

# House of Sages

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FREEDOM & JUDAISM

31ST MARCH, 2024

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## COME & LEARN

Human freedom is *Imitatio Dei*, man's engagement  
in the divine work of creation.

*David Goldman, "The Jewish Idea of Freedom"*



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## ON FREEDOM

USE THE SPACE BELOW TO DEFINE THE WORD “FREEDOM”

### SOURCE 1 – ISAIAH BERLIN, “TWO CONCEPTS OF LIBERTY”

*Isaiah Berlin was a 20th century British philosopher and political theorist. His essay Two Concepts of Liberty (1958) is one of his most famous and influential works in which he describes his idea of negative freedom and positive freedom. While this is simply a short excerpt, he argues that negative freedom is freedom from other humans not putting constraints on you (i.e. not being physically enslaved) while positive freedom is freedom to pursue goals/the life you want.*

“For it is this, the “positive” conception of liberty, not freedom from, but freedom to—to lead one prescribed form of life—which the adherents of the “negative” notion represent as being, at times, no better than a specious disguise for brutal tyranny.”

#### FRAMING QUESTIONS:

- How do you understand negative freedom? How do you understand positive freedom? How are they different?

SOURCES ABOUT FREEDOM

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## FREEDOM FROM...

### SOURCE 1 – EXODUS 2:23

The Israelites were groaning under the bondage and cried out; and their cry for help from the bondage rose up to God.

וַיֹּאנְחוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִן־הָעֲבָדָה  
וַיִּזְעְקוּ וַתַּעַל שׁוֹעַתָם אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים  
מִן־הָעֲבָדָה:

### SOURCE 2 – LEVITICUS 26:13

I the Lord am your God who brought you out from the land of the Egyptians to be their slaves no more, who broke the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect.

אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹקֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִי  
אֶתְכֶם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִהֵיטֵד לָהֶם  
עֲבָדִים וְאֲשַׁבַּר מִטַּת עַלְכֶם וְאוֹלַךְ  
אֶתְכֶם קוֹמְמִיּוֹת:

### SOURCE 3 – EXODUS 22:20-21

You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.  
You shall not ill-treat any widow or orphan.

(כ) וְגַר לֹא־תוֹנֶה וְלֹא תִלְחָצֶנּוּ כִּי־  
גֵרִים הֵייתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם:  
(כא) כָּל־אִלְמָנָה וַיְתוֹם לֹא תַעֲנוּן:

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- Within these sources how is Freedom framed?
- In these contexts what does it mean to be free? Where does freedom come from and what comes with it?

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## FREEDOM TO...

### SOURCE 1 – LEVITICUS 25:55

For it is to Me that the Israelites are servants: they are My servants, whom I freed from the land of Egypt—I Lord, your God.

כִּי־לִי בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל עֲבָדִים עֲבָדַי הֵם  
אֲשֶׁר־הוֹצֵאתִי אוֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ  
מִצְרַיִם אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

### SOURCE 2 – LEVITICUS 25:42

For they are My slaves, whom I freed from the land of Egypt; they may not give themselves over into servitude.

כִּי־עֲבָדַי הֵם אֲשֶׁר־הוֹצֵאתִי אֹתָם  
מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לֹא יִמְכְּרוּ מִמְכָּרָת  
עֲבָד:

### SOURCE 3 – R. SHIMSHON RAPHAEL HIRSCH ON LEVITICUS 25:42

“For they are My slaves”—A slave of God cannot be a slave to others; slavery to God is liberating.

### SOURCE 4 – PIRKEI AVOT 6:2

And it says, “And the tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, graven upon the tablets” (Exodus 32:16). Read not haruth [‘graven’] but heruth [‘freedom’]. For there is no free man but one that occupies himself with the study of the Torah.

וְאוֹמֵר (שְׁמוֹת לֵב) וְהִלַּחַת מַעֲשֵׂה  
אֱלֹהִים הֵמָּה וְהַמְּכָתֵב מְכָתֵב  
אֱלֹהִים הוּא חֲרוּת עַל הַלַּחַת, אֶל  
תִּקְרָא חֲרוּת אֶלָּא חֲרוּת, שְׂאִין לָךְ  
בֶּן חוֹרִין אֶלָּא מִי שְׁעוֹסֵק בְּתַלְמוּד  
תּוֹרָה.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS ON NEXT PAGE

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## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- How do these sources describe the experience of being freed?
- When placed in contrast to the previous sources what do these sources seem to say?
- Does this challenge preconceived notions of freedom?

## SOURCE 5 – *IMITATIO DEI* JEWISH VIRTUAL LIBRARY

*Imitatio Dei* (imitation of God), a theological concept meaning man's obligation to imitate God in His actions.

## SOURCE 6 – DAVID GOLDMAN, “THE JEWISH IDEA OF FREEDOM”

The Jewish concept of freedom is the first such concept in human history and still the most radical. It asserts that the Covenant between God and man makes it possible for mortal man to rise to partnership with the Maker of Heaven in the continuing work of creation. It is different from the notions of freedom promulgated in the Christian West with its inheritance of Greek thought; indeed, the philosophical indifferentism of the secular West is the consequence of the failure of Greek philosophy and its successors.

Freedom is God’s freedom, the freedom to create. Human freedom is *Imitatio Dei*, man’s engagement in the divine work of creation.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

How does Goldman’s perspective relate to the biblical sources above?  
Is it an extension of them or a separate belief?

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## SOURCE 7 – LEVITICUS 25:10

and you shall hallow the fiftieth year. You shall proclaim release (liberty) throughout the land for all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: each of you shall return to your holding and each of you shall return to your family.

כִּילִי בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל עֲבָדִים עֲבָדֵי הֵם  
אֲשֶׁר־הוֹצֵאתִי אוֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ  
מִצְרַיִם אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹקֵיכֶם:

## SOURCE 8 – MISHNEH TORAH, SABBATICAL YEAR AND THE JUBILEE, RAMBAM

It is a positive commandment to nullify a loan in the Sabbatical year, as [Deuteronomy 15:2] states: "All of those who bear debt must release their hold." A person who demands payment of a debt after the Sabbatical year passed violates a negative commandment, as it is stated [Deuteronomy 15:2]: "One shall not demand [payment] from his friend and his brother."

מִצְוַת עֲשֵׂה לְהַשְׁמִיט הַמְלוּהָ  
בְּשִׁבְעִית שְׁנָאָמַר (דְּבָרִים טו ב)  
"שְׁמוּט כָּל בַּעַל מַשֶּׁה יָדוּ".  
וְהַתּוֹבֵעַ חוֹב שֶׁעֲבָרָה עָלָיו  
שִׁבְעִית עֵבֵר עַל לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה  
שְׁנָאָמַר (דְּבָרִים טו ב) "לֹא יִגַּשׁ  
אֶת רֵעֵהוּ וְאֶת אָחִיו":

## SOURCE 9 – LIBERTY BELL, 1751



“Proclaim Liberty throughout all the Land Unto all the inhabitants thereof—Leviticus 25:10”



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS ON NEXT PAGE

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## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- What does debt forgiveness have to do with freedom?
- How do you think shmita and yovel are connected to freedom?  
How is it connected to ‘freedom to’?
- Why do you think “Proclaim Liberty throughout all the Land  
Unto all the inhabitants thereof—Leviticus 25:10” was chosen as  
the quote on the Liberty Bell in 1751?

## SOURCE 10 – RABBI JONATHAN SACKS, “FREEDOM’S DEFENSE” IN COVENANT AND CONVERSATION

The Israelites were on the brink of their release. Moses, their leader, gathered them together and prepared to address them. What would he speak about at this fateful juncture, the birth of a people? He could have spoken about many things. He might have talked about liberty, the breaking of their chains, and the end of slavery. He might have talked about the destination to which they were about to travel, the “land flowing with milk and honey”. Or he might have chosen a more sombre theme: the journey that lay ahead, the dangers they would face: what Nelson Mandela called “the long walk to freedom”. Any one of these would have been the speech of a great leader sensing an historic moment in the destiny of Israel.

Moses did none of these things. Instead he spoke about children, and the distant future, and the duty to pass on memory to generations yet unborn. Three times in this week’s sedra he turns to the theme:

And when your children ask you, ‘What do you mean by this rite?’ you shall say... (Ex. 12:26-27)

SOURCE CONTINUES ON NEXT PAGE

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## SOURCE 7 – RABBI JONATHAN SACKS, “FREEDOM’S DEFENSE” IN COVENANT AND CONVERSATION

And you shall explain to your child on that day, ‘It is because of what the Lord did for me when I went free from Egypt’ (Ex. 13:8)

And when, in time to come, your child asks you, saying, ‘What does this mean?’ you shall answer... (Ex. 13:14)

About to gain their freedom, the Israelites were told that they had to become a nation of educators. That is what made Moses not just a great leader, but a unique one. What the Torah is teaching is that freedom is won, not on the battlefield, nor in the political arena, nor in the courts, national or international, but in the human imagination and will. To defend a country you need an army. But to defend a free society you need schools. You need families and an educational system in which ideals are passed on from one generation to the next, and never lost, or despaired of, or obscured. So Jews became the people whose passion was education, whose citadels were schools and whose heroes were teachers.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- What perspective does Rabbi Sacks bring to the discussion? How does this relate to previous sources? How does it differ?

### USE THE SPACE BELOW TO DEFINE THE WORD “FREEDOM”

Without looking back at your initial definition, please define the word again.

Have these sources affected your understanding of this word?

FREEDOM TO...