

The meaning of freedom

-When he was 8, my son Jonathan said he was not going to put shoes on for the seder. He said he was a “free man”. In the end I convinced him to put shoes on, but I appreciated the appropriateness of his remark.

-What does freedom really mean, if you can't even go barefoot to the dinner table? When you have to constantly follow laws, rules and regulations, customs and practices, and conform to society's expectations?

-Rabbi Yehudah Loew ben Betzalel (1520-1609), the Maharal of Prague, said:

-Pesach does not celebrate true freedom, but rather the change of masters [from Pharaoh to God].

What did he mean?

-How the two slaveries differ

-Slavery to Pharaoh was for the benefit of the master, but slavery to God is for our own benefit.

-If we refused to obey, retribution was immediate in the case of Pharaoh, not so (if it ever came) in the case of God.

-True freedom is only freedom of the mind

And the Tablets are God's handiwork, and the handwriting is God's handwriting engraved [charut] on the Tablets." Do not read "charut" (engraved) but "cherut" (freedom), for **no one is freer than one who engages in the study of Torah.** [En ben chorin ella mi she'osek b'talmud Torah.](Pirkei Avot 6:2)

Odd. Torah may make life more meaningful, useful and enduring, but why more free? The Maharal explains: Slavery refers only to the body, which is enslaved by the laws of the universe. The spiritual world is not enslaved by these laws, and it is attained only by the Torah, whence the quote.

-A person is never really free: He worries about material problems and is constrained by the world around him. Only by involvement in matters of the mind can he attain true freedom.

Notes:

-Pirkei Avot says "engraved", not "written". Writing can be erased, but not engraving.

-“Eved” can mean "servant" or "slave." In Egypt, we were Pharaoh's *slaves*, but afterwards we became God's *servants*.