

D'var Torah, Parashat Vaera Exodus 6:2-9:35

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by David Stone

in honor of Martin Luther King Jr's birthday

"And God spoke to Moses and said to him... 'Say, therefore, to the Israelite people: I am Hashem. ... I will free you from the labors of the Egyptians and deliver you from their bondage. I will redeem you with outstretched arm and ... I will bring you into the land which I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.'" [1] In this week's parsha, Vaera, this is one of those majestic, ennobling moments when we rise above the everyday struggles and difficulties and dangers to see the big picture of why all this is happening. I get goose bumps when I read it. It's what I like to think of as one of those 'Cecil B DeMille moments.'"

The last of these promises, "I will bring you into the land," is pretty straightforward. But what about the other three: "I will free you," "I will deliver you," "I will redeem you"? What's the difference here? Looking them up confirmed my original thought that they essentially mean the same thing. To free is to deliver is to redeem. Yet we know two things: we know that in Torah no word is superfluous, and we know that the words of the written Torah cannot simply be taken at face value. These statements have been interpreted as follows: "I will free you" from physical enslavement in Egypt; "I will deliver you" from the psychological mindset of being a slave, which may persist even after you have been physically liberated; "I will redeem you" so that you will think of yourselves as a free people. [2] It is the second of these which I would especially like to look at today: freeing not only our bodies but our minds, bearing in mind that we must not only take the slave out of Egypt but must also take Egypt out of the slave.

The crucial importance of self-esteem and self-respect is something which was never far from the mind of Reverend Martin Luther King Jr, from the beginning to the end of his career. In May of 1954 -- before he even began to be active in the civil rights movement -- Rev King, who was then 25 years old and pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, delivered a sermon entitled "Mental and Spiritual Slavery," in which he observed that "Usually we think of slavery in the physical sense, as an institution inflicted by one group of people on another group. But there is another type of slavery which is probably more prevalent than physical bondage, namely mental slavery. This is a slavery which the individual inflicts on himself. History abounds with individuals who enjoyed physical freedom and who have at the same time inflicted mental and spiritual slavery on themselves. Deep down in their souls and mind they were slaves." [3]

And near the end of his life -- in August of 1967, less than eight months before his tragic death -- Rev King, speaking to the annual convention of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which he served as president throughout his work in the civil rights movement, said that "As long as the mind is enslaved the body can never be free. Psychological freedom and a firm sense of self-esteem is the most powerful weapon against the long night of physical slavery." [4]

In August 1963, at the historic March on Washington, in what is by far his best-known speech -- the "I Have a Dream" speech -- immediately before speaking of his dream, Rev King, speaking to his fellow activists in the civil rights movement, said, "I am not unmindful that some of you have come here out of great trials and tribulations. Some of you have come fresh from narrow jail cells. And some of you have come from areas where your quest for freedom left you battered by the storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality. ... Continue to work ... Go back to Mississippi, go back to Alabama, go back to South Carolina, go back to Georgia, go back to Louisiana ... knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed." [5]

And back they went. And further trials and tribulations they had. For three of them it was the ultimate tribulation. On the night of June 21-22, 1964, just off a secluded road near Philadelphia, Mississippi, three young civil rights workers -- an African American named James Cheney and two Jewish men named Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, who were attempting to register African Americans to vote -- were murdered by members of the Ku Klux Klan. The Mississippi state government refused to prosecute the case, and federal prosecutions were only minimally successful. The murders sparked moral outrage nationwide which helped give the impetus to enact the

Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. And within the next few years Southern laws on the books for over half a century mandating the segregation of the races and preventing African-Americans from exercising their right to vote had fallen.

Mrs Julia Holmes, one of the participants in the Philadelphia, Mississippi campaign, said that, despite this tragedy, the efforts of civil-rights activists had brought a number of positive changes to Mississippi. She told one interviewer that, after the movement, "blacks began to feel like they were worthy ... Their self-esteem just went up sky-high. And they felt that they didn't have to bow down to anybody and that they were as good as anyone else. ... they felt that they should be beneficial to society, and they started owning their own businesses and running for office ... So the movement was not in vain and they didn't die in vain." [6] They had been delivered from the psychological mindset of being slaves and had been redeemed so that they could think of themselves as a free people.

And now we come to the fourth of God's promises to the Israelites: that He would bring them into the Promised Land. In the last speech of his life, the night before he was killed, Rev King, alluding to threats on his life, said that "I would like to have a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. and he's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we as a people will reach the Promised Land." [7] His listeners, who were intimately familiar with biblical teachings about the enslavement and liberation of the Israelite slaves, knew that he was referring to the example of Moses, who did not enter the Promised Land with the freed Israelite slaves but who ascended Mount Nebo so he could watch them enter.

But what was Rev King referring to when he spoke of the Promised Land? Was he referring to an actual piece of land? Was he referring to a return to Africa? No. Was he referring to a part of the United States which would be ceded to the African-American people to form their own state? No. Rev King was referring to a Promised Land of the spirit. An America in which African Americans, and all Americans, could live in dignity. This is what Rev King called "the beloved community." It was a vision in which, in the words of the Martin Luther King Jr Center for Nonviolent Social Change, "Racism and all forms of discrimination, bigotry and prejudice will be replaced by an all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood ... poverty, homelessness, and hunger will not be tolerated because the standards of human decency will not allow it. ... Love and trust will triumph over fear and hatred." [8] In that day, God's promises to the Israelites will be fulfilled in our country -- "I will free you," "I will deliver you," "I will redeem you," and "I will bring you to the Promised Land."

Footnotes:

[1] Exodus 6:2, 6, 8

[2] "Etz Chayim Torah and Commentary." The Rabbinic Assembly and the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, Jewish Publication Society, copyright 2001, page 352.

[3] "'Mental and Spiritual Slavery,' Sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church,"

<https://swap.stanford.edu/20141218225611/http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/primarydocuments/Vol6/May1954MentalandSpiritualSlavery.pdf> - page 168

[4] [http://mlk-](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/where_do_we_go_from_here_delivered_at_the_1)

[kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/where do we go from here delivered at the 1](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/where_do_we_go_from_here_delivered_at_the_1)
[1th annual sclc convention](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/where_do_we_go_from_here_delivered_at_the_1)

[5] <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihavedream.htm>

[6] <http://www.usm.edu/crdp/html/cd/impact.htm>

[7] <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkivebeentothemountaintop.htm>

[8] <http://www.thekingcenter.org/king-philosophy#sub4>