

## A Thought For Shabbat

Freedom From, Freedom To and What Else?

The Hebrew Bible has a number of words for Freedom. Chofesh and Cherut to name two. Some commentators find in these two words an echo of the distinction that the famous philosopher Sir Isaiah Berlin would see between the idea of “Freedom To’ And ‘Freedom From”

Chofesh, the word used when a slave leaves a master, (and possibly related to the word chafetz, to want) means a freedom from obligations or constraints. It is freedom ‘from’. Cherut - related to the word l’charet, to engrave, to leave a mark, may mean the ability to achieve wonderful things - a Ben Chorin - a free person occupies himself with Torah, say the Rabbis. This is, classically, freedom ‘to’.

But in our parsha - Behar - Bechukotai - we meet a different - and perhaps deeper - expression of freedom.

Describing the Yovel (Jubilee) year, the 50th year, we are told

לְכֶם תִּהְיֶה הוּא יוֹבֵל לְכָל־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאַרְץ דְּרוֹר וּקְרָאתֶם שָׁנָה הַחֲמִשִּׁים שָׁנָת אֶת וְקִדְשְׁתֶּם  
תִּשְׁבוּ מִשְׁפַּחְתּוֹאֵל וְאִישׁ אֶל־אֲחֻזָּתוֹ אִישׁ וְשִׁבְתֶּם

And you shall hallow the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout all the land to all its inhabitants: it shall be a jubilee for you; and you shall return every man to his possession, and you shall return every man to his family.

The word Dror - translated here as ‘liberty’ is an interesting word.

Rashi says it comes from the word ‘dar, or dira’ to live - to be able to dwell, wherever you like. “R. Jehuda said, “What is the etymology of the term דְּרוֹר, freedom? A free man is like a person who may dwell (דור) at an inn — meaning that he may reside in any place he pleases, and is not under the control of others.”

Not so much freedom ‘from’ or freedom ‘to’ - but a freedom we would all very much like to be able to experience right now - freedom ‘to go’. To move wherever we like (even to go to a hotel!)

But another medieval commentator, Ibn Ezra, adds another dimension.

“Dror” is used elsewhere in the Bible to describe a song bird - “Compare, “like a flying swallow” [Proverbs 26:2]. The term there denotes a bird which sings as long as it is free;” he writes.

Such a beautiful image! Freedom to sing ! To soar! We are - and please let us keep remembering, because it is so important - by staying indoors, not going out, mizing, socializing, working - we are doing an incredible thing. Saving lives. Ensuring that we get through this, safely - not just for our sake but for everyone elses. But - there is a cost. Our wings are ‘clipped’. We live with constraints, it feels like we live locked away from each other. It is a life, for so many of us, without joy. An unhappy life.

And this is the vision of Parshat Behar. We WILL be free! We may have to be patient, we may have to keep counting, anticipating - but we will get there!

I am, I must admit, deeply touched by the image of the Ibn Ezra. Freedom to sing - free enough to want to sing - to be able to soar. It's the ultimate freedom. Freedom from needing to be anxious. Carefree.

I think a powerful proof that Ibn Ezra's interpretation is correct, comes from the end of the verse. What do we do with this gift of 'dror' liberty - that we are given.

We don't wander away - embark on a voyage or even a vacation. It describes something that so many people long for right now - Ish el mishpachto tashuvu. We return to our family. To the people and places we love most. That we miss the most. That perhaps we didn't value enough.

The tashuvu - return - is real Teshuva. It reminds us that when are counting and our waiting is done, and we come - it will probably be more gradual than this -but when we, like birds released from our cage - when we spread our wings and burst into songs - we won't speak out far away places, new experiences - not at first. We will seek out our family, our friends. And yes, our community and each other.

Then we will be free. Then we will sing again.

Let's keep counting, let's be patient. Let's be safe. But let's be ready to sing.

Shabbat Shalom