

Achieving Freedom

by Rabbi Mauricio Balter

Every time I reread the story of Passover it appears to me like a fantasy story and each time I read the Haggadah it reads anew like a moving story. However, I have a feeling that something is missing from the text. I feel that something happened in the story that we missed and maybe we should review.

My idea is that the liberation was the product of the action of individuals which led to the liberation of the people from the slavery of Egypt with divine intervention. That is to say, the divine intervention in the story is the consequence of the action of people who decided to be proactive against their reality and act.

Let's review the points in the story that help us understand this idea:

First of all, we have the midwives—do you remember them? They were the beginning of liberation. From my point of view, they were the first ones who were capable of opposing Pharaoh's orders and the first ones to have that level of sensitivity to the suffering of others. The sages argue over whether they were Hebrews or not, but from my point of view it is a minor detail. Two women decided to risk their lives to fight injustice and preserve human life. Let's have a glance at the source:

The king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah,

saying, "When you deliver the Hebrew women, look at the birth stool: if it is a boy, kill him; if it is a girl, let her live."

The midwives, fearing God, did not do as the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live.

So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this thing, letting the boys live?"

The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women: they are vigorous. Before the midwife can come to them, they have given birth." (Exodus 1:15-19)

Secondly, let's remember Moses as a young man. He was a prince, he in a position of power. He had the possibility of living a good life without any worries, yet the text tells us that when he grew up he went to see his brothers and he acted—he intervened in the face of the violence of an oppressor and did not remain indifferent when it came to matters concerning human life. He had the sensitivity to fight against oppression and did not want to be silent. Let's go back to the source:

Some time after that, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his kinsfolk and witnessed their labors. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsmen.

He turned this way and that and, seeing no one about, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.

When he went out the next day, he found two Hebrews fighting; so he said to the offender, "Why do you strike your fellow?"

He retorted, "Who made you chief and ruler over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" Moses was frightened, and thought: Then the matter is known! (Exodus 2:11-15)

Thirdly, I want to recall Moses after his flight from Egypt. He has settled down once more, married, has a job and a family and then suddenly he has the revelation. However, I want to suggest that we look at the verse before the burning bush.

Now Moses, tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian, drove the flock into the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. (Exodus 3:1)

The Midrash proposes a very original idea about the verse:

Our teachers have said: Once, while Moses our Teacher was tending [his father-in-law] Jethro's sheep, one of the sheep ran away. Moses ran after it until it reached a small, shaded place. There, the lamb came across a pool and began to drink. As Moses approached the lamb, he said, "I did not know you ran away because you were thirsty. You are so exhausted!" He then put the lamb on his shoulders and carried him back. The Holy One said, "Since you tend the sheep of human beings with such overwhelming love - by your life, I swear you shall be the shepherd of My sheep, Israel." God saw the scene and said: "Since you put so much pity on your work with the sheep, I will entrust to you mine, the children of Israel; you will be his boss "(Midrash Shmot Raba Parasha Bet)

Once more, Moses is not passive in the face in front of events that occur around him and once again he takes action. Even in the face of the suffering of an animal, he is incapable of being indifferent and reacts.

Fourthly, towards the end of chapter 2 of Exodus we read:

A long time after that, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites were groaning under the bondage and cried out; and their cry for help from the bondage rose up to God.

God heard their moaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.

God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them. (Exodus 2:23-25)

And here I allow myself a free interpretation. God heard the desperate cries and complaints of those who like Shiphrah, Pua and Moses had the courage to face injustice and suffering.

Finally, Pesach is not only to remember how comfortable it is to expect divine intervention to solve the problems of our society and of our world. Pesach teaches us that each one of us must take the example and learn to act up in the face of injustice and suffering. As long as we walk away, in one way or another we will remain slaves. Freedom is achieved only by acting, and taking an active part of what happens in our lives and in our environment.

I invite you to join me this year as we think together about what we can do to be truly free and help those who do not yet enjoy their freedom.

Chag Kasher VeSameach,

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