to have their friends give them help while taking exams. Why not?

If the right to do "one's own thing" means freedom to yield to one's own passions, to set up one's own standards for right and wrong, it is the antithesis of everything Judaism stands for. As a matter of fact, the phrase *ish kol hayashar beynav yaase* is the Jewish description, not of a desirable state, but of anarchy.

Judaism doesn't deny that freedom includes certain rights. But the emphasis in Judaism is in a different direction, and it is an emphasis that makes all the difference.

The Torah teaches the meaning of freedom, not in terms of rights, but rather in terms of duties! Not in terms of desires, but rather in terms of responsibilities!

Here are some examples.

Tzedaka: The earliest social welfare legislation is in the Torah. However! The Torah doesn't speak of the rights of the poor to receive, but rather of the duties of those who are not poor to provide! tzedaka is a duty, not a right. If a man refused to fulfill that duty, the Jewish community could, through the courts, confiscate property, or mortgage land in order to force him to do so. So great is the duty to give, that even the poor who are sustained through charity, must themselves give, even if meagrely, to express their duty to help others.

Labour Relation Laws: The Torah does not emphasize the rights of the employee or employer. It does not speak of justified or unjustified demands, but rather of the duties and obligations of each towards the other.

Love of the Stranger: Thirty three times this is commanded in the Torah. But here again, it is not the emphasis of the rights of the stranger and orphan and widow, as much as the duties and obligation of each member of society and society as a whole towards them!

Family: The Torah is especially protective of the Jewish family. After all, the people of Israel was formed with a Jewish family, we went down to Egypt as a family, ish ubeto, and when we were formed into a nation at the Exodus, it was the family that was the building block of the nation, and from which grew its cohesiveness. It is obvious, therefore, that the Torah gives a great deal of attention to the family, in every one of its facets; children and parents, as well as husbands and wives. The very marriage contract is written as a document of duty of each to the other. Think how much more secure a marriage would be if its partners would consider the other in terms of what each owes to their partner instead of what their partner owes to them. But the Jewish marriage contract and the entire institution of Jewish marriage is based on that concept of giving rather than taking... And the institution of marriage is in trouble; especially because nowadays its partners often seek to get instead of give.

There are many Jews today who see their Judaism in terms of rights. They have a right, they think, to observe or not to observe. Well, not before the heavenly tribunal! Mount Sinai was a covenant that set out Jewish duties, and demanded that no Jew can resign from those duties or from his people! That is what our Rabbis meant when they reread the word herut which means freedom, and redefined it by saying it is harut, which means engraved, the obligations forever engraved on the tablets given at Mount Sinai and which stand for all our duties to God, our people, Israel and fellow man.

Even such a thing as belonging to a synagogue nowadays, is often considered in terms of what we get from it; sociability, acceptance, business, inspiration and even wisdom, an aliya to the Torah, a chance to say Kaddish, High Holiday seats, burial rights and insurance, but we don't always see a synagogue as it really should be, our marshalling place in which and through which we fulfil our responsibilities to our fellow Jews, to God and to Israel! Not what we get from the shul, but what we give to it and through it is the true measure of freedom as the Jew understands it and as it applies to our community obligations! We could define it by saying, that to the Jew freedom is not the right to do what we want to do, but the responsibility to do what we ought to

do!

This is not an easy creed to live by. But we think it is the only way. And Judaism says we have no choice. We can't resign from these duties. They are, after all, God's command to us. And we who were saved from Egypt where we would otherwise have perished in slavery; we who have survived by God's providence a history where we would have perished by assimilation and decimation; we are His, and our purpose is to do His will. And this gives us the highest level of freedom possible to man. For if we are God's servants exclusively, we cannot be, we must never be, slaves to any mortal man. We are free of any slavery on earth, because we are bound by one Divine and everlasting service, the service to God and to God alone.

Let us earnestly desire, above all, always to do His will. let us read our purpose here, in terms of God's will for us. And then we, and all Israel, will find freedom and peace. And then the lesson will finally be learned by the entire world, AMEN VEAMEN.