

True Freedom
Message to Confirmands
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When I think of this year's class, words from the old High Holy Day prayer book come to mind, words to the effect that one generation comes into a world of peace and prosperity, while another, through no fault of its own, faces difficult challenges. We don't get to choose the times of our lives, and you guys have hit a sort of jackpot.

My two daughters are ten years apart. The older one came of age in the more peaceful, optimistic years of the Clinton presidency, and remembers trips to Israel that included visits to Jericho and friendly conversations with the Palestinian police. The youngest learned to read the week that 9-11 happened, death was on the front page of the newspapers for months, and the sabbatical she remembers in Israel was punctuated by suicide car and bus bombings

When I talk with our 96- and 97-year-old members, they say to me, I have been through a lot, but nothing like this.

Your talks this evening already showed us how you and your generation have been shaped by this pandemic, by the experience of shelter in place, by the losses you and your peers have experienced. The pundits have lots to say about this, and studies will bring us more information for decades to come.

To all of that I just want to add one brief perspective from Jewish tradition.

Passover and Shavuot, the holiday we celebrate this evening, are connected both in their stories and through the counting of the Omer, which we just concluded. Passover is a festival of freedom—obviously, freedom from slavery—but Shavuot is also considered a celebration of freedom. But what kind of freedom? It is the holiday on which we celebrate the giving of the Torah, law, which seems like a restriction on freedom. Yet the rabbis read the Torah this way: The commandments were charut on the tablets, literally engraved, but they read it as cheiroot, freedom. How can commandments bring freedom?

Today living here in America, the laws of the Torah are laws that we get to choose to obey, or not, unlike American civil law, but I don't think that's what the rabbis were thinking about.

I believe they were ruminating on those things that we have the power to do, yet choose not to do because of some higher commitment. In ancient times that might have been moving your neighbor's landmark in the dark of night, or cursing the deaf and putting a stumbling block before the blind. No one would catch you at it, but you still could choose not to do it, because of your inner sense of right and wrong.

In our own day that might be about safeguarding nature, even if we have the power to totally destroy it, or it might be about not doing that nasty thing to another person, even though it is so easy to open our mouths and hurt them.

The freedom of Shavuot is the freedom from the compulsion to do everything it is in our power to do. It is the power to control ourselves. For our rabbis, that, and not power over others, was the true measure of strength.

Bill McKibben, an environmental activist, writes about this ability to control ourselves as the special gift of humans: Just as birds can fly, we can decide about things we are not willing to do. He writes:

Societies are measured not just by the things they build, but also by the things they can bring themselves to leave alone: whales, bright-plumed birds, mountains, and children kept safe from Dickensian labor. . . . That's our superpower, even if we exercise it too rarely.

During this shelter in place, we have each experienced that kind of power. We may not have felt free. There was so much that we couldn't do, and yet a certain power was granted to us. We had the freedom to define our approach to this unique time.

As you go forward in life, I hope you will be blessed with better times, times without so many restrictions, times when we can enjoy being together.

But whatever the times you experience, I hope that this sense of Shavuot freedom will remain always with you, the freedom to choose what you will not do, the freedom to define your own approach to the hand you are dealt.

The Cantor and I are delighted to have this opportunity to call forth God's blessings upon you with ancient words that I recited for some of you when you

were named and for many of you when you came to the Torah as a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. Normally we would present you each with a certificate and a present at this moment as well, but that will have to wait until we can be together.

May there be in your lives many happy occasions upon which this blessing may be recited.