

PARASHAS EMOR

Give Me Liberty

A famous pre-Revolutionary American once said, “Give me liberty or give me death!” Not all would agree that life without liberty is not worth living, yet we all acknowledge that liberty is a priceless gift. But what is liberation and why is it so precious? Is simply casting off all restrictions a virtue? Should a mother aspire to be liberated from caring for her infant child?

Furthermore, our Sages tell that “the only free person is one who studies the Torah.” But how is Torah study liberating? If anything, its many prohibitions and restrictions would seem to be quite restrictive.

Let us look into the very first verse of this week’s Torah portion for the answer. “And Hashem said to Moses, ‘Say it to the Kohanim, the sons of Aaron, and you shall say to them, ‘You shall not contaminate yourselves . . .’” Say it to the Kohanim . . . and you shall say to them . . . There are no superfluous words in the Torah. What then is the point of this apparent redundancy?

The commentators find a profound implication in this verse. Hashem was actually sending two different and distinct messages to the Kohanim through Moses. The principal message was the prohibition against contamination by corpses and all the other precautionary guidelines that follow thereafter. There was always the possibility, however, that the Kohanim would find the prohibitions restrictive, that they would chafe at the burden imposed upon them.

Therefore, Hashem told Moses to preface his remarks with another message: “Say it to the Kohanim . . . the sons of Aaron!” Remind them of who they are. Remind them that they are not ordinary people. They are the sons of Aaron, the exalted princes of the Jewish people, the privileged members of Hashem’s priestly caste. Ordinary modes of behavior and lifestyle would be inappropriate for such people. Their special status requires a higher, more purified way of life. Thus, the prohibitions are not oppressive restrictions but marks of distinction.

In this light, we gain new insight into the meaning of liberty. It is the freedom to achieve the maximum personal growth without hindrance or outside interference. The mother caring for her infant child enjoys liberty when she is allowed to fulfill her maternal role completely, not when she is released from it. Liberty allows us to live up to our standards, our values and ideals, to seek personal fulfillment.

How does a person reach fulfillment by the transcendent standards that apply to a human being, a creature formed *betzelem Elokim*, in “the Image of the Lord”? Our Sages tells us that it is only through Torah. Without Torah, a person is drawn into the vortex of his passions and desires. He is swept away on the carnal currents and drifts ever further from the fulfillment of his exalted potential. Only through years of painstakingly following the divine guidelines of the Torah can a person approach perfection. This is liberty of the highest order.

In our own lives, in a society that glorifies liberty and libertarianism, we sometimes find ourselves restricted by the commandments of the Torah, and reflexively, we may feel a twitch of resentment. But if we reflect on the overall benefits of our way of life, we will surely understand that we are the ones who enjoy true liberty, we are the ones whose entire lives are directed toward bring us to ever higher levels of spirituality. Torah truly enriches us and gives us the priceless gift of liberty.