

There are no shortcuts to freedom! Being freed and becoming free are two completely different things, as our ancestors learn during their trek from Egypt to the Promised Land, and as we are still slowly, painfully learning today.

Why is freedom so difficult? No one wants to remain enslaved, but in order to be truly free we also have to free ourselves from the shackles of fear and hopelessness. We have to shake off inertia and be willing to trust in our own judgement, to take risks, to make mistakes, to bear the consequences, and to learn from the experience to do better next time. In other words, freedom is for adults – and that is why it is incumbent upon us to teach it to our children, as our Torah commands us to do.

Freedom requires patience and perseverance – willingness to defer gratification and bear hardship while pursuing far-off goals, sometimes stumbling in the process but then recovering and moving on with new determination. It is hardly surprising that our poor ancestors fail time and time again! They're hungry, thirsty, tired of manna, and impatient with their leaders. But how can it be otherwise? Their lives as slaves were unpleasant, but predictable. Here in the wilderness they are on their own, and all too often fear distorts their judgement and causes them to make disastrously poor decisions.

The parallels between Parashah Ki Tissa, which we read in the middle of March, and this week's parashah are striking. In both readings, the people are overcome by fear. In Ki Tissa, they are restless because Moses has been on the Mountain for so long that they are certain he will never return. They pressure Aaron to make them "gods" to lead them in place of Moses, and we have the debacle of the Golden Calf. And in Shelach lecha, 10 of the 12 scouts who are sent to explore the land return with negative reports: Everything is so huge, we felt like grasshoppers and we know the inhabitants, who are giants, agree. It's hopeless. In both cases, the people are paralyzed by fear, once again they complain about Moses and Aaron and clamor to return to the perceived safety and certainty of Egypt. Only Joshua and Caleb remain undeterred, but the people rebel and are subdued only when HaShem intervenes.

Both times HaShem is furious to the point of wanting to annihilate the people and make Moses the father of a new nation. And both times Moses pleads for the people, engaging in some extraordinary chutzpah in the process: What will the Egyptians say? Moses, the humblest of all men, actually shaming HaShem into upholding the eternal covenant made with Abraham! HaShem relents the first time, and honors Moses' request to "see (His) glory" with the words we know so well from the Torah service during the Chagim: *Adonai, Adonai, el rachum v'chanun ...*

The second time Moses is even more chutzpadik: All the nations will say You lacked the ability to bring Your people into the Promised Land, so You slaughtered them in the desert. And he ends by quoting HaShem's words from Ki Tissa: *Adonai, erech apayim ...* acknowledging that not all will be pardoned, while appealing to HaShem's mercy. And once more HaShem relents, with words we know from Yom Kippur: *salachti kidvarecha* – I have forgiven them in accordance with your word – words we quote when we ourselves ask for pardon.

Yes, freedom also requires a certain amount of chutzpah, which means we have to be willing to take the initiative to build freedom step by step, and to defend it. We have to replace abject fear with healthy caution, hopelessness with confidence, impatience with dedication, and inertia with willingness to work hard, to trust and to persevere. And it all depends on developing the ability to assume responsibility for our actions. We are fallible humans, and we can, and will make mistakes. But when we do, we must be adult enough to own them, to make amends, and to try to do better next time. Each time we grow, and we learn valuable lessons for the future.

We have the assurance of our eternal covenant, but *aleinu* – it's upon us to uphold our part, working with HaShem to the best of our own, fallible human abilities to persevere in building and upholding freedom, not only for us, but for all our fellow humans.

Shabbat shalom.