

Passover: Achieving Our Freedom

By Rabbi Bernard S. Raskas

Moses is mentioned but once in a stray passage during the seder service, but nevertheless he is the towering figure of the Haggadah as well as the entire Passover.

His lack of emphasis during the seder is for two reasons -- his rather obvious centrality in this great drama and the concern of the rabbis who compiled the Haggadah that he might become idolized or worshipped as a deity.

Moses' impact is exemplified in the following story. The prophet was tending his sheep in the wilderness when he saw that wonderful burning bush. Now, according to the story, Moses turned aside, but then he heard God call his name.

"Yes," said Moses. "What do you want?"

"Well," said God, "I have good news and bad news for you."

"Nu," Moses said, "start off with the good news."

And God replied: "I have heard the cry of my oppressed people in Egypt. I am going to rescue them. But the Pharaoh will refuse to let them go, and I will have to smite Egypt with terrible plagues: blood, frogs, vermin, cattle disease, boils, hail, locusts and the slaying of the first-born.

"I will have to drown the whole Egyptian army in the Red Sea -- horses, chariots, troops -- everything. But in the end, you will lead the Hebrew people to freedom."

"That sounds great," said Moses. "Now what's the bad news?"

"You," said the voice from the bush, "will have to write the environmental impact study."

Behind this story lies the profound question of why the elaborate scenario? Why did God not directly intervene and take the people out? Why did God leave the decision up to Pharaoh with all its concomitant pressure? Why didn't God smooth Moses' way and simply have him lead the people to Mount Sinai?

The answer lies in a "midrash," a rabbinic story: Only a few years later, after the Israelites had left Egypt and had received the Torah, they stood on the border of Canaan, ready to invade. It was God's plan that those who had been liberated from Egypt would conquer Canaan and settle the land.

But, as the Bible informs us, the recently liberated Israelites backed off, fearing defeat, and were condemned by God to live out their lives in the desert. After they died, their children entered the Promised Land.

Why, asked the rabbis, did these former slaves who had witnessed God's great powers refuse the opportunity to fulfill the redemption? Why did they fear to take the land which God had promised them?

The answer of the rabbis is simple, basic and classic: "You could take the Jews out of Egypt, but you can't take Egypt out of the Jews." It takes time to prepare for freedom.

In other words, there is a difference between "being freed" and "being free," between being merely released from repression and acting like free and independent human beings.

God chose to have the Jews wander in the wilderness for 40 years in order to help diminish their slave mentality and to prepare them for the challenges and risks of living in freedom.

Indeed, this points out the three sides of the triangle of freedom: physical freedom, intellectual freedom and emotional freedom.

Most important, of course, is physical freedom. In contemporary terms, this means freedom for the Jews in the Soviet Union and Arab countries, to practice Judaism and to emigrate as they wish.

It relates to the freedom of blacks and South Africa to be treated as equal citizens, to vote, to live wherever they wish. It relates to Afghanistan, which is dominated by Soviet military forces. One could wander the world and

discover that freedom is a dream that many cherish, but that so many are denied.

All the nations and cultures should remember the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson: "If you put a chain around the neck of a slave, the other end fastens itself to your own arm."

Or to put it in more graphic terms: Freedom is like a bag of sand. If there is a hole anywhere in the bag, all the sand will run out. If any group of people is denied its rights, sooner or later all groups will be denied their rights. Freedom is indivisible: It is for all or it is for none.

The second aspect of freedom is intellectual. We can be free physically, but bound intellectually. It is what the Hebrew writer Ahad Ha'am termed "avdut betoch cherut" -- slavery amidst freedom. This means that unless and minority culture is vigilant, committed and aware, it can slowly slip into the majority culture.

The situation of contemporary U.S. Jewry is an obvious illustration of this thought. We must be determined not to be intellectually lazy, but continue to practice, study and preserve our traditions. The growth of the Hebrew day school, the expansion of Hebrew studies on campuses, the steady stream of new Jewish books and magazines are assertions of Jewish intellectual freedom.

On the other hand, assimilationist tendencies are far too many and too obvious to mention. They demonstrate that many of us are still in intellectual slavery. But the one sure way to keep Jewish intellectual freedom is through Jewish education.

A non-Jew was attending a Jewish fundraising meeting. Afterward, he approached the two Jewish co-chairmen, who were his friends, and asked, "How are you able to raise such a fantastic sum?"

One co-chairman replied, "First you start with 2,000 years of persecution." The other co-

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