

RABBI'S MESSAGE

What is Freedom?

Many scholars believe that, when the Hebrews living in Egypt had the opportunity to escape with Moses, many chose to stay put. According to some, at least 80% of the Israelites remained in Egypt rather than face the mystery of the unknown. While their neighbors were hurrying to gather their few belongings to embark on an exciting adventure toward freedom, apparently thousands of others watched them go. Why? Who would choose oppression over freedom? Or perhaps it is a little more complicated.

When I first learned of this astonishing statistic, I remembered the expression “the devil you know versus the devil you don’t know.” I began to think that some choices may seem obvious to others, but those surrounded by a situation may feel as if they don’t have a choice at all. Fear of the unknown often keeps people from moving forward, and it’s tempting to judge people’s actions without understanding the whole story. *Mitzrayim*, the Hebrew word for Egypt, means “narrow place.” Some people, we think, may create their own *mitzrayim*. There are many ways to feel confined in narrow places that are hard to escape. Some feel trapped by an addiction, health problems, an abusive relationship, an unfulfilling job, limited financial resources, or just loneliness. The longer you remain in place, the harder it is to get away. The Hebrews were enslaved for hundreds of years. While some were eager to leave, others felt stuck in the sand.

For some, it may have seemed as if they didn’t have a choice. Leaving was scary; staying was hard. Just as we can create our own confinement, perhaps we can also create our own freedom...even if that freedom involves limitations. Some of the Hebrews who remained in Egypt might have seen no viable alternative, but grew to accept the limitations of bondage and made the best of things where they were. While some situations are self-imposed, other limitations don’t offer a choice. I have a friend who is now 67 years old who was blinded in an accident at the age of 30. He is one of the happiest men I know; not because of his blindness, but *despite* of it. Of course, he would rather see; but he has learned how to enjoy life in a different way, deciding, “I can be blind and mope, feeling sorry for myself, or I can be blind and enjoy life the best I can.” Every day I see someone who used to be very active using a walker or wheelchair to get around. They feel restrained by limited mobility. As a prison chaplain, I met men who have no hope of being released from prison, but read, write, create art, take college classes and actively work on their souls in order to make the time while incarcerated meaningful instead of just waiting to die.

Those Israelites who left Egypt with Moses had a great incentive and plenty of support to move toward freedom. For them, it was a difficult journey, and though many perished along the way, it was worth it! Their bravery to take that risk meant the survival of our people and the formalization of our covenantal relationship with G-D when we received the Ten Commandments. Those who were unable or unwilling to join the journey had to find their own

personal freedoms. They missed out on being part of the Jewish people, and we missed out on sharing their presence. Despite that, hopefully they were able to find freedom within the soul.

This Pesach, I pray that each of us discovers ways to find some freedom from our *mitzrayim*, the narrow places that hold us back. And like our risk-taking ancestors, may we support each other in the march toward new freedoms!

L'shalom,

Rabbi Dan Gordon