

Unfortunately, it is human nature to want to take shortcuts, but we all know that what looks practical at the outset can reveal a multitude of hidden roadblocks. Anyone who has ever learned a skill, from riding a bicycle or driving a car to dancing, painting, or playing a musical instrument, quickly realizes that proficiency does not just happen; it takes constant practice, even for the prodigiously talented. Autonomy is also a skill, and because it begins with a state of mind, it requires deep understanding as well as constant practice. For people who have known generations of slavery, freedom is one of the most difficult and fraught concepts to master. Slave mentality learned and practiced over generations becomes so entrenched that independence is simply unfathomable. Learning how to live as a free person, which entails not only rights, but also responsibilities, is akin to installing a completely new operating system on a computer. But unlike machines, we can't simply wipe our hard drives and start over. Learned habits must be slowly and systematically overwritten with new habits, and that takes considerable time and effort. Lack of freedom is stultifying. On the one hand, it is comforting because the consequences that accompany initiative and independent thinking are eliminated; life, however difficult, is regulated and predictable. But on the other, it leads to dangerous complacency and feelings of entitlement; people who have adapted to lack of freedom come to expect that their basic needs will be met. At the beginning of our parashah, we learn that HaShem does not allow the Israelites to take the shorter route through the land of the Philistines. Instead, they will be led through the desert in a trek that ends up taking 40 years. HaShem's simple explanation in the first verse, "...lest the people reconsider when they see war and return to Egypt" can be understood as a multilayered discourse on human behavior. War can mean many things, including fighting what German speakers call the *innerer Schweinehund* – that little voice of laziness we might call our "inner couch potato." Some of us make new year's resolutions to optimize certain aspects of our lives, but as the work becomes more difficult and boredom sets in, many hopeful plans fall by the wayside. I see this every year in my gym. By springtime many starry-eyed first-timers have disappeared along with their fancy new attire and good intentions. Learning how to negotiate life as free people means acquiring a whole new set of profoundly life-altering habits, and there are no shortcuts. Releasing animals into the wild after even the most humane captivity is seldom successful. Keiko, the orca of the movie *Free Willy* is just one of many tragic examples. Ill-equipped to fend for himself and used to human companionship, he never managed to join a wild pod of whales and died of pneumonia two years after his release. Science and sad experience have taught us that the more complex the animal, the less likely it can survive on its own after life in captivity. No wonder HaShem chooses the longer path for the Israelites, and no wonder they end up spending decades lurching from blunder to blunder, duly sobered by the experience, but still not quite understanding how to manage on their own. They had left Egypt and slavery, but the mentality of their former life held them in bondage to the end, calling them back every time they faced new challenges. Our sages rightly said that although it took only one day for the Israelites to get out of Egypt, it took 40 years to get Egypt out of the Israelites. There are no shortcuts to freedom. The generation that left Egypt was so steeped in slave mentality that even 40 years were not long enough. It was up to their descendants to continue the process of attaining freedom. The Talmud offers a lovely illustration (Eruvin 53b): Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya asks a young boy, "Which path shall we walk to reach the city?" The boy answers, "This way is short and long." He takes the short path, and then concludes, "When I approached the city I found that gardens and orchards surrounded it, and I did not know the trails leading through them to the city. I returned and asked the boy, 'Didn't you tell me that this way is short?' He answered, 'And didn't I tell you that it is also long?' ... Happy are you, o Israel, for you are all exceedingly wise, from your old to your young." This wisdom is the product of millennia of systematically building new, healthy habits based on good concepts. For those still grappling with the concept of freedom, new challenges often lead to disastrous nostalgia for the old, familiar life, all its hardships notwithstanding. Being slaves to Pharaoh seemed considerably easier than being *avdei Adonai*, servants of HaShem. Slaves do not need covenants; they are entirely dependent on the whims of their owners. People with the freedom to enter into covenants must be able to accept and carry out the responsibilities that make up their part of the contract. It starts with understanding that forming new habits is a long and arduous process. If honing a simple motoric skill like riding a bicycle requires constant practice until it becomes ingrained, learning freedom, which begins with developing a new mentality, requires even more time spent in mindful, diligent practice. As we are seeing today, this complex, slippery idea of freedom is unfortunately still not completely understood. Freedom with all its rights and privileges also entails responsibility to ourselves, our fellow humans, and our world. HaShem's covenant with us teaches us how.

Shabbat shalom!