

Letting Freedom Ring
Parashat Bo
By Rabbi Jason Miller

Delivered at Adat Shalom Synagogue

Being on semester break from school, I've seen quite a few movies over the past couple weeks. The most memorable of all these was a wonderful movie based on a true story entitled "Girl, Interrupted." Winona Ryder plays Susanna Kaysen, a troubled 18-year old who admits herself into a mental institution. Susanna lacks the necessary support to help free herself from the abyss that has become her life. She is a lost soul. She is a slave to her own uncertainty. A slave to her insecurity. It is only once she forms lasting friendships with the other young women in the institution that she begins her yearlong transformation. A transformation to break free from the bonds of her inner ghosts, her lack of self-confidence, and her anxiety. The answer for her was not that she was not beautiful enough... not that she was not smart enough. The answer lied in community. Once Susanna established a community with other young women also plagued with these insecurities, she broke free, out of her slavery. In her chevre, the camaraderie that was formed amongst the girls of the mental institution, Susanna found freedom.

In this morning's parsha, Pharaoh finally bends and allows the Hebrew slaves to "go worship the Lord." First, however, the Egyptian leader asks Moses, "Who will go? And Moses responds in a strong, demanding voice: *bin'areinu u'viz'kei'neinu nelekh, b'vaneinu u'viv'no'teinu, b'tzo'neinu u'vivkareinu* - "We will all go! Our Young and Our Old, We will all go with Our Sons and Our Daughters, Our Flocks and Our Herds, for we must observe the Lord's Festival!"

Pharaoh let only the Hebrew men go this time, no one else. Was it that he did not trust the Israelites to all go for they might not return? Or rather, did Pharaoh not want the Hebrew slaves to rally together as an entire community to worship God, as that would certainly have been a unifying act of solidarity, thereby allowing these slaves to build up their confidence and break free out of the bonds of Egyptian slavery? As the chief slave master of the Hebrews, Pharaoh had the task of ensuring that his slaves not get too passionate or too powerful by forming the type of cooperation that would allow them to leave Egypt.

Later in this morning's Torah Portion, as a result of the plague of Locusts, Pharaoh does not even wait for Moses to again request permission for the Hebrew slaves to go and pray to the Lord. He quickly summons Moses and says: "Go worship the Lord your God... even your children can go." Nevertheless, Pharaoh is still too stubborn to let them go free, for God hardens his heart. Exactly why does the Torah say that God hardens Pharaoh's heart, making him too stubborn to let our ancestors go free? It is so the Israelites are forced to join together as a community - as one people. One nation praying before the Lord together - Joining together in holy worship.

At the essence of the "slave mentality" is the fact that slaves lack vision. They have lost their self-confidence. They are not united... they are a group of broken individuals, like Susanna Kaysen. Slaves need a leader who can help them unite and take them into the "Promised Land" together, into freedom. And, it was precisely God's plan to have the Israelites come together under Moses before the Exodus from Egypt could occur - forcing them to create one united community.

Moses was charged with the awesome task of helping the Hebrew people unify. Before they could "break free" from their oppressors, they were built up by assembling as a community. Moses was the visionary behind this operation. He was the prophet and spiritual leader who brought the Hebrew slaves into freedom. I envision Moses standing in front of the people, out in the fields of Egypt, a group of slaves coming together to worship God on a holy festival day. With his brother Aaron and sister Miriam by his side. I hear him charging his people. For just as I can hear Moses passionately demand to Pharaoh "Let my people go," I can also hear him charge our ancestors with the rallying cry: "Let Freedom Ring!"

During the Civil Rights Era in our own country, there was another visionary, another prophet who set out to unify a people. This spiritual leader saw the need to strengthen a people to help them develop a community - A spiritual community. This great man realized, as Moses did before him, that this group of men and women, sons and daughters, would only achieve freedom - true equality - if they united as a community. How appropriate that today is the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday - The same day our community recalls the transformation of our own people from slavery to freedom. Dr. King understood what it takes for a people to develop the self-confidence to make that transformation. Let Freedom Ring.

The message of our Passover Haggadah is "In Every Generation." This means more than just history repeating itself. Metaphorically speaking, we are all slaves. We all have our own "Egypt." This liberation theology resonates with us all and the reading of our ancestors' exodus forces us to remember that slavery is the plague of all generations. This is not the message we should speak of only once during the year. It is not enough to only say "In Every Generation" at our Passover Seder. We must recall not only what makes people slaves, but also what makes women and men free. Let the weekly Torah portions serve as a tool to remind us each week not only of the hardships our Hebrew ancestors went through in their search for freedom. But also, we must look to our Tradition to help us identify with the struggle our brothers and sisters have gone through in our own time.

We have the challenge to remember what is necessary for freedom to truly ring. It is an impossibility for one man or one woman to find freedom on his or her own. They must come together with others and seek freedom together... as a community.

Each day of my studies at the Jewish Theological Seminary, I am reminded of the importance of community. The Seminary is a community made up of hundreds of students bringing in kedushah, holiness, through Torah study, prayer, and spiritual interaction with God. JTS is a community of devoted Jews - rabbis, cantors, professors, students, educators who invite God to be a part of our lives on a daily basis. Seminary students, like myself, are planning and building for the future each day by holding on to our traditions-studying our holy texts, wrestling with difficult personal theology, and preparing to bring more vibrancy to the Jewish community in the coming years.

JTS continues to experience dramatic and accelerating growth-our enrollment, our faculty, and our programs are increasing both in number and in strength. With successful schools and programs, like the Graduate School, the H.L. Miller Cantorial School, the Davidson School of Jewish Education, the List College Undergraduate Program in conjunction with Columbia, and the Rabbinical School... The student body has increased by approximately 25 percent over the last ten years.

JTS continues to reach Jews all over the world, not only with our campuses in Argentina and Israel, but also with Project Judaica - the Seminary's pioneering program in Jewish studies in Moscow. Additionally, the Seminary now extends its reach into Cyberspace- in fact, it was through the Distance Learning Program on the Internet that I began learning with some of the Seminary's most revered professors even before I began my Rabbinical School two years ago. Great things happen when people come together as a strong community, united with a common vision, strong leadership, and hopes for a better world.

Moses knew he needed to assemble all the people, the entire nation... the women and the men and the children together to hear freedom ring. Dr. King knew it was essential for people to come together for his vision to succeed. And people did come together. They came together from many different communities, forming one large community united in the movement toward positive change. The mediaeval French Biblical commentator Rashi explains that the Israelites were not the only people to leave Egypt. He explains that other nations held in Egyptian slavery also left with our ancestors. The Hebrew slaves realized their common plight with this *erev rav*, this mixed multitude of other nations and, in forming a larger community, escaped from Egypt together. Similarly, our people, the Jewish community, joined forces in the Civil Rights Movement. The Seminary's renowned Professor Abraham Joshua Heschel marched arm in arm with Dr. King in Selma, Alabama. Rabbi Heschel described Martin Luther King as "one of the great men of our age, a truly great prophet." Shortly before his assassination, Heschel said:

"God has sent him to us... His mission is sacred... I call upon every Jew to hearken to his voice, to share his vision, to follow in his way."

King realized he had many loyal partners in the Conservative Jewish Community. Rabbi Spectre is reminded of how important it was for Dr. King to visit a Rabbinical Assembly Convention in the 60s. For him to address our movement's rabbis, to encourage them to continue to help in the crusade toward racial equality and harmony in our country. Dr. King praised our rabbis for joining the larger community, for being counted in the mission of tikkun olam, making the world a better place.

We all have an "Egypt." No matter what our "Egypt" may be, it is imperative that we look to our Tradition for guidance. And we must look to the visionaries of old to direct us. They understood that by joining forces, by forming alliances, anything is possible. Dr. King knew that freedom could only ring when we all make it ring together.

"We will be able to speed up that day," he said in our nation's capitol, "when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands."

Some two weeks ago, President Clinton reiterated King's words in front of the Lincoln Memorial, as our nation was only minutes away from this new century. "We must never forget the meaning of the 20th century. Or the gifts of those who worked... and marched... who fought and died for the triumph of freedom. Therefore, as we ring in this New Year, and a new century, and a new millennium, we must now and always echo Dr. King, in the words of the old American hymn... Let Freedom Ring!"

On this Martin Luther King weekend, I urge us all to remember the dictum "In Every Generation." In each generation, we must recognize our differences but also unite as one force, as one spiritual community standing strong for freedom. Like our biblical leader Moses, and Reverend King much after him, we must envision what it really takes to let freedom ring... We must say *binareinu u'vizkeineinu nelekh* - WE WILL ALL GO!

Shabbat Shalom.