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Sermon: Freedom and Its Discontents

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My friend Shaya Cohen, a Torah Scholar, wrote recently that “...we Jews are on a journey, a historical quest of development and growth... Our history is not of a wheel spinning in space, but of a wheel traveling down a road. Every year we have the same Torah readings and the same festivals and the same commandments – but we accomplish and experience those things within the context of our growth, and within the new developments within our relationships with each other and with G-d.”

The wheel will turn, and the story of the Exodus will come around again...and we'll have a chance to consider it again, from different angles and in the context provided by whatever is going on around us.

American slavery has been in the news lately: Statues are coming down, memorials defaced, while school districts in Texas are rechristening elementary schools named after forebears who had the temerity to have dwelt in slave-owning America. Not just Robert E. Lee, but Benjamin Franklin and John Quincy Adams—who were both, by the way, early abolitionists. But never mind. Always, one must radically simplify whatever one seeks to condemn.

And we do have to try to judge history and the men and women who made it, for how else are we to learn from it? Still, perhaps as Christians we should judge our forebears modestly, with fear and trembling for our own sins?

As we have noted here before, there is a lot of slavery in our Bible. A slave became a slave in Bible times because he was captured in battle, or sold himself to settle a debt. Nomadic herders could not build prisons in the wilderness, so slavery could serve as a punishment for crime, one that was more humane than the punishments meted out in Egypt or Babylon. The maximum sentence for theft, for

instance, wasn't death, or having your hands chopped off, but seven years in slavery.

By the time of Jesus, Roman law applied under which slavery was still legal and normal. But Jews still considered themselves obliged to treat their slaves according to the Law of Moses. Since Mosaic rendered slavery relatively humane, this might explain why Jesus did not see fit to abolish it altogether.

And yet, there remains in scripture, in history and in our own souls the evidence that God made all human beings with an innate desire to be free. Free will is, in itself, a rebuke to slavery.

So why not just free the slaves?

Well, Pharaoh didn't "let my people go" because Pharaoh was evil —-you know, racist, sexist, toxically masculine, Islamophobic, transphobic..No...wait... gotta watch those anachronisms.

There's not much point in judging Pharaoh from a neo-Marxist intersectional perspective: better to assume that slavery existed in Egypt for the same reason it existed everywhere in the world.

Slavery was the means by which the rich natural resources of the Nile delta were translated into the fish, crops and livestock, wealth and life.

If you look at it that way, an irony emerges. By the time God is done with God's miracles: there are no fish in the bloodied waters of the Nile, no goats, sheep or cows for milk and meat. The crops have been flattened by hail and locusts, there are no draft animals to pull the ploughs so the next crops can be planted. All the Egyptian workers are either dead or incapacitated by illness. The only resources—human, animal or vegetable— that have been spared in Egypt are those belonging to the Israelites. How will Egypt itself survive if Pharaoh allows the Israelites to walk away?

One could argue that Pharaoh's heart gets harder and harder because with each new, calamitous miracle the immediate problem of keeping his society as a whole fed and functioning becomes a more urgent priority.

Last time, I compared the moral problem of slavery to that of climate change. So let's compare Egypt to Houston. Let's imagine that everyone in Houston accepts that Hurricane Irma was divine punishment for all those internal combustion engines sinfully belching carbon into the atmosphere.

Everyone agrees that halting and reversing climate change is a moral imperative...but how can the people of Houston get rid of their cars and trucks...today? Not someday, not gradually, with alternative, earth-friendly transportation phased in, but now? Without cars and trucks, how will a devastated population obtain food, water, medical supplies and the materials needed for rebuilding?

How do you completely transform society while you are still dealing with the consequences of having failed to transform it *yesterday*?

That was Pharoah's problem. That was the Founding Father's problem, too.

The irony of demanding freedom for themselves while denying it, wholesale, to others was not lost on

the Founding Fathers. Quite the contrary: early American patriots, both white and black, understood exactly what it meant to say that all men are created equal.

By the time of the Revolution, there were already individuals and organizations dedicated to the abolition of slavery; William Livingston, one of the early supporters and financiers of the Revolution, wrote to Ben Franklin, “I would most ardently wish to become a member of [the anti-slavery society in New York] and . . . I can safely promise them that neither my tongue, nor my pen, nor purse shall be wanting to promote the abolition of what to me appears so inconsistent with humanity and Christianity. . . . “

And yet... slavery was not abolished. The very men who, in 1776 effected such a radical change in the whole idea of government... did not change this.

They did, however, plant the seeds of its abolition so deeply into the foundational documents of this country that Frederick Douglass would later write that the American government “was never, in its essence, anything but an anti-slavery government. “

Douglass had been born into slavery and escaped from it, eventually becoming a prominent abolitionist. “Abolish slavery tomorrow,” he wrote, in 1864, “and not a sentence or syllable of the [United States] Constitution need be altered. [For] It was purposely so framed as to give no claim, no sanction to the claim, of property in man. If in its origin slavery had any relation to the government, it was only as the scaffolding to the magnificent structure, to be removed as soon as the building was completed.”

Why did it take so long to remove the “scaffolding” of slavery from human as well as American structures?

We have already found one answer in the book of Exodus: because it was feared, with some good reason, that the economy would collapse without it.

But there is another complication too, the uncomfortable one that is expressed by the Israelites to Moses in the verses we read this morning: What if a person is better off slave than free?

Slaveowners in the American South would invite comparison between their slaves and the poor of Europe or the workers in the Northern states. Were not slaves better cared for? Often better trained and fed? Didn't their owners assist them when they were sick and aged, unlike wage earners who, once fired from their jobs, were left to fend for themselves?

In his autobiography, (*Up From Slavery*) Booker T. Washington described "wild scenes of ecstasy" in response to news that slavery had ended. But the rejoicing, he wrote, was quickly tempered by a new reality.

"For I noticed that by the time they returned to their cabins, there was a change in their feelings. The great responsibility of being free, of having charge of themselves, of having to think and plan for themselves and their children, seemed to take possession of them."

That existential anxiety often became concrete hardship: Freed slaves were often made homeless, had to live in Freedman's camps. There were horrific outbreaks of smallpox and cholera. Many simply starved to death.

At best, the period immediately after the Civil War was a period of intense uncertainty. As Tony Cox, a newly freed man from Mississippi remarked about emancipation, “Us had a hard time getting adjusted and making a way for us selves.”

Could you blame them if some of these newly free American citizens cried out, like the Israelites, “if only we had died by the Lord’s hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.”

Transformation is not easy. Freedom is hard. The power to make your own choices comes with heavy responsibility. Adjustment takes time. Not only liberation, but learning to live in liberty turns out to demand God’s miraculous and saving grace.

No one here in this sanctuary today owns slaves. That’s not a sign of our innate moral superiority. Instead, we have the unbelievable good fortune of being able to add our bricks to an existing and—as Frederick Douglas would remind us— miraculously

sound structure. God help us if we should ever have to start again from scratch.

Not only ought we judge our sinful forebears modestly, perhaps we ought also to be deeply grateful to them for struggling as hard as they did to be as virtuous as they were. In their place we might not have done as well, let alone done better.

Before we leave the subject of slavery and roll on, with the Israelites, into the next chapter of their story and ours, I would like to add a post-script: there are slaves and slaveowners in the world today. Human trafficking exists, of course, but also there are Jihadist groups in the Middle East —-ISIS—-and in Northern Nigeria—-Boko Haram—that have explicitly endorsed the taking of slaves in war and have actually enslaved women and girls.

Abubakar Shekau, the leader of Boko Haram, said in an interview “I shall capture people and make them slaves. [It is] an order from Allah and all we are doing is in the Book of Allah that we follow.”

These are not primitive or uneducated people; they’ve got websites and cell phones. They are contributing their share of carbon to global warming

with their cars, trucks and planes. And still they believe that one human being can own another, that women should be owned by men, that homosexuality should be punished by death...

We are not the only—nor, arguably, the worst—sinners determined to transform the world...

Amen.