

Yom Kippur 2011/5772 – From Oppression to Freedom

Ha Lachma Anya – the maggid, the telling of the Passover story begins every spring at our Seder tables. Ha lachma anya – This is the bread of affliction...this year we are slaves, next year we will be free!

And then this powerful idea echoed through the countries of the Middle East in the Arab Spring. It all started December 18, 2010. It began in Tunisia, then caught fire in Egypt, Libya, Syria, Bahrain, even Saudi Arabia, with protests in many other countries as well. And now we wait to see if the fires will burn with light and warmth for new life and hope, or whether the fires will burn out of control and whether Islamic fundamentalists will fan the flames.

Meavdut li'cherut, from slavery to freedom is the story of our Passover, and each Shabbat and our three major festivals, Passover, Shavuot, Sukkot are for us zecher litziyat mitzrayim, moments that recall the Exodus from Egypt.

Yom Kippur is Shabbat Shabbaton, the Sabbath of Sabbaths, the time of reckoning before God for us as individuals, and for the entire people, a time for a careful review of what we have done, and not done, how we have spoken and how we have not spoken up, as we wait in anticipation of return to God, and as we hope for the courage to remake the broken parts of our lives, especially our relationships with others that are broken.

Shabbat Shabbaton, the Sabbath of Sabbaths, is also then the essential holy time that recalls the Exodus from Egypt and by bringing together atonement, forgiveness, review of our actions and words, Yom Kippur makes the statement that freedom is not the end goal of itself. The goal is to answer the question: Freedom for what purpose?

Freedom for what purpose? -- Jews, Christians, Muslims are all faiths of Abraham and so all regard the Bible as a source of wisdom and inspiration. And we might wonder, given the fact that slavery is a practice in the Bible, whether true freedom is really a shared value. There is enough evidence, though, to demonstrate freedom as an underlying and organizing value. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, chief Rabbi of Britain, "The Bible was, and probably always will be, a radical political document, testifying to the right of prophets to criticize kings, the inalienable dignity of the human person regardless of wealth and status, and most importantly for the history of freedom: a clear sense of the moral limits of power."(Feiler, 30) Early Christian writer, Clement of Alexandria wrote in the 2nd century, "I would ask you, does it not seem to you monstrous that human beings who are God's own handiwork should be subjected to another master?"(Feiler, 31) Dr. Mahmoud Sabit, explains the Muslim view, "The word 'freedom' that we're now hearing on the streets of Cairo, Tripoli, and Damascus doesn't have a precise equivalent in Arabic. And I would have to say that freedom as a concept isn't central to the Qur'an. What does have precedence-and what many Muslims mean when they cry 'freedom' -is liberty, justice, and not being a slave."(Feiler, 35)

For us, today, the message is much the same as it comes to us in the words of the Haftarah that we just heard, from the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah witnessed the people who would fast during the year, just as we do on Yom Kippur, and believe that the ritual fast alone was

sufficient to cause reconciliation with God. The fast was, and is, meant to challenge us to create a world of justice and freedom, but the prophet did not see the people pursuing these values in his time. He saw the oppression of workers, conflict among the people. Isaiah teaches that God wants fasting to, “unlock the shackles of wickedness, untie the cords of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free...to share our bread with the hungry and take care of those in need, to provide clothing to those without it and to be especially mindful of those in our own families.”

We will test the success of the Arab Spring by the words of Isaiah. The uprisings in Syria, Bahrain, and Yemen certainly have not achieved the ideal order envisioned by the prophet. In Syria there are reports of some 3,600 deaths in the uprising, and 30,000 people detained. In Bahrain authorities opened fire on thousands of street protesters. In Yemen, a three decade dictatorship stubbornly holds on as bitter conflict rages. If we look to the countries that have made changes in leadership, we see some initial signs of hope. When there was an attack on the Israeli embassy in Cairo, both Egyptian lay and interim-government leaders were united in their denunciation of the attack and in arresting the perpetrators. The interim military government also agreed to have observers in its upcoming elections. In Libya, the Transitional National Council as of this past Monday selected a cabinet and set a schedule for elections, elections in which they will step aside to allow new leaders to come forward.

And yet, terrorists crossed the border from Egypt, wore Egyptian uniforms, and killed eight Israelis and wounded at least 26 civilians. And there is still smuggling of arms into Gaza from Egypt. And there are still 50,000 missiles in Hezbollah controlled Lebanon, missiles that can now reach anywhere in Israel.

We may be closer to freedom in some countries in the Middle East but the region is still in turmoil and there is still oppression and there are still threats both against Israel and against our allied troops who are operating in Iraq and Afghanistan. Our troops have been on the front lines of the fight for freedom and whatever our feelings may be on these ongoing conflicts and US participation, we can all agree that we are proud of our troops, grateful for the sacrifices they make, and that freedom is not something that we cannot, must not, take for granted. As of the end of 2010, there were some 148,000 US troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. And since the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom 6,230 service men and women have been killed in action. *Our* Exodus from Egypt was not bloodless. There were casualties on the Egyptian side – at the crossing of the sea the Torah speaks of God hurling horse and rider into the depths, and we suffered loss in battle as we marched toward the Holy Land and, according to the Bible, in wars to secure and defend ourselves in the Holy Land.

The Arab Spring has turned now to fall. There is change in the air as the color of the leaves will begin to change but there is much more change needed before a total transformation in the Middle East for brutal dictatorships to become functioning and lasting democracies. Egypt, Tunisia, and others would be wise to look to Israel as *the* example of a functioning democracy in the region, and an economy that thrives on innovation and the latest trends in technology and science. Israel, of course, has experienced its own grass-roots protests that are ongoing now, the tent cities of Tel Aviv, with people seeking better housing conditions. These protests, as they seek social justice, are signs of a healthy democracy in which protest is a right and sharing grievances is a right, where people can engage in these activities without worrying about security forces using live ammunition against them as it

happened in neighboring Arab countries. The types of demands the tent protesters in Israel are making, again, whether we agree with their arguments and methods or not, are in line with the vision of Isaiah from today's Haftarah – that a just society evokes the Presence of God, that what we do here, in synagogue, today and every other time we gather for prayers, life-cycle and other ritual events and programs here is about building a community with an awareness of the richness of our tradition's wisdom about the universe as well as an active awareness of the imperfections in the world that require our attention and tikkun, repair, as we say, tikkun olam, repairing the world. Freedom for what purpose? Freedom for justice, for healing, for the evolution of societies to higher levels of functioning.

As a community, I hope that we can send our prayers and voices today to a couple of individuals who represent many, many more who are not free and who we wish for their liberty. Our prayers are with Alan Gross and his family. Alan has been held and incarcerated in Cuba since 2009. Alan and his family are from my hometown of Potomac, Maryland. He had been on a mission for USAID and was supplying satellite and phone equipment to Cuba's Jewish community. He is in poor health and his family has experienced poor health and financial problems during his incarceration. Our prayers are also with Gilad Schalit, 25 year old Israeli soldier who was captured in 2006 and has been held in inhumane conditions in Gaza since then. The Talmud teaches us that pidyon shvuyim, freeing captives, is a mitzvah rabbah a great mitzvah and the great Maimonides, who lived in Egypt in the 12th century, leveraged his power and influence on many occasions to free captives and collected funds to free captives as well. We pray that the last blast of the shofar tonight will be the sound of the beginning of their redemption and freedom from captivity.

May this High Holiday season open the doors of freedom to our souls that are bound by the wrongs we committed in the past year so that we may begin anew in this New Year, that we may have the opportunity to remake ourselves and grow. May our prayers this season be the beginning of an active and ongoing effort to both talk about and create the just world that Isaiah envisioned in his prophecy: that all those who are oppressed may go free. May the days of freedom come soon, in our own day.

Tzom Kal, an easy fast, and G'mar Ketivah ve'chatimah tovah, may we all be written and sealed into the Book of Life. Amen.