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Reel
61

Box
19

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1201

The Limits of Freedom, 1981.

The Limits of Freedom
Daniel Jeremy Silver
April 19, 1981

Of all of the major celebrations and holidays of our people Pesach is in many ways the happiest, the most joyful. It's springtime. There's a sense of promise all about us. It's the time when, if we're lucky, our children and our grandchildren come back from the diaspora, the mobile society, and join us around the seder table. It's a time when in this society where generally families literally grab a bite together where we sit down together and actually spend time together and where the seder, particularly the haggadah, get us talking about serious subjects. I had a friend the other day who came up to me and said, you know, I think seder is the only night when my family never gossips. Pesach is a joyous time and it's a colorful time. The table looks good, the flowers, the seder plate. There's a sense of drama to what we do, the opening of the door for Elijah, the bustle of the youngsters looking for the afakomen, that empty extra place for Elijah, the four questions, the four sons. It's tuneful if we're lucky enough to be able to sing and it's tasty if we're lucky enough to have a wife who's a good cook. But there's another reason why this holiday is a joyous time and that is its theme, its message. Its message is the promise of freedom and I think deep down most of us feel that freedom is something which you can't get enough of. Freedom is one of those golden words which bespeaks all of the hopes and the aspirations of everyone of us. The theme of this service, this theme of the haggadah last night, is that Passover is the time when our ancestors went from bondage to freedom. Our fathers were slaves in Egypt and the Lord our God brought them out with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. And this theme of freedom is an existential one. We are to act as if we ourselves are among the redeemed, and so the message of freedom is not only one that is historical. Passover is not only a remembrance of a great moment in our history, but it's one which is immediate. It speaks to us of the needs of mankind to be free from tyranny and oppression, to have a degree of liberty and independence. Certainly, that is the message which is appropriate to our world where, unfortunately, the

heavy hand of tyranny and oppression and of government is creeping more and more over the face of the earth, dominating the lives of individuals. But if you were careful in your reading last night, and I'm sure you were, you recognized that the freedom which is spoken of the seder, the freedom which we spoke of this morning, is not simply freedom from tyranny. It's a freedom, a broad definition, to which each of us can relate, of which of us has needs. There's that little section in the haggadah which reminds not so much of the historical beginnings when Israel was a slave and then achieved freedom, but of the time when Israel was idolatrous. Our fathers were idolatrous and the Lord drew us to Him. There is the freedom from superstition, superstitions which paralyze the spirit. There is freedom from ignorance, ignorance which shackles us and makes us unable to cope with and to deal effectively with the problems of our day. There is freedom from dependence, emotional and spiritual dependence upon the approval of others, the protection of others. There is freedom from addiction to our passions and to our appetites. There is freedom from illiteracy, illiteracy which makes it impossible for people to handle their lives and to live within the complexities of modern society. There is a freedom from loneliness. There is a freedom from manipulation and coercion of those who seemingly have some authority over us. Freedom has a broad circumference. It is a many-sided thing. It is a hope for which we all, in many ways, devoutly hope.

But what I'd like to suggest to you this morning is that for all of the hopes which we invest in freedom, freedom is an instrumental goal, virtue, and not an ultimate goal or virtue. I have a feeling deep down that this generation, particularly in the west, particularly in the free west, has made such a virtue of freedom that we have failed to understand the very essence of the ways in which people become free. This is the era of deregulation, and for many deregulation means it's not simply the removal of onerous and unnecessary regulations imposed upon us by various bureaucracies, but it means, as the libertarian party in the last election tried to say, it means the removal of all of those regulations which govern human life. It's the lack of understanding when freedom is made into this ultimate and

absolute that we have these regulations because of a social compact, because without them the rich prey on the poor, the powerful prey on the wicked, and the unscrupulous prey on all of us. We live in a society where many take it as a matter of conviction that all rules are onerous, that all institutions impose themselves upon them. We live among porcupine people whose quills are always out, who will not bow their heads to the conventions and the requirements of community and social living. I'll do my own thing, I'll go my own way, nobody will tell me what to do. There's the assumption that somehow all authority is evil, is manipulative and is coercive. My fear, of course, is that these porcupine people will ultimately undermine the very freedoms which we enjoy in this free society, largely free society, because not willing to work with they move apart from, not being part of they are strays, not being willing to share in the national purpose they follow only their own purposes, and ultimately a society without a center, a society without common conviction and common purposes cannot long survive. That's the lesson of our Torah. Freedom is the beginning, Freedom is the absolute necessary beginning. Torah passes over in less than a sentence the four hundred years Israel spent as slaves in Egypt. They were unproductive, uncreative years. The people could only endure. They had no time to think. They had no opportunity to create. Nothing emerged out of those four hundred years in our history. They were the only period in our history which are absolutely meaningless. We managed to live, and that was a great accomplishment, but that is all. Civilization requires freedom. Civilization requires the ability to be one's own master, to think one's own thoughts, but it also requires that we cooperate with and share among.

One of the interesting etymologies of the word freedom is a Sanskrit one, freda, which means originally, I am told, a person, husband, it is the state of being able to be part of the family. A slave has no family. A slave is owned. A slave is directed. When one is one own's person one can be a member of the community. Freedom for, freedom for. When the Jews left the Israelites left Egypt, the exodus, that first step, was an important step. It was the statement that there is now

possibility, but what happens as the Torah tells it to us about our fathers, those first days. They were mutinous. They were cantankerous. They were rebellious. They were uncooperative. They were uncommunicative. The Bible describes them as a stiff-necked lot, an elev rab, a rabble who murmured continuously against Moses who ultimately within a day or two were complaining because their rations weren't full enough, take us back to the flesh pots of Egypt. Freedom is only the beginning and anarchy, that ultimate vision of total freedom, is the very opposite of the civilization's true freedoms of which we speak. I could not drive easily and with some degree of speed through this city if there were not traffic signs and traffic lights and occasionally policemen to enforce the laws. Civilization requires discipline. Growth, individuality, competence, achievement, these, too require discipline. It's only because you and I trained our minds in schools, memorized the tables that we memorized, learned the rules and the languages and the skills which have allowed us to operate in the adult world that we are free to follow the professions, to do the things which we are desirous of doing. The ignorant man, the illiterate man, is a prisoner of the will of others and of his own limitations. And what's true of our mind is true of our body. It's only as we discipline ourselves, learn the skills a sport requires, develop our body to its utmost, that we are free to do that sport, to use that skill as it should be used.

It was not until the children of Israel were brought to Sinai and accepted a covenant that coherence, community, and true possibility emerged, that they were for the first time able to begin to use the great gift of freedom which God had given to them. Freedom, paradoxically, requires discipline. It requires law. It requires regulation in order to emerge. And what we read of historically when we read the Torah, the cantankerousness, the rebelliousness, the lack of common purpose which the slaves showed when they first achieved their freedom. Many of us have seen in recent years in the lives of some of the families we know, families which were determined to raise their children without rules and regulations

so that they could be free spirits, blithe spirits, but in point of fact many of these children have never developed the ability to focus their energies in any one direction. They don't know who they are any more than a child raised in a home with standards against which he can begin to measure himself and then ultimately achieve his freedom. And many of these children have grown up to be incapable of living within the ordinary norms of a free society.

Freedom has its limits, and to achieve true freedom there must be a commitment to rules and to discipline. Freedom is a great virtue. Freedom talk permeates our society. I believe, obviously, in freedom and I am opposed to all forms of arbitrary coercion, but as a rabbi I must tell you that our tradition says simply that a bad law is better than no law. There's a principle in the Talmud which reads, the laws of the state are obligatory, that unless the state forces you to harm another human being or to publicly blaspheme God, bow your head, obey the law, for without law a city is a jungle. Now, there are laws and there are better laws and obviously the Torah represents the law which is God's law, that which cannot be bettered. Society, our tradition tells us, requires law and so do we. Each of us knows that if we look back on our own growth and development. It was not the teacher who said to us, I don't really have standards, I don't care how much you learn, do a minimal job, that's enough, who inspired us and helped us to grow but the teacher who said, this is what I demand, these are the requirements of this course, you're going to meet them because you can meet them. We grew, and because we mastered that discipline we were then free to use it forever after.

We need standards. We need Torah. God says, proclaim freedom unto the land, but the freedom which we are to proclaim unto the land is not anarchy, each man following and doing that which is right in his own eyes, but it's community and God's own law, Torah. In the book of Leviticus we're told God says, for Israel are servants to Me. The rabbis added, they are not to be servants to others. Tyranny is to be opposed. Political freedom is to be desired, but we are always to be conscious

of the value of law, that law must be judged by a higher law, God's law, but law itself has a value and that we attain freedom only as we are servants to Torah, to those disciplines. This is a rule which our society does not like to listen to, but it's traditional, it's Jewish, it's a Jewish approach, the Jewish way.

And so on this Passover I remind you that Passover does not exist as a holiday unto itself. One of the interesting old customs of our people was to have what was called sefira, every day between Passover and Shavuot, between Passover and the feast of weeks which is now our Confirmation day, there was a moment in the synagogue where the day was counted out. This is the first day of the counting of the omah, this is the second day. There was a sense of partnership, of combination between Passover and Shavuot. Passover was a ~~moment~~ retaining the time of our physical, our political, our independence, we were released from bondage; and Shavuot which celebrates the giving of the law to Moses on Mount Sinai, the acceptance of the covenant by the people. These two ideas are paired, twinned, in our Jewish tradition. Freedom and law, freedom and duty, freedom and obligation, and in our thinking freedom can never be treated as an absolute, it's instrumental. It's the means by which we ultimately come to the ability to fulfill ourselves, but to do so we require law.

In the mystical tradition of our people, in the Zohar, the great book of the mystical tradition, Passover is defined as the time when Israel was redeemed from the demonic powers, and a slave people produces nothing, they're under the burden of the darkness. Once we're free of these demonic powers we're free to perceive the light of Torah, the light of Sinai, the light which is the light through which possibility comes. We're free to see that if we want to grow we've got first to discipline ourselves, morally, professionally, intellectually, physically, to all those rules which make growth possible, and that only through those disciplines are we ever ultimately free.

I can't produce music. I can't produce music because I have never mastered the discipline of the keyboard. If I had mastered that discipline I would

be a free man, but I am a slave, I'm in bondage to a limitation. All of us have similar limitations and every limitation from which we suffer is a limitation which is imposed upon us because we didn't accept certain disciplines, certain rules, certain requirements. We tried to do it our own way, just bulling ahead. That's not the way. If the message of freedom is to have any meaning this Passover message is that freedom comes through discipline, freedom comes from study, from training, through community. We need community in order to be free. We need law in order to be free. We need the message of Shavuot in order fully to appreciate the message of the Passover.



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