

Shabbat Shalom.

Let me read you a few things.

From the Hamas charter:

The time will not come until Muslims will fight the Jews (and kill them); until the Jews hide behind rocks and trees, which will cry: O Muslim! there is a Jew hiding behind me, come on and kill him!

Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah has said:

If we searched the entire world for a person more cowardly, despicable, weak and feeble in psyche, mind, ideology and religion, we would not find anyone like the Jew.

He went on to specifically point out that he said Jew, not Israeli.

And Hugo Chavez, the former president of Venezuela, a country that does not even share a hemisphere with Israel, called Israel a "terrorist and murderous state," and cursed it by saying:

"I take this opportunity to condemn again from the bottom of my soul and my guts the State of Israel: Cursed you, State of Israel! Cursed you, terrorists and assassins!"

Sadly, I could go on for a long time like this. But I think this is quite enough.

I am a Jew by choice. Given what I just read, am I nuts?

I am going to let you in on a secret. Rabbi Lerner is a Jew by choice. Rabbi Fel is a Jew by choice, too. So what do I mean by this? I am not talking about the conventional understanding of that phrase as a person not born to Jewish mother but who chooses to have a halakhic conversion to Judaism as an adult. I am talking about making a conscious and deliberate decision to live a Jewish life. Not just being Jewish by default, but affirmatively and freely choosing to be Jewish. Every time you light Shabbat candles, choose kosher over non-kosher food, or come to services you are making a free will choice to be Jewish.

We are known as the chosen people, and that reflects God's choice of Israel. Exodus 19:5

Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine, but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

We are being singled out by God among all peoples to be a holy nation to Him. That is His choice.

But we are also a choosing people. Notice that the designation by God is conditional, if we choose to obey and keep God's covenant then we will be a treasured possession. The affirmation of our choice is found in Exodus 24:3

Moses went and repeated to the people all the commandments of the Lord and all the rules; and all the people answered with one

voice, saying, "All the things that the Lord has commanded we will do!"

Think of the power of this communal pledge, done with one voice, that established us as a people willing to accept the challenge of being a holy nation. That pledge at Sinai might have been the last time all the Jews agreed on anything. Can you imagine what Rabbi Lerner would do if on completing a sermon we all stood together and said, "As you say, so shall we do"?

Where did this unique in all creation ability to make free will choices come from? In B'reishit 1:27 we read

And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

"In His image" does not refer to a body, of course, but to a spark of the divine that separates us from the rest of God's creations. Free will is something that distinguishes man from all other creatures, including the angels. It is a great gift, but we have to understand what it is. In Jewish thinking free will is not just the ability to make a choice, animals certainly make choices. Rather it is the ability to make moral choices, to know right from wrong and to act on that knowledge. And we know that man was given free will at creation because almost the first thing we read about after creation is how we defied God's command not to eat of the forbidden tree, and from then on it is a steady string of bad moral choices for ten generations up until the time of Noah when God decided that He had had enough. At that point God decided to take a do-over with humanity, but he did not remove free will from Noah or his family because that is essential to being human.

Our very name as a people implies free will. Who knows what the word Islam means? Submission to God. How about the origin of the word Israel? Israel also refers to a relationship with God, but it is different from the Islamic concept of submission. In B'reishit 32:25 we read how Jacob wrestled with an angel and prevailed. At dawn, Jacob demanded a blessing for his struggle and triumph. The angle then spoke.

Said the other, "What is your name?" He replied, "Jacob." Said he, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed."

Jacob had already received a blessing from his father years before, but that blessing was obtained through trickery, by pretending to be someone he was not. Now he demands a blessing that he has earned through his own actions and choices. Notice that he is not given a traditional blessing of long life or prosperity or power or any other worldly thing. He is given a new name to show that he has struggled and prevailed. The wrestling match with an angel was not the fundamental reason for the new name, rather the name was a recognition of how Jacob had turned his life around and made a free choice to live according to the word of God rather than taking the expedient path to get what he wanted.

The Torah is often said to be a gift to the Jewish people from God, and that gift includes the requirement to struggle and challenge and question Him. There is a long tradition of people who have challenged God. Abraham challenged God's plan to destroy Sodom and argued for saving the city if just ten righteous people could be found. Moses argues with God many times to not destroy the people for being stiff-

necked and refusing to do as they were called upon to do. In the Talmud there is the story of the oven of Akhnai where the rabbis argued Halacha with God and won, and much of the book of Job describes Job calling on God to justify His mistreatment of him.

So God has given us the power to exercise our free will, but why should we make “good” choices when it is often easier and more immediately beneficial to make “bad” choices? One can argue philosophy and the greater good, but the rabbis had a more direct answer. There is a piece of Talmud (Yevamos 106a) that talks about the conditions under which a man can deliver a get to his wife for a divorce. The Talmud states that a get is not valid if it is not offered of the man’s own will. That seems obvious, but it goes on to say that if he is not willing, he can be subjected to pressure until he says, "I am willing." How can this be that using force can lead to a free will statement? The rabbis understanding was that every person has the innate desire to do the right thing, but that sometimes we choose to do otherwise due to the influence of the yetzer hara, evil impulses. But by using a little coercion at the right time a person can be freed of his evil urge so that his true inclination is able to reassert itself and make the “good” choice. People are good by nature, but sometimes we need help to be who we are meant to be.

So our name as the people of Israel is not just a recognition of ancestry and a past event, it is also a call to us to struggle and make choices. For all of the rituals and customs in Judaism, asking questions and looking for answers is the Jewish way much more than simply following a set of rules.

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What a story in today's parasha. An enemy brings in a mighty wizard to vanquish us, an angel appears with a sword, a talking donkey (perhaps an inspiration for William Steig when he wrote *Shrek!*?), lots of sacrifices, and finally one of the most poetic blessings of the Jewish people forced from the mouth of an enemy. Balaam said that he could not do anything but that God commanded it. Three times he sets up to curse us and three times God forces him to offer a blessing instead. So did Balaam have free will if his words were given by God? Did God take away his free will just to use him as a prop in this story? Earlier in the story we read that emissaries of Balak came to Balaam to hire him to curse the Jews, and that Balaam consulted God who told him that this thing was hateful to Him. Balaam then turned down Balak. But when Balak upped the offer, Balaam did not refuse again, instead he went back to God and said, "oh please can't I go?", and God told him that he could go if he desired. Balaam knew what God wanted, but he went anyway and rationalized his choice saying that he could only say what God wanted him to say. In the end, the Jews did receive a blessing from God as forced from Balaam, but this did not make Balaam one of the good guys. The mishna teaches that it was Balaam who had the idea to tempt the Jews through prostitution with Moabite women and this resulted in the plague seen at the end of this parasha that killed 24,000 people.

I have been talking about free will and how it is central to Judaism. But something else is required for us to be able to fully practice our free will, and that is freedom. Does anyone know how many times the exodus from Egypt is mentioned in the Torah? My careful count shows that the answer is, lots. Free will is given to every individual person as a

gift for being human. But freedom is communal. Moses said to Pharaoh, "Let my people go," not let me go.

God gave us life, and along with that free will. But without the freedom to make our own choices, can we exercise our free will and can we really engage in the moral struggle that is at the core of being Jewish? If a man holds a knife at my throat and forces me to eat a ham sandwich, have I committed a sin? And if a woman steals money from me and gives it to the poor, have I fulfilled a mitzvah? In both cases I say no because in both cases I was not the moral actor, I was merely the tool of another.

Let me read you something else, a little more uplifting than the quotes I started with,

We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are endowed by the creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

I am an American by choice. Once again, I am not referring to a condition of birth, I am talking about understanding and feeling what this country stands for and strives to be. Other countries started primarily with an ethnic group that expanded and became countries that were the lands of those people. But America was founded as the land of an idea, not a specific people.

How many people here were born somewhere else and then came to this country? Now how about people who are first generation in this country, one of your parents was born elsewhere and then immigrated to the U.S. This speaks to the universality of the desire to live a free life.

Israel was a gift from God to the Jewish people as a land to be our homeland and to worship God. America was a gift to ourselves 239 years ago and like many things of great value, it has to be cared for and renewed periodically. As Jews it is our duty to learn and discuss and challenge what God has called on us to do. And as Americans it is also our duty learn and discuss and challenge, and to fix when needed and to act when appropriate. It is a place where we are free to be Jewish, or Catholic, or Muslim, or Buddhist, or atheist or anything else, and where we can be white or black or brown or red and none of that matters because what counts is the understanding that all men are to be equal under the law and have the freedom to pursue their own beliefs and their own happiness.

Today is Shabbat, a great day to be a Jew. And it is also Independence Day, a great day to be an American. America was founded on the idea that individual people have the right from God to their life, liberty and the free exercise of their liberty to pursue their own happiness. This was a unique national principal when the country was founded, and sadly it remains rare even today. It is not hard to find examples in the world of countries that seem to be moving away from freedom rather than toward it. That is why it is so important to understand, appreciate and protect the freedom that we have in this country. We call on God every Shabbat to “safeguard the ideals and free institutions that are the pride and glory of our country.” This is not jingoism, this is an affirmation of the importance of freedom to a Jewish life and the recognition of the highest ideals and promise of this country.

Shabbat shalom, and may God bless America.