

Parashat Bamidbar-Shavuot 5781, 2021:

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*Torah is Freedom*

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The first *mishnah* in *Pirkei Avot* cites a statement from the *Anshei Keneset HaGadolah*, a group of sixth century BCE jurists that constitute one of the crucial links in *shalsholet hakabbalah* (the great chain of Jewish being and tradition). Even though nearly all its members remain anonymous, it is universally recognized as one of the singular institutions in the storied history of our nation. One of their greatest accomplishments was the formalization of the liturgy so that all members of our people, regardless of their level of education, would have an equal opportunity to stand before the Almighty and pour out their hearts in soulful prayer.

When we study the *tefilah* of Shavuot, we notice that the *Anshei Keneset HaGadolah* labelled it *z'man matan Torateinu* (the time of the giving of our Torah). In considering this phrase, our focus is immediately drawn to the first set of the *Luchot HaBrit* (Tablets of the Covenant): “Now the tablets were G-d’s work, and the inscription was G-d’s inscription, engraved on the tablets (*charut al haluchot*).” (*Sefer Shemot* 31:16, this and all Bible translations translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, underlining my own)

The original Hebrew words in *Tanach* are written without vowels; therefore, they can be pronounced in a variety of ways that differ significantly from the Masoretic vocalized versions found in our standard texts. *Chazal* often utilize one of these alternative readings in order to underscore a fundamental concept or idea. The reinterpretation of our *pasuk*'s words, “*charut al haluchot*,” is a well-known example of this approach that appears in many diverse sources: “Do not read the word ‘*charut*’ (‘engraved’) as ‘*charut*,’ instead, read it as ‘*cheirut*’ (‘freedom’).” Rather than “engraved on the tablets,” the reading, therefore, becomes “freedom on the tablets.”

Rabbinic literature views the Torah’s concept of freedom as being comprised of two aspects: negative (freedom from) and positive (freedom to). The *Midrash Rabbah* on *Sefer Shemot* (32:1 and 41:7) and *Sefer Vayikra* (18:3) focus upon the freedom from element of the Torah, in the sense that we will ultimately be free from exile (Rabbi Yehudah), the Angel of Death (Rabbi Nechemiah), the hegemony of other nations (Rabbi Nachman) and the trials and tribulations we face on an ongoing basis (the Rabbis). In contrast, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi’s statement in *Pirkei Avot* 6:2 underscores the positive freedom that is a hallmark of the Torah:

It says in *Sefer Shemot* 32:16: “And the tablets were the work of G-d, and the writing was the writing of G-d (*charut*) engraved upon the tablets.” Do not read the [non-vocalized] word as *charut* (engraved); instead read it as *cheirut* (freedom). [This is so] since there is no one who is truly free except for one who engages in Torah study.

In Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi’s view, engaging in *talmud Torah* is the paradigm of freedom, since it enables us to understand and fulfill Hashem’s Torah. He therefore concludes with the celebrated words, “there is no one who is truly free except for one who engages in Torah study.”

My *rebbe* and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as “the Rav” by his students and followers, expands upon *Chazal*’s many statements regarding freedom in his analysis of the Exodus and the Haggadah. He notes that the Haggadah states, “*vayotzi’einu Hashem E-lokeinu mi-sham*” (and Hashem, our G-d, took us out from there), rather than “*vayotzi’einu Hashem mi-sham*” alone. For the Rav, the significance of adding the word, “*E-lokeinu,*” cannot be overestimated:

If the Haggadah had said simply *Vayotzi’einu Hashem mi-sham*, it would have referred only to the fact that God has mercy on us, that He does not tolerate injustice and iniquity, that when we pray to Him, He hearkens to our voice...God intervenes in the process of nature, in history and society, saving the persecuted and protecting them against their persecutors. But we understand freedom at a different level than others. When we say that God has taken us out of the house of bondage and granted us freedom, we add that freedom consists in serving God, abiding by His will and conforming to His *mitzvot*.... (This and the following quote, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Festival of Freedom: Essays on Pesah and the Haggadah*, pages 50-51)

This passage contains an implicit reference to a recurrent idea in the Rav’s thought, that the purpose of *yetziat mitzrayim* (Pesach) was to receive the Torah and its *mitzvot* at Mount Sinai (Shavuot), for only then could we be free:

If we had been taken out of Egypt without *E-lokeinu*, without accepting His code, without surrendering to His authority, without reaching a covenant with Him, without obligating ourselves to surrender freedom in order to gain a higher form of freedom — then we would have been in bondage again. Instead of bondage to Pharaoh, it would have been bondage to our own fears, to our own phobias, to nature, to society, to slogans.

With the Hashem’s help and our fervent desire, may this Shavuot be the time when we, as individuals and as a people, rededicate ourselves to renewing our covenant with the Almighty and to fulfilling His *mitzvot*, for then, we will be truly free. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom and *Chag Sameach* and may Hashem in His infinite mercy remove the pandemic from *klal Yisrael* and all the nations of the world.

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria Etengoff and the *parasha*'s name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdb718@gmail.com>.

\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at:  
<http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.