

## I Would if I Could

This past October, the worldwide Jewish community let out a sigh of relief. One of our own was reunited with his family, and regardless of our individual political leanings, many Jews around the world felt collectively complete again. The release and return of Gilad Shalit was a combination of moments of celebration, moments of outrage at the deal, and thoughtful discussions on what it means to return to your home after so much time away. Imagine what it must be like to go from terror to love, from solitude to a fury of media attention.

This conversation doesn't end with Shalit's return; it's a part of the dialogue on the release of captives all over the world. While Gilad Shalit's story might be the most recent event of captivity and release in our minds, this has been going on as far back as our Torah narrative. After all, we are reminded time and again that we are to observe *mitzvot* "because of what God did for us when we went forth from bondage in Egypt." We were once held in captivity as well, and our collective memory requires us to pause and take note of this fact.

*Parshat Vaera*, our Torah portion for this week, tells of Moshe and his uneasy rise to leader of the Israelite nation, including the bringing of the first seven of the ten plagues upon Egypt. God begins by reminding Moshe of the covenant that He had made with Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov, reminding Moshe that freedom, release from the Egyptian shackles, was forthcoming. In this reminder we learn of the five stages of redemption as set out by God. Chapter 6, verses 6-8 state: "Say, therefore, to the Israelite people: I am the Lord. I will free you from the labors of the Egyptians and deliver you from their bondage. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and through extraordinary chastisements. And I will take you to be My people, and I will be your God. And you shall know that I, the Lord, am your God who freed you from the labors of the Egyptians. I will bring you to the land which I swore to give to Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov and I will give it to you for possession, I the Lord." Within these verses, God speaks of the stages of redemption, which correspond to our 4 cups of wine (plus one) at our *Pesach Seder*. But what can we learn from this event having never been slaves ourselves?

1. The first stage according to our text is to be freed from physical enslavement. In the Torah, we're talking about enslavement from Egypt, but in the modern world this could be any enslavement. Whether it is our ties to our profession or overstretched obligations of any kind, we first need to recognize what is enslaving us and how we can set ourselves free.

2. The second stage is deliverance from the psychological mindset of being a slave. That is to say that even though we might be physically freed from what held us back, we still have emotional work to do. It is not easy to just move forward; rather, we must work to think of ourselves in a new light. Instead of identifying as persecuted, wronged or enslaved, we must change our mindset.

3. That leads to our third stage: redemption. It's not enough to remove the physical shackles and the psychological baggage we've carried, harboring preconceived notions about who we are. We still have to take the difficult step forward as our own human beings. Imagine a car that has been garaged for years without running. The first step in driving it again is opening the garage, and the second step is

fixing up the car so it's in good shape, but the vehicle doesn't really get new life until that first trip down the driveway.

4. Stage four requires us to engage with God spirituality. According to this text, we are free, redeemed individuals when we experience our world not only through our emotions and physical senses, but rather when we take time to find our own soul, our connection to God, something greater than us. In doing this we find ourselves in harmony with our inner thoughts and desires, and able to explore them further.

5. The fifth stage is finding a place to call our own. We live in a society where this stage is the most crucial. Having a place of your own, to come home to each night and to feel sheltered and protected, helps keep our lives whole and grounded.

Even though we may talk about the metaphor of captivity and slavery in our own lives, we know that as far back as the Torah and as recently as October, the reality is that on a physical level, these stages are still being experienced around the world. But we also know that our people stand together, seeing the gift of each individual life, and through that truth we can work toward freedom.

ללמוד **To Learn:** ללמד **To Teach:** לשמור **To Keep:** לעשות **To Do:** As the Torah begins to focus on the Israelites and their new freedom, it also places emphasis on making sure to mark time with reason and responsibility. So often we make excuses for not taking the time to do the things that keep us physically, emotionally and spiritually healthy. The 5 stages detailed above can be seen as a key to living a balanced life. Pick one activity that you've been meaning to do as a family and walk yourself through the stages of freedom to make it a reality.