



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

BAMIDBAR > Shavuot

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

June 7-8, 2011

Shavuot

Sinai Revolution



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Writing earlier this year about the prospects for the “Arab Spring” – as the recent uprisings in the Middle East have been dubbed – Professor Fouad Ajami declared:

“The gift of liberty is like that of a horse, handsome, strong and high-spirited. In some it arouses a wish to ride; in many others, on the contrary, it increases the urge to walk. For decades, Arabs walked and cowered in fear. Now they seem eager to take freedom’s ride. Wisely, they are paying no heed to those who wish to speak to them of liberty’s risks.”

But some of us are not so sure, for liberty’s risks are great.

As we watch cities in Yemen fall to Islamist warriors who claimed to have “liberated” it from “the agents of the Americans,” we fear that radicals and militants could exploit the breakdown of authority to trample the nascent democratic movement to take control. As we watch Egypt open its borders to Hamas in Gaza, we wonder what that country’s liberty will mean for the security of Israel.

We are all mindful that the Arab lands, where people are throwing off the yoke of oppression, have little experience with liberty or democracy. And we all have studied enough history to know that revolutions – which by definition are violent upheavals – seldom end with American-style outcomes.

So what will be in the Middle East – liberty or death?

On this holiday of Shavuot – when we commemorate our own revolution, the Sinai Revolution – we are wise to ponder the meaning of liberty, its rights and responsibilities, and its elusive paths.

So let us retrace our steps to the earliest roots of freedom and the first establishment of a government that honors the individual rights of all its citizens. Let us consider what happened 3323 years ago, when the human race received its mandate to build a civilized world, which would be free for one reason only – it would rest on a foundation of such core values as peace, justice, equality and social responsibility – values which were not part of any civilization until then.

THE SINAI REVOLUTION AND THE PATH TO FREEDOM

1. Liberty: A Spirited Horse

Writing earlier this year about the prospects for the “Arab Spring” – as the recent uprisings in the Middle East have been dubbed – Professor Fouad Ajami declared:

“The gift of liberty is like that of a horse, handsome, strong and high-spirited. In some it arouses a wish to ride; in many others, on the contrary, it increases the urge to walk. For decades, Arabs walked and cowered in fear. Now they seem eager to take freedom’s ride. Wisely, they are paying no heed to those who wish to speak to them of liberty’s risks.”¹

But some of us are not so sure, for liberty’s risks are great.

This horse analogy reminds me of a tale about cowboys in the Old West. They were most impressed by the Indians’ ability to put their ears to the ground and hear a galloping horse miles away. On this occasion, two cowboys come upon an Indian lying on his stomach with his head pressed into the dust.

¹ *New York Times*, Feb. 26, 2011, Op-Ed article by Fouad Ajami, professor at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies and author of *The Foreigner’s Gift: The Americans, the Arabs and the Iraqis in Iraq*. He was quoting, in part, Massimo d’Azeglio, an Italian statesman of the mid-19th century.

-One of the cowboys stops and says to the other, "You see that Indian? I bet he can hear things for miles in any direction."

-Just then the Indian lifts up his head from the ground. "Covered wagon," he whispers, "about two miles down the road. Man, woman, child, household effects in wagon. Pulled by big horse, brown."

-"Incredible!" says the cowboy to his friend. "This Indian knows how far away they are, who is in the wagon, what is in the wagon, and even the color of the horse. Amazing!"

-The Indian raises his head again and moans, "Ran over me about a half hour ago."

So that's our worry. Will this spirited horse named "Arab Spring" gallop to the finish line, or veer off the track and run over a lot innocent people, trampling them as he goes.

As we watch cities in Yemen fall to Islamist warriors who claimed to have "liberated" it from "the agents of the Americans," we fear [it could be the latter and] that radicals and militants could exploit the breakdown of authority to trample the nascent democratic movement.² As we watch Egypt open its borders to Hamas in Gaza, we wonder what that country's liberty will mean for the security of Israel.

2. Revolutionary Record

We are all mindful that the Arab lands, where people are throwing off the yoke of oppression, have little experience with liberty or democracy. And we all have studied enough history to know that revolutions – which by definition are violent upheavals – seldom end with American-style outcomes.

² *New York Times*, May 30, 2011, "Islamists Seize a Yemeni City, Stoking Fears"

Even the seminal event of the Enlightenment – the French Revolution of 1789 – first degenerated into a “Reign of Terror,” then was followed the dictatorship of Napoleon, who proceeded to engage in a massive war that engulfed most of Europe.

The Russian Revolution of 1917, as well as the Chinese Revolution in 1949, led to the creation of anti-democratic, totalitarian regimes that ultimately caused the deaths of tens of millions of citizens and massive suffering, economic hardship and political oppression.

And need we be reminded of the outcome of the Iranian Revolution of 1979? We have all watched enough repression of the recent protests in Teheran, to know that “let freedom ring” is hardly the motto of the Iranian republic.

And that is only a partial list of failed revolutions which did not bring about either democracy or freedom.³

So what will be in the Middle East – liberty or death?

3. Sinai Revolution

On this holiday of Shavout – when we commemorate our own revolution, the Sinai Revolution – we are wise to ponder the meaning of liberty, its rights and responsibilities, and its elusive paths.

So let us retrace our steps to the earliest roots of freedom and the first establishment of a government that honors the individual rights of all its citizens. Let us consider what happened 3323 years ago, when the human race received its mandate to build a civilized world, which would be free for one reason only – it would rest on a foundation of such core values as peace, justice, equality and social responsibility – values which were not part of any civilization until then.

³See “You Say You Want a Revolution: Is the Arab Spring Good or Bad for the World?” by Rabbi Ken Spiro.

That was the Sinai Revolution.

[But, in fact, *two* revolutions took place at Sinai.]

Note to Rabbi: If your time is limited, you can speak only about the first revolution in #4-5 and then skip to #12.

4. The First Revolution

First and foremost, at Sinai, God made it clear that freedom comes from Him. The First Commandment of the Ten Commandments reads: “I am your God who delivered you from Egypt, from the house of bondage.”⁴ (And the Jewish sages explain that Egypt – in Hebrew *Mitzrayim*, meaning “confinement” – refers to all forms of slavery, anything that inhibits human freedom.)

The opening of the Torah, the Book of Genesis, states that the human being was created in the Divine Image. By virtue of this fact, each of us has unalienable rights, as the American Founding Fathers made clear.

For the American Founding Fathers built the new democracy on Torah values given at Sinai. That is the truth, plain and simple.⁵ They did not just speak of rights of citizens (like the Enlightened French) or rights of workers (like the Communist Russians) – they spoke of inalienable rights granted equally to all men by their Creator:

“We hold these truths to be self evident that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among them are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

Once that axiom was in place – that we are all children of the One God and created in his Divine Image – there was a solid foundation upon which all law and order could stand, for there was a recognition that it is a Divine Authority that has endowed *us all* with fundamental freedoms and with a moral system by which to live.

⁴ *Exodus 20:2.*

⁵ Documented in *On Two Wings* by Michael Novak, and *The Biblical Heritage of American Democracy* by Abraham I. Katsh.

5. The Bedrock

The sheer simplicity and brilliance of the opening of the Ten Commandments is undeniable.

And take away that opening ... take away the bedrock of the First Commandment – that God is the source of freedom – and all else inevitably falls. With no Creator imbuing us with absolute freedom and defining for us a blueprint for life, all morality becomes arbitrary and relative.

A colleague tells of his Uncle Irving arriving in Berlin in 1921 and being astonished at the warmth and politeness of the German people. When he was lost, a mere passerby (who could not have missed his Jewish garb) personally escorted him to his destination. Ten years later, these same polite Germans declared Jews sub-human, and a mere twenty years later they escorted them to the gas chambers. That is what arbitrary and relative morality looks like in practice.

The Nazis defied basic morality – including the Sixth Commandment “you shall not murder” – because they defied the First Commandment, refusing to accept God as the source of life and freedom.

So that was the [first] great revolution at Sinai – the bestowal of freedom by God on all human beings. This is what we celebrate today, and we can only pray that those in the midst of their own revolution right now, get the message, as the American Founding Fathers did.

6. The Second Revolution

But there was a second revolution that took place at Sinai, and it was even greater than the first.

Before Sinai there was an impenetrable rift between heaven and earth, between matter and spirit. An invisible wall separated between the transcendental and the material. A schism divided above and below.

“That which was above could not descend below, and that which was below could not ascend above.”⁶

But at Sinai all that changed. Heaven was unplugged. And earth was unleashed. For the first time the human race was given the opportunity to bridge heaven and earth – to fuse spirit and matter. It gave us the power to spiritualize the material, and to make our lives sacred, not just ethical.

This was no small event.

7. How High Can We Reach?

Philosophers, thinkers, theologians and lay people have all always asked the eternal question: How high can a human being reach? Are we humans just sophisticated beasts with limited potential? Can we ever reach heaven or bring heaven down to earth? Can we integrate spirituality into our material lives? Can we fuse the finite and the infinite?

The fact is that matter and spirit are in a perpetual struggle. Narcissism, greed, corruption are staples of life. When we look at ourselves, each of us knows that we are often selfish, and sadly, sometimes even to the detriment of others. When selfishness becomes extreme, it can destroy lives of those around us. On the other hand, we also have a divine spirit inside of us. We have the power to live noble lives, filled with dignity and selflessness.

So we have an inevitable clash. Matter by its very nature is selfish. Spirit is selfless. No wonder that people have always speculated whether these two worlds can meet, let alone merge.

⁶ Midrash Tanchuma, Vaeira 15; Midrash Rabbah, Shemot 12:4.

In general, we find two approaches evolving in history: self-denial and self-immersion. The former holds that, in order to experience the spirit, we must separate ourselves from the physical tentacles of life by living ascetic lives, meditating and becoming absorbed in a higher reality. In other words, we must deny the material life – to reach the infinite, we must deny the finite.

The other extreme is self-immersion. This approach assumes that we can never reach heaven. The best we can do then is live ethically, build healthy homes and workplaces, and find spirit in limited ways within our limited lives. Because we are essentially mortal creatures, with inherent selfishness or even evil tendencies, we cannot expect anything more than the best an earthy creature can achieve. The infinite can never be integrated into our own finite lives.

8. The Third Option

Sinai opened the door to a third option. Sinai created an interface that bridged heaven and earth, giving us the power to integrate matter and spirit, utterly and completely, without compromising one or the other. The finite can become one with the infinite; matter can become one with spirit; the sacred can become one with the secular. Because God is neither spirit nor matter, He gave us the power to completely integrate the two – the power to build a Sanctuary, a home for the Divine, where God could dwell among us.

This third option, however, does not come easily. As limiting as the first two options may be, they seem simpler, while the Sinai option requires a continual straddling of the thin line between matter and spirit.

That is why Sinai came after much hard work, and why it has taken thousands of years since to integrate its power into global affairs.

9. Where Do We Stand Today?

So where do we stand today?

The first revolution of Sinai, the message of freedom, has finally infiltrated most of the nations of the world. Today, Freedom House ranks only 25 of the world's 192 countries as "unfree."⁷ Unfortunately, quite a few of these are in the Middle East, which is why we are rooting for this part of the world to get it right this time. And the stakes are high.

But the second revolution, integration of spirit and matter, has yet to fully take hold – that is on a personal level. In technology, science, medicine and many other fields, the last century has witnessed to unprecedented breakthroughs in the bridge between matter and energy, form and function – between the invisible and the tangible, the micro- forces of quantum particles and the macro-forces of the universe, between DNA and the body.

However, on the personal front – in our psychological lives, our relationships, business and human interactions – we have yet to find peace between our souls and our bodies, between our spiritual/transcendental needs and our physical need to survive. Most of our lives today are severely fragmented, with a multitude of forces tugging us in different directions. This fragmentation – or compartmentalization – is unprecedented, precisely due to all the options, comforts and advancements of our times. So many people today suffer from internal anxiety and insecurity. Even children are unhappy. We have clearly not reached integration between our hearts and our minds, and between our souls and our bodies.

⁷ "High Hopes, Hard Facts" by Fareed Zakaria, Newsweek, Jan. 31, 2005.

10. The Tipping Point

When we do, the rest will follow. As writer Malcolm Gladwell points out in *The Tipping Point*, little changes can have big effects – when small numbers of people start behaving differently, that behavior can ripple outward until a critical mass or “tipping point” is reached, changing the world.

Although most people learned this from Gladwell’s best-selling book, in truth, Maimonides wrote of this phenomenon long ago. It is a fundamental Torah principle, given to us at Sinai: “A person must see himself and the world as equally balanced on two ends of the scale – by doing one good deed, he tips the scale and brings himself and the entire world redemption and salvation.”⁸

So if there were to be a certain minimum level of commitment among a minimum number of us Jews, a tipping point could be reached, and the others who are struggling with this issue would get a leg up. Maybe even the spirited horse, called “Arab Spring,” would reach the finish line.

So despite that fact that the fight appears to be bigger than us all, one small act by even one of us has the power to tip the entire scale. Consider it like the “butterfly effect:” the flutter of wings on one end of the world can create a typhoon on the other.

Indeed, each of us is a “small universe” and the universe is a “large organism.”⁹ When we integrate our own personal lives, realizing unity in our individual world in microcosm, this fusion spills over and impacts the macrocosm – introducing unity in the world at large. Our personal harmony helps resolve the struggle between heaven and earth in all its manifestations, including the battle that we so often have witnessed between religion and secularism.

⁸ Rambam, Laws of Teshuvah 3:4.

⁹ Midrash Tanchuma Pekudei 3.

11. The Ultimate Struggle

For, if you are a firm believer, how do you deal with the secular world? Do you wage a holy war against the secular, or do you embrace it?

Therein lies the essential root of the religious wars waged throughout history. Recognizing pagan self-worship and secular heresy as an enemy, first the Christians and now the Muslims, have waged aggressive battles with the forces they have perceived as threatening.

In turn, the secular forces have fought back, ferociously at times, at what they perceive as oppressive and corrupt forces of religious authority. The result has been extreme secularism, which can often be as fundamentalist and fanatical as its religious counterparts at the other end of the spectrum.

The third option – the path of integrating spirit and matter, religion and modernity – has remained elusive.

Peace will not come until we embrace the Sinai mandate in its entirety. In addition to Sinai's message of freedom, we are called on today to integrate into our lives the Sinai system and blueprint for life, namely the universal laws of civilization as they rang out from Sinai. The operative word being "integrate" – that is, create harmony between the material world and its spiritual purpose.

It's one thing to be free. It's quite another to use the gift of freedom to live by the Divine standards expected of us. Only then are we truly free – and only then does our freedom realize its potential.

Yes, freedom is the bedrock of our lives, but freedom must be coupled with a practical system of law and order that can be implemented to build the institutions of a free state. This system begins with education – educating people not only that they are free and have rights, dignity and indispensable value because they bear the image of the Maker of Heaven and Earth, but that they also have responsibilities to live up to their calling.

Freedom is thus the foundation upon which must be built a structure that includes personal responsibility, ethical behavior and virtuous living. One without the other cannot survive.

12. The Foundation and the Structure

The first of the Ten Commandments dictates the foundation; the other nine define the structure.

Our challenge is to translate the Sinai principles into a practical plan that tackles chaos, plague and poverty, and allows for each nation to define the universal laws according to their own traditions and cultures.

The stage is set. The next move is ours. All that is needed is an unwavering commitment to the Sinai laws of civilization and a demand – of ourselves and of the entire world – to live up to its calling.

Each of us can do much in this regard by recommitting today, on the holiday of Shavuot, to the Ten Commandments that we read today. Our sages tell us that when we read this chapter it is considered as if we are standing at Sinai and receiving the Torah!

We have the power today to recreate Sinai and reignite its profound impact on the world by reconnecting to its message:

- By paying attention to its immortal words – the same words that rang out from one end of the world to the other 3323 years ago.
- By speaking about these ideas and discussing them with our children and families.
- By reawakening and reliving the Sinai experience in our homes and communities, and rededicating our lives to its enduring call.

Our renewed commitment to Sinai will then ripple through the universe.

It took more than three thousand years for Sinai's clarion of freedom to penetrate the world's nations. Let's make sure that we embrace Sinai's blueprint for life in far less time. Amen.