

“Seeking Human Liberty: Inquire Within”

On a cloudless night in west Texas, the sky is full of stars. The view is truly awesome. Some stars burn so brightly while others barely twinkle. But, a Danish proverb explains, “Even a small star shines in the darkness.” In Houston, city lights obscure all the stars in the sky even on a cloudless night. In the city, the brightest lights are the ones we created. Imagine that, God created light and so did we. Creating light is a remarkable human achievement. In the glow of our lights, we can appear large and grand to ourselves; but, it comes at a cost. If we can’t see the stars above us we might conclude that we’re the creator of the lights that matter most. We aren’t.

In a Hebrew Proverb, we learn, “The light of God is the soul of humankind” (Proverbs 20:27). The first light is God’s light. The light that burns in us is God’s, too. And, yet, when we stand before God, the ultimate Creator of light, we aren’t small. Before God, we are all stars that shine in the darkness.

Our hope is to live a fully illuminated life. It’s a life where we can see all God’s gifts to us, and people in our lives might see them in us, too. Abraham Joshua Heschel calls it living life with “outer liberty” and “inner liberty.” In his book, “The Sabbath” (1951, pp. 89-90), he explains that humankind first experienced outer liberty and inner liberty at Mount Sinai. He called it a “moment of eternity.” As such, that moment is ours, too.

Heschel identified the source of “outer liberty” in the first of the Ten Commandments. God proclaimed, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the Land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” God liberated us. In a free society, Jews thrive; it’s the only place where God’s Torah can take root. To this day, Jews have thrived in democratic societies that provide room to be Jewish without boundaries. In history, when our fate often rested in the hands of tyrants or fascist regimes, our liberty was short-lived. From an Egyptian Pharaoh, “who knew not Joseph,” to Hitler, our history lists more oppressors than liberators.

Heschel, himself, fled Poland for London, six weeks before the Nazis invaded. To leave everything behind was more than physical liberation. He left behind worldly possessions that were a meaningful part of his heritage. Despite it all, Heschel preserved his faith. That eternal moment at Sinai had not been extinguished in him.

But, Heschel’s main concern is inner liberty. The last Commandment says, “You shall not covet anything that is your neighbors.” Heschel’s hope is that we should be able to live among other people and remain free. The wisdom of such inner liberty is found in the context in which Heschel sets it. He finds inner liberty best reflected in the Sabbath, because it’s the division between the realm of space and the realm of time.

In the realm of space, we focus on the world of creation. It's the six days of the week when we use technology and tools to transform the world around us. In the realm of time, we focus on the creation of the world. Nothing better represents the realm of time than the Sabbath. Heschel raise the question, what did God create to honor six days of creation? It wasn't a mountain. It wasn't an altar. The answer is in the Book of Genesis, where we read, "And God blessed the Seventh day and made it holy." After six days of creation, God created a holy time called the Sabbath. And, God rested.

The Sabbath is holy; it is "the mystery and the majesty of the divine," writes Heschel. "The Sabbath is entirely independent of the month and unrelated to [the cycle of] the moon. Its date is not determined by any event in nature...but by the act of creation, [itself]. Thus the essence of the Sabbath is completely detached from the world of space" (p. 10).

And, Yom Kippur is called the Sabbath of Sabbaths. The observances and rituals that we perform on this Sabbath of Sabbaths do not atone for us; but, rather the "essence" of the day, itself, atones for our sins. It's a moment in eternity that comes down to us from Sinai, and liberates us. It allows us to live among other people and be free.

Since Rosh Hashanah, ten days ago, we were expected to seek atonement from each other before we would seek it from God, on Yom Kippur. We faced people whom we've wronged or who wronged us. It hasn't been easy. I've heard the stories of people who have made a concerted effort. I have traded emails with some who sought guidance on how to do it; I have listened to the tear-filled conversations about torn relationships and painful reconciliations. And I have concluded that, even after all these years of trying, we can still be so hard on each other. We still fail to catch each other doing good; we still struggle to let go and let live; we still wrestle about what's fair instead of wrestling to understand what's true.

By comparison, the power of this day is found in God's presence when we come to plead for forgiveness and God replies, "סלחתי כי דברך," (salachti ki d'varecha) I have pardoned according to your plea. You see, God is "merciful and gracious, endlessly patient, loving and true, showing mercy to the thousands, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin, and granting pardon." God is more loving and compassionate to us than we are to each other. The Psalmist wrote, "In distress I called upon God; God answered me by setting me free. With God at my side, I am not afraid; what can mere mortals do to me?" (Psalm 118). "God is our refuge" (Psalm 91:2).

In a poem by Kaylin Haught, called "God Says Yes to Me," she writes about God's unconditional love.

I asked God if it was okay to be
melodramatic
and she said yes
I asked her if it was okay
to be short
and she said it sure is

I asked her if I could wear nail
 polish
 or not wear nail polish
 and she said honey
 she calls me that sometimes
 she said you can do just exactly
 what you want to
 Thanks God I said
 And is it okay if I don't
 Paragraph my letters
 Sweetcakes God said
 who knows where she picked
 that up
 what I'm telling you is
 Yes Yes Yes

from *The Palm of your Hand*, 1995
 Tilbury House Publishers

The poet validates our understanding that inner liberty begins with God's light in each of us. Such gifts glow within us. The results are innumerable, and include happiness and peace, optimism and hope.

Inner liberty requires much of us. When we covet, envy or crave what others have, we diminish the light that God created uniquely in us. When we fear that what others have is better than what we have or more than they deserve, our fear can become petty jealousy. When the way forward feels unreachable and without alternate routes, petty jealousy can become utter despair, hopeless misery, and self-destruction. The matter is growing more critical every day for young and old, alike.

It isn't just that suicide is a rising statistic in our country, but it is. It isn't just that access to health resources are slim to none, but they are. It's also that belief in inner liberty --- the ability to live among other people and remain free --- has gone unnoticed as a means of increasing personal joy and accessing sources of unconditional love.

When a woman sought help for her troubled marriage, she explained her husband's failure to continue to mature. Over time, he lost jobs, wasted time instead of learning new skills, and relied on her to finance their needs. Marriage counseling and other forms of support provided a bridge to the place she arrived in now. And, inner liberty would be at the core of her help. She learned that she was commanded, "Do not covet." She had failed to see what she had, and became focused on what she believed would never be hers. When she looked deep within herself, she found skills and brightness, ambition and self-worth. She found pathways she didn't know still existed for her. She began to feel liberated.

This was her eternal moment. She needed to be unbound in order to live with people and remain free. Then she began to see, again, what God intended her to be. Ultimately, after taking very important and careful steps, the marriage did end. In Judaism, divorce is not a sin. We don't advocate for it, but it can be a "correction." In this case, it opened new ways for each partner to become what each needed to be, individually. Her current happiness became something she never thought she would ever know again.

Teenagers who are coming of age struggle with inner liberty, too; they suffer more than we know. Their transformation to young adulthood isn't easy. We try to offer them advice, but they complain that we were born "before the common era." Little do they know that their challenges are fundamentally the same as they were when we were teenagers. Their hopes are fundamentally the same, too. They want to be liked by others for who they are, today. They want to feel valued for personal preferences they're beginning to choose. They want to feel likeable, let alone loveable, to someone who "gets them."

Even at their age, inner liberty comes from the last commandment, "Do not covet anything that is your neighbors." It's a profoundly simple truth that works for them, because what they have and who they are is fundamentally good. They're at an age when they don't have to commit to anything just yet. Nothing is truly urgent; not even the last text message. Everything can be about time unfolding with room to grow, ways to learn and places to explore. Today's teenagers will probably live to be 90-100, without much trouble. Their whole life is literally ahead of them. It makes three years of middle and four years of high school just a blip on their life's path. But, at a vulnerable time in their development without intervention, suffering for six years could set them on a difficult path for a long time.

The most difficult struggle for inner liberty is borne by teenagers who are LGBT. I mention it tonight, not to be provocative; bear with me. I mention it because it breaks my heart. Just days ago, the news reported that a young teenager took his own life after his private text messages to another teenager were posted on-line. He wasn't the first one to feel betrayed by a homophobic community. He wasn't the first one to feel that self-destruction was the only way out. LGBT teenagers are often told, "It gets better," but it doesn't always get better and not as soon as it should.

Inner liberty for any teenager who feels like the odd-kid-out begins in an unconditionally loving environment. In what becomes their eternal moment, they can discover that God's light burns in them, too. It takes time. We can't rush teenagers to know everything about themselves at age 13 or 18; it's a flawed expectation. No one peaks that young; as if everything they are now will be everything they will ever be. Even a young person whose bedroom shelves are filled with trophies knows, intuitively, that the future will be filled with more shelves and no guarantee they will be filled with trophies, too. We know it's true, because some of us aren't sure if we've peaked, yet. And, what if we have peaked? Is it all downhill from here? Or, is it a long struggle to hold onto the high place we think we've reached?

People rise and fall many times. If we've learned well, then we can face our children and grandchildren honestly. We can tell them that we love them for who they are. We can tell

them that life is hard. We can tell them that God blessed them with gifts that need unpacking over years of life, not just days or weeks. We can tell them that God loves them unconditionally and so do we. Our preferences for them are not demands; rather, they are suggestions to try, because when we were in their place --- before the common era --- they worked for us. This conversation is vital to them. As much as their young world is challenging, family needs to be their rock, their home base. If they don't get it at home from family, they will get it from somewhere else, and we might never know where that is.

Tomorrow morning, we'll read in Torah that God said, "I make this covenant with those who are standing here this day, and with those who are not standing here this day." We are the souls that weren't there that day, but we are the souls that stand here now in God's eternal moment with us. As reminders to ourselves, we set God's light before us. The Ner Tamid, the Eternal Light, is the pillar of fire that guided the Israelites on their journey. Now, the fire's light guides us on our journey. We can still create our own lights and stand in their glow; but they will always be dim and faded compared to the eternal light that burns within us.

This is our Sabbath of Sabbaths, our holiest day. Let inner liberty be its gift to us. Let inner liberty be our peace in the New Year. And, let it reflect the shining light that God created in you and me. The prophet Isaiah said, "O House of Jacob, come, let us walk by the light of God." Amen.