

It happened when Pharaoh sent out the people. (13:17)

Finally, after 210 years of brutal slavery, the Jewish People were free! The Exodus is among the most seminal experiences of our collective Jewish history. Every year we devote an entire festival to commemorating our freedom, our liberation from servitude. *Zeicher l'yetzias Mitzrayim*, “In remembrance of the exodus from Egypt” is a critical part of many *tefilos*, prayers. It has been over three thousand years since that auspicious moment of mass exodus from a tyrannical monarchy bent on destroying our people – and we still commemorate that moment. We must, however, sit back for a moment and ask ourselves: Have we always been free? I think that, if we were to study Jewish history, we would note otherwise. Perhaps we lived in freedom until the destruction of the first *Bais Hamikdash*, but what followed after that? The Greeks and the Romans were followed by the Crusaders and the Arabs, the barbarians of Western Europe whose anti-Semite pogroms went on for a thousand years until the Nazis completed the cruelty they had initiated. The Russians certainly had nothing to be ashamed of in terms of their ability to persecute the hapless Jew. All in all, I would not posit that these last three thousand years have been idyllic.

We reiterate the question: How could the Jewish People have celebrated their freedom during these thousands of years of exile? Furthermore, we have celebrated this freedom in the most unfree places and circumstances. My parents celebrated the *Pesach* “Seder” running from burnt-out house to burnt-out house in the Warsaw Ghetto – and they were certainly not the only ones! Russian Jews celebrated *Pesach* under the tyrannical, brutal Communists. We all have celebrated *Pesach* and its message of freedom, but how do we do so amidst oppression, brutality and genocide?

The *Maharal m'Prague* asks this question (*Gevuros Hashem* 61) and offers an answer which defines our People, post – Egyptian exodus. We make the mistake of thinking that *yetzias Mitzrayim* was a one-time event during which slaves who had heretofore been subjected to cruel bondage were now released and free to go as they pleased. Wrong. *Maharal* explains that the Exodus created within the Jewish psyche a freedom mindset. We were no longer slaves; we had become free men. Freedom became part of our essence; no longer would the Jew be subservient to another nation. We rise above servitude. It goes against our grain.

Veritably, throughout the millennia, we have been conquered, reviled, abused, oppressed, hunted and murdered. Despite all of the travail, we have never altered our mindset. We are free men, subservient only to Hashem. Despite the suppression, our minds have remained free. Never have we acquiesced to the abuse. It is almost as if we have been sprayed with a Teflon coating of “freedom” which protects us from becoming tainted by the tyranny that has often been our lot.

Those of our People who sadly do not understand this concept continue to wonder why we did not fight back during World War II. Why did we go like “sheep to the slaughter”? This has become the catchphrase for all of the self-loathing, myopic Jews who do not understand the true meaning of freedom. The Jew will always be free – regardless of his situation and circumstance. We are a

nation that was granted freedom by the Creator of all men, and, with His help, we will remain free throughout time. It is up to the individual Jew to maintain the spiritual integrity, the courage and the strength, to see to it that our minds remain unshackled and that we each remain a citadel of freedom and a beacon of hope to our People and to all mankind.

Having said this, we ask why it is that there are so many of our brethren who lack this sense of freedom, who feel enslaved, who cringe when the word “anti-Semite” is mentioned, who will do anything to be accepted by a world whose envy of the Jew precludes the ability to see his G-dliness. I think the reason is that a sense of freedom mandates a sense of responsibility. No longer can a person hide behind the veil of travail. He has no valid excuses. The shackles are off. We are free! The *Baal Shem Tov* was wont to say, “You are where your will is.” If one wants to be free – he is free. The one who fears freedom remains a slave.

Freedom is an intrinsic part of the soul of the Jewish People. It is, thus, wholly understandable that the leaders of many of the “movements” and “isms” who have spoken out against repression of any kind were Jewish. Sadly, though, their outspokenness was not against spiritual tyranny, but for social advancement. Likewise, children should be encouraged to express themselves. Often our children are suffocated by peer pressure, parental fears and media messages which demand that they conform to the society around them, so that they will not be excluded, disliked or even hurt.

The boy or girl who has “questions” about religion should not be stifled. Obviously, the person giving the answers should be erudite and blessed with an inordinate balance of common sense and compassion. What is it about the young student who does not fit into the prefabricated mold that the individual religious community has adopted? Should he/she be shunned? Is he/she a sinner just because he/she is exercising the individual gift of self-expression? If we suppress the children’s innate sense of freedom of expression, they might be forced to go “elsewhere” – like the others who attribute their alienation from religion to having their religious inquisitiveness either ignored or suppressed. Questions should be encouraged, so that the child can learn to understand and appreciate the beauty of Judaism. Obviously, he should reach a point in which he accepts, through a leap of faith, what his limited mind cannot comprehend. One must be led to faith upon the building blocks of understanding. This only occurs once he has been inspired and encouraged to respond to his inner-calling, his inherent Jewish DNA, the yearning for freedom. When there is a will, there is a way.