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## WHY THE FREE BIRD SINGS

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The caged bird sings  
with a fearful trill  
of things unknown  
but longed for still  
and his tune is heard  
on the distant hill  
for the caged bird  
sings of freedom  
*Maya Angelou, "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings"*

I know a bird  
that sings when free,  
but when caged  
by you or me  
it ceases to eat  
and refuses to live.  
*Avraham Ibn Ezra, Commentary to Vayikra 25:10, as freely translated by Aryeh Klapper*

The inscription on the Liberty Bell reads "Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof." This excerpt (from the King James translation of Vayikra 25:10) makes several interesting translational choices. For example, why "throughout all the land," when the Hebrew is בארץ, merely "in the land?" Why "the inhabitants thereof," rather than merely "inhabitants thereof," when the Hebrew יושביה has no definite article? These choices can seem odd even in English, and many internet sites quoting the Bell accidentally remove the first "all" and the second "the." These imprecisions matter because they license us to challenge the core translation: Is the Hebrew דרור /*d'ror* properly translated as "liberty?"

A translation can have any of three sources: tradition, parallel uses, and context. In the case of *d'ror*, the parallel in Yirmiyah 34:8-9 seems to make the meaning crystal clear.

הַדְּבַר אֲשֶׁר-הָיָה אֵלַי־רַמְיָהוּ מֵאֵת ה'־  
אֲחֵרִי כִּרְתֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ צִדְקִיָּהוּ בְּרִית אֶת-כָּל-הָעַם אֲשֶׁר בִּירוּשָׁלַם  
לְקַרְא לְהֵם דְּרוֹר:  
לְשַׁלַּח אִישׁ אֶת-עַבְדּוֹ וְאִישׁ אֶת-שִׁפְחָתוֹ  
הַעֲבָרִי וְהַעֲבֵרָהּ  
חֲפְשִׁים  
לְבַלְתִּי עֲבַד-בָּם  
בְּיַהֲדוּי אֲחֵיהֶם אִישׁ־

*The matter which came to Yirmiyahu from Hashem  
after Tz'dkiyahu cut a covenant with all the populace that was in  
Yerushalayim  
to proclaim to them d'ror  
to send forth each man his manslave and his maidslave  
the Hebrew and the Hebrewess  
free  
to not work them as slaves  
a Jew, his brother man.*

It seems undeniable that a *d'ror*-proclamation sets slaves free. When the Jews fail to abide by the proclamation, G-d frames their coming destruction as poetic justice, declaring that He will grant His servants of destruction freedom to destroy:

אַתֶּם לֹא-שִׁמַּעְתֶּם אֵלַי לְקַרְא דְּרוֹר  
אִישׁ לְאָחִיו וְאִישׁ לְרֵעֵהוּ  
הֲנִי קֹרָא לָכֶם דְּרוֹר וְנָאִם-ה'  
אֶל-הַחֲבֵר אֶל-הַדְּבַר וְאֶל-הַרְעֵב

*You did not heed me, to proclaim a דרור*

*Each man to his brother, and each man to his fellow*

*Behold I am proclaiming a d'ror regarding you, says Hashem,  
to the sword and the plague and the famine*

Yeshayahu 61:1 similarly reads

לְקַרְא לְשִׁבּוּיִם דְּרוֹר

*To proclaim d'ror regarding captives.*

So *d'ror* plainly can refer to liberation from a previous state of constraint. Likely the King James chose "liberty" rather than "freedom" because the connotation of liberty at that time was "freedom from," whereas freedom would be more likely understood as "freedom to."

However, these are not the only Biblical contexts in which the word *d'ror* appears.

For example, Shemot 30:23 refers to "myrrh *d'ror*." Most commentators assume that the meaning in this context must be derived from the contexts we have already seen. Thus R. Avraham ben HaRambam writes:

שם הטוהר והחרות

*a term for purity/freedom (from impurities)*

while BDB translates *d'ror* as "liquid" on the basis of "flowing; free run, liberty." Only Rashbam seems to take this instance as reflecting a different meaning entirely: חשוב, significant. I'm not sure that I'm understanding Rashbam correctly, though, and he may also see social significance as rooted in the capacity to resist others' attempts to constrain you.

*D'ror* also appears twice in contexts where the intended referent seems to be a type or species of bird.

כַּצְפוֹר לָנוּד כְּדְרוֹר לְעוֹף

*Like a bird to wander; like a d'ror to fly (Mishlei 26:2)*

גַּם־צְפוֹרוּ מְצָאָה בַּיֵּת וּדְרוֹרוּ קוֹן לָהּ

*Also the bird found a home, and the d'ror a nest for itself (Tebillim 84)*

One might see these uses as stemming from a different root entirely. BDB, for example, simply identifies the species as “swallow.” Ibn Ezra to Mishlei 26:2 seems to adopt this approach:

טעם שמות העופות והבהמות אשר פרשו הראשונים

הם כחלומות בלי פתרון

והזכיר הצפור והדרור

כי הם דרות בבתיים עם בני אדם

וצריכין לנוד מהרה ממקו למקום מפני העוברים והשבים

*The rationales that my predecessors gave for the species-names of birds and animals*

*are like dreams that have no interpretation*

*it mentions the tzippor and the d'ror here*

*because they live in houses together with human beings*

*and they need to flit rapidly from place to place because of the passers-by*

Here Ibn Ezra denies that the species-name *d'ror* has any discoverable etymology, or that the species has any relevant characteristic that distinguishes it from the *tzippor*. He does however identify it as a bird that lives in a space it shares with human beings.

Ibn Ezra to Tehillim 84:4 takes a radically different approach:

– דרוֹר

שם עוף מנגן

אולי נקרא כן

בעבור שאין מנהגו לנגן

כל זמן שאיננו חפשי

זזה העוף ידוע הוא בספרד

“D’ror” –

*This is the name of a songbird*

*Perhaps it is called thus*

*because its practice is not to sing*

*whenever it is not free*

*This bird is known in Spain.*

Ibn Ezra here provides an etymology for the species-name *d'ror* – the same kind of etymology he scoffed at in his comments to Mishlei 26:2! Assuming this is the same species, we now learn that its residence among human beings does not imply domestication, or at least not total domestication; the bird sings only when it is free. Its constant motion is likely for the purpose of avoiding capture.

Even more astonishingly, Ibn Ezra to Vayikra 25:10 - the Liberty Bell verse - reverses the vector of derivation.

– דרוֹר

ידועה

והוא כמו חפשי.

– וכדרור לעוף –

עוף קטן

מנגן כשהוא ברשותו

ואם הוא ברשות אדם

לא יאכל

עד שימות.

“D’ror” –

*The meaning is known*

*and it is like “free.”*

*(as in the verse) “like a d’ror to fly”*

*a small bird*

*which sings when in its own reshut*

*but when in the reshut of a human being*

*it will not eat*

*to the point of dying*

Here Ibn Ezra argues that the species name is the etymology of the term “liberty,” or at the least that we derive the meaning of *d'ror* here from the species name. Why would he take that approach, which requires him to assume that the name was known via tradition, when the meaning seems clear from context here and from parallel passages?

I suggest that Ibn Ezra thought the translation of “liberty” was not a perfect fit in our context. Why? Because although Yirmiyahu uses *d'ror* to refer to freeing slaves, and Yeshayahu uses *d'ror* to refer to freeing captives, a careful look at the Jubilee law in Vayikra 25:10 reveals no explicit contextual reference at all to slavery or freedom. Rather, the unit Vayikra 25:10-13 speaks about the need for people to return to their hereditary homesteads. Slavery may be mentioned in 25:14, but as an additional element. One can argue that people who sell their land will eventually end up enslaved, or that 25:10-13 refers to people who were sold away from their lands rather than people who sold their lands, but this is certainly not obvious.

How does Ibn Ezra resolve this? Perhaps the key is that he frames the bird’s refusal to sing as about *reshut*, which can mean both “space” and “authority.” The bird will sing only when it is in its own *reshut*. Similarly, even if people are not enslaved, they do not have *d'ror* unless they have a space they can call their own.

The problem is that Ibn Ezra to Mishlei 26:2 defines the *d'ror* species as one that lives in human houses, and therefore finds its space continually intruded on.

I can only suggest this. We all live within the impersonal constraints of time, space, and our own physicality. We can only dream of perfect, Divine freedom. Perhaps we can even dream of that freedom only when we are not subject to any other person’s will. Until then we are constrained to imagine only freedom from, not freedom to.

The *d'ror* dreams of its own space, but its physical needs and limitations compel it to live in human abodes. So long as it is not captive – so long as it is not subject to a human will – the dream seems close enough that it can be expressed in music.

The free bird sings  
with a fearful trill  
of things unknown  
but longed for still.  
it sings of freedom.