

The Israelites have stepped out of slavery and into the daunting world of freedom. But as history teaches us time and again, independence is not instinctive; it has to be learned, one painful step at a time. We are born knowing how to attach, depend, and seek protection. These are essential patterns for our survival, but we must shed them as we mature into adulthood; and that, as we all know, is difficult. From riding a bicycle or driving a car to dancing, painting, or playing a musical instrument, proficiency does not just happen; it takes constant practice, even for the prodigiously talented. Learning how to live as a free person is akin to installing a 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 time and effort. Slavery is infantilizing. On the one hand, life, however oppressive, is regulated and predictable, and as long as one follows the rules there are no risks. But on the other, it breeds 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" is a profound 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 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 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 each time, 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, calling them back every time they faced new challenges. When there is no freedom of choice, people stop imagining that they could choose. And when all needs are being met, whether through Egyptian taskmasters or HaShem's miracles, people stop imagining that they could provide for themselves. In short, the Israelites are neither arrogant nor spoiled; they are simply suffering from the infantilizing effects of slavery. 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. In Talmud Tractate Eruvin 53b Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya illustrates: "I asked a young boy, 'Which path shall we walk to reach the city?' He said to me, 'This path is short and long, and that is long and short.' I took the short and long path, but 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 life-affirming concepts. For those who are unused to freedom, new challenges often produce a disastrous nostalgia for the old, familiar life, all its hardships notwithstanding. Being slaves to Pharaoh seemed easier than being *avdei Adonai*, servants of HaShem. Freedom is frightening and difficult, because it requires accountability, a concept that centuries of slavery had overwritten. Now, HaShem must show the people how to reclaim the independence that their ancestors once embodied. The patriarchs and matriarchs did not depend on divine intervention; they were supremely courageous, and willing to act even when the path was unclear. The wilderness is the Israelites' school. Manna teaches Abraham's trust; Shabbat teaches Abraham and Sarah's hospitality; Amalek teaches Jakob's struggles; the encampments teach Rachel and Leah's conflict resolution; and the entire journey teaches Rebekka's decisiveness. Our complicated and imperfect ancestors were at the forefront of a revolutionary covenantal adulthood that the Exodus generation must now regain. If learning to ride a bicycle requires constant practice until it becomes ingrained, learning freedom, which begins with acquiring a whole new mentality, requires far more mindful and diligent practice. As we are seeing today, the complex idea of freedom is still misunderstood and misused. Freedom is a practice we must continually cultivate. The wilderness has given us the tools. Liberation was just the first step. The work of balancing the rights and obligations that freedom entails began immediately afterward, and is now ours to carry forward.

Shabbat shalom!