

Bo 5771- Freedom with Purpose
Rabbi David Lerner

Shabbat Shalom.

After the destruction of the first Temple in Jerusalem some 2600 years ago, Jews started establishing communities outside of the Land of Israel. While the largest numbers of people were exiled to Babylonia, in later centuries, Jews started to move all around the Mediterranean Sea.

A large Jewish community settled in Egypt, the world's great super-power at the time. They began to speak Greek, and, in the third century before the Common Era, almost 2300 years ago, the process of translating the Torah, the Hebrew Bible, into Greek began.

According to the version recorded in the Talmud, "King Ptolemy once gathered 72 elders. He placed them in 72 chambers, each of them in a separate one, without revealing to them why they were summoned. He entered each one's room and said: 'Write for me the Torah of Moshe, your teacher.' God put it in the heart of each one to translate identically as all the others did." (Megillah 9A)

It's a great story. Each translator came up with the identical text, even though each one was in a separate room. What does it say about the translation?

That even it is divinely inspired; so the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Tanakh had authority and divine blessing.

While I may not believe the story literally, it demonstrates the value of and challenge of a good translation of sacred texts. Whenever we translate something from one language to another, especially when we translate from Hebrew to English to study our own tradition, we not only translate a text, but we also interpret it. Every translation is an interpretation.

I want to share a story about the wonderful d'var Torah that our Bar-Mitzvah Matt shared this morning. He, Rabbi Jacobs, Marcy Lidman and I discussed the translation of the opening word of the parashah, *Bo*, which literally means "come." "*Bo el Pharaoh* – come to Pharaoh;" our Etz Hayim Humash translates it as "Go to Pharaoh," because that's really what it means.

Now we could get into a long discussion about why the Torah uses the word *Bo*, come, when it really intends that Moses is to go, and one of the answers is that God is telling Moses to go to Pharaoh, that Pharaoh too is created in God's image. That God is sending Moshe and even, somehow, with Pharaoh. But I want to get back to the difficulty of translation.

Let me give you another example of tricky translation. In this week's Torah portion, as well as the last two, we find a familiar phrase that sometimes gets translated as, "Let my people go." We teach that to our children; we sing: "Go down Moses, Way down in Egypt Land, Tell Old Pharaoh to let my people go."

If we look at the original Hebrew text, we find that the Hebrew phrase is "*Shalah ami v'ya'avduni*." It literally means, "Send my people and they shall serve me." Or, to smooth it out a little bit: Send my people so that they may serve me. While "Let my people go" is not an awful translation, it is not a complete translation.

The idea is to send forth the Hebrew slaves. And there is a second phrase that is often ignored, *V'ya'avduni* - that they may serve me, that they may be slaves to me – it is the same root – they were *avadim* – slaves to Pharaoh and now, *v'ya'avduni* – they will serve, be slaves to God.

That is the key to the entire Exodus. It is not simply being freed, "Let my people go." While that is important, and it is just and right that no people ever be enslaved, it is not the complete story. If they simply had freedom, that would be freedom without purpose.

As the great Jewish theologian of the 20th century Boston's own Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik teaches, there is freedom from and there is freedom to – freedom with purpose. There is simply running from something and running to something.

The same Hebrew root – *ayin, vet, daled* – meaning slave – is found in both places and it is deliberate – we are all slaves to something – we build our lives around ideas and things that we follow. We can either be slaves to Pharaoh or some other impermanent idea, or we can be slaves to God, servants to eternity and ultimate values.

Soloveitchik writes, "The purpose of the Exodus is not political freedom, but the conversion of a slave society into a kingdom of Priests – *mamlechet kohanim v'goi kadosh* and a holy nation." (Soloveitchik, Lecture on Leadership 6-10-1974)

Freedom must have purpose and direction. If the slaves are simply freed to go off and do whatever they want, that is a lower level of freedom. But, with freedom with purpose, the Jewish people are asked to go to God, to receive God's revelation, purpose, and direction, – the core of the Torah at Sinai – eternal values, giving them meaning, a system of mitzvot about how to live and how to perfect the world. That is freedom with purpose. That is a very different statement from simply, "Let my people go."

The New York Times columnist David Brooks wrote an op-ed last week (12-30-10 The Arena Culture) which mentioned a new book by Hubert Dreyfus of Berkeley and Sean Dorrance Kelly of Harvard, called "All Things Shining." He wrote:

“Dreyfus and Kelly start with Vico’s old idea that each age has its own lens through which people see the world. In the Middle Ages, for example, ‘people could not help but experience themselves as determined or created by God.’ They assumed that God’s plans encompassed their lives the way we assume the laws of physics do.

“For the past hundred years or so, we have lived in a secular age. That does not mean that people aren’t religious. It means there is no shared set of values we all absorb as preconscious assumptions. In our world, individuals have to find or create their own meaning.

“This, Dreyfus and Kelly argue, has led to a pervasive sadness. Individuals are usually not capable of creating their own lives from the ground up. So, modern life is marked by frequent feelings of indecision and anxiety. People often lack the foundations upon which to make the most important choices.

“Dreyfus and Kelly suffer from the usual Cambridge/Berkeley parochialism. They assume that nobody believes in eternal truth any more. But they are on to something important when they describe the way — far more than in past ages — sports has risen up to fill a spiritual void.

“Spiritually unmoored, many people nonetheless experience intense elevation during the magical moments that sport often affords. Dreyfus and Kelly mention the mood that swept through the crowd at Yankee Stadium when Lou Gehrig delivered his ‘Luckiest Man Alive’ speech, or the mood that swept through Wimbledon as Roger Federer completed one of his greatest matches.”

I also thought of the mood of jubilation that swept through Boston in 2004 when the Sox won the World Series after 86 years. It was a pure joy and exultation!

“The most real things in life, they write, well up and take us over. They call this experience “whooshing up.” We get whooshed up at a sports arena, at a political rally, or even at magical moments while woodworking or walking through nature.”

This is a fascinating analysis of our society and this idea of the whooshing up resonates with me strongly. Though many Americans and many modern people feel less connected to eternal ideas and a sense of direction, we do have occasionally these whooshing up moments.

For some it may occur watching an episode of ABC's feel-good reality TV show ["Extreme Makeover: Home Edition"](#), which, the couple of times I've seen it, has always brought me a whooshing up of tears. That show always gets me!

But it happens in our tradition as well – at a wedding, the nachas, the joy of watching the youngest child chant the Four Questions at the Seder, the feeling of warmth around the Hanukkah candles, the joy right here, right now at Matt’s Bar-Mitzvah, the

sadness and intensity of losing someone or when we make a *minyan* for them to stand up and say the *Kaddish*.

Most American Jews today, however, don't have a regular pattern of Jewish moments; they only have these occasional Jewish whooshing up moments. Sadly, we have lost the real continuous pattern of Jewish living.

Similarly, Dreyfus and Kelly claim that now we are choosing spiritual moments and ideas as from a Smorgasbord, but that we are lacking any ultimate purpose and direction.

Our tradition holds out a different paradigm. As a modern Jew and a person who is engaged with all sorts of ideas, I choose to orient myself differently.

We do have ultimate purpose and direction. We are given the gift of the Torah, with its core eternal ideas of perfecting the world in the image of God.

We are given a handbook and a system of mitzvot that guide our actions, how we speak, how we eat, how we interact, how we behave, how we conduct business, how we grow up, and how we live.

We are blessed to have that purpose. The Israelites were given freedom with purpose, with direction.

Not freedom from, but freedom to.

Freedom is not simply to wander around aimlessly in the wilderness. It is to go to Sinai, to connect with the Holy One, and to receive God's eternal ideas and ideals. It is to become partners with God in perfecting the world.

While Dreyfus and Kelly make some interesting points, it is not simply to "Let my people go" and have them wander about looking for some whooshing up moments, picking among at a Smorgasbord as at some dessert table.

No. It is freedom with a purpose.

It is to bring about God's eternal moral view of perfecting the world through mitzvot, through the Commandments.

While some may wander without purpose, we are blessed to have direction.

May we all aspire to choose freedom with purpose.

Shabbat Shalom.