

# Escape to Freedom

By HaRav Ariel Bar Tzadok

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Question: What should one do when one feels disconnected from anything spiritual?

Answer: Change locations to where one can learn to feel reconnected.

Our Sages have taught, “a change of place brings with it a change of destiny,” (mishaneh makom, mishaneh mazal). Such a change can be permanent, but it does not necessarily have to be. Sometimes one can just get away for however short a period and still recharge one’s spiritual batteries. Yet, without movement, something deep inside us sleeps and seldom awakens. There is no greater command that for the sleeper to awaken.



I do not need to elaborate on the amount of pressure and stress we each face daily. Each of us has our own horror stories to share. Yet, even though we tread through life, everyday facing this or that problem, wearing ourselves down little by little, we seldom take the necessary time to rebuild ourselves back up even if we do this equally little by little. Whatever gets worn down needs to be rebuilt back up. When we fail to do this, we eventually continue to wear down until not much is left of our original selves. At this point many sink into a sense of despair and acceptance that life is full of unpleasant events and nothing will ever change this or make it better.

One who reaches this state of despair needs to just drop everything and take whatever time is necessary to recharge. This state of mental despair leads one to a state of psychological paralysis. One feels that nothing can change and eventually comes to tolerate and condone whatever happens, no matter how bad things are. This mentality is the mentality of the powerless slave.

Long ago in ancient times the children of Israel served as slaves in Egypt. Israel was physically and politically set free by the Mighty Hand of G-d with miracles and wonders. Israel went forth out of Egypt as free men. When faced with the onslaught of the Egyptian army at the Reed Sea, Heaven again intervened and Israel was miraculously saved. Then as Israel marched towards Sinai to receive the Torah, they were attacked by the nation of Amalek. Yet, this time there was no miracle or wonder. This time the children of Israel were commanded to go forth and to fight. And fight they did. And win they did. Although they did not utterly destroy their enemy they did sufficiently remove them from being any more of an immediate threat. Amalek was not heard from again for a good long time.

At Sinai Israel received the Torah. The nation of Israel there experienced a tremendous and profound revelation. The connection between the people and HaShem their G-d was sealed by the acceptance of the commandments. While all this was accomplished still there resided something deep inside the collective Israelite soul that served as a seed to undo all that was done.

With the sin of the Golden Calf, the people made a grave error of judgment. Yet, the Torah commentaries explain that this error on their part was almost forced upon them. The nation was seduced and duped just as Eve and Adam were long ago in the Garden of Eden. Although Heavenly anger was swift to come against the nation; still, Heaven was appeased and judgment subsided. However, the damage was already done. Great changes were made in how the Torah was to be understood and practiced in order to accommodate the again fallen state of the collective Israelite consciousness. Yet, even with this lesser state of revelation (pshat as opposed to sod), Heaven was OK with this and the march towards the Promised Land would continue.

Later when the spies were sent out to investigate the Promised Land and then came back with a bad report, the proverbial “straw that broke the camels back” finally came down hard. The people were terrified of the report they received. Even after all the miracles they experienced, the fear in their hearts could not bring them to believe that the Promised Land was actually an attainable goal. Although they had earlier fought Amalek and won, the nation seemed to have forgotten their martial abilities. The demon seed of fear, thought gone, had instead blossomed in their hearts and revived within them the psyche of the slave. They were emotionally and psychologically paralyzed. Although they were free men in body, they had reverted again to become slaves in their minds. This grievous sin could not be overcome or forgiven. For once one embraces slavery as a state of mind not even the Power of Heaven can redeem one from one's own self-imposed prison.

The only recourse for that generation was death. Psychological slaves can only free themselves, no one, not even the Power of Heaven can free the individual mind all the while that the individual mind embraces weakness and emasculation. This sorrowful psychological state of paralysis and fear never left many a human mind. Numerous are those who are descendants of those who went forth from Egypt free from bondage and who nonetheless returned to the mindset of slavery, in essence returning their souls to Egypt, long after their bodies had been freed from there.

So, here we are many centuries since the historical Exodus and more and more individuals are returning to spiritual Egypt allowing their minds and their hearts to become imprisoned in the traps of modern stress and anxiety. Once the mind succumbs and believes there is no escape, then indeed such beliefs become a self-fulfilling prophecy. This is the proverbial 50<sup>th</sup> level of uncleanness (tumah) spoken of by our Sages that Israel would succumb to in the days prior to the coming of Mashiah.

So, how can the individual address this sorry state? What can one person do to become free? The road to freedom is a long one, and not necessarily an easy one, but nonetheless it is indeed an accessible one; freedom can be attained by all those willing to fight for it.

The good fight along the road to freedom is a psychological battle. It is a war between conflicting attitudes, between wanting to ignore and appease and the will to fight for what's right, no matter the cost. Some fights are easier than others. Sometimes all we have to do in order to strike a blow against psychological slavery is to just get up and move about. Sometimes one may need to move from one city to another, or from one country to another. Yet, such major moves are not always necessary. Sometimes it can suffice to just take a week off and to go recharge one's self in the isolation, quietness and solitude of nature.

Every path begins with a first step. Psychological emancipation is a long road and only G-d can guide the way. Eventually we can free our minds from the prisons we have entrapped them in. Yet, true freedom is no longer a free gift. We received this gift when G-d brought Israel out of Egypt. But since then all of us have returned to a psychological Egypt and have enslaved ourselves

over and over again. Enslaved as we are, we can still achieve emancipation. All we have to do is walk the path. And as I said, every path begins with a first step.

Getting out of town for a while and back into nature, to the great outdoors, is always a natural way of relaxation. It enables one to disconnected from all the distractions and noises of urban life and to reconnect with life the way G-d has meant for it to be lived. Getting back to nature is an integral message of Shabat observance, which we say, we observe in commemoration of the work of creation. When we reconnect with nature, HaTeva in Hebrew, we also reconnect with Elohim, the Creator, the One whose "rest" we commemorate on Shabat. Returning to the outdoors therefore enables one to take the first step towards a return to G-d. In essence, a return to the great outdoors enables one to experience the Shabat all the week long.

Living in an urban environment clouds the mind and disables one from seeing the Hand of the Living G-d operating in nature. When one is overcome by all the pressures and stresses that modern urban life imposes, one can easily get spiritually lost. In order for one to find oneself and to rediscover one's lost soul, one needs to adhere to the wise words of our Sages. Not for naught did they teach us that, "a change of place brings with it a change of destiny," even if such change is only temporary.

We can take the first step towards freedom, but the path does not begin where we are at now. We have to move. We have to relocate, however temporarily to the type of place that will enable us to rediscover our lost freedom. Only then can we ever experience again the true meaning of the Exodus from ancient Egypt. Shabat also commemorates this. Shabat thus commemorates both rest and freedom. Both of these can be embraced by a simple temporary return to the natural world of the great outdoors that G-d has made.

Becoming spiritual is not a hard accomplishment and it is a human necessity. When spirituality is missing it is deeply felt in the soul. Although many might not be aware of why it is that they are not truly happy in life, the real reason is always because a lost soul cannot know happiness. Lost souls find their way home in the way that is natural to them. Returning to G-d is the true restoration of freedom and only a free soul can truly be happy and truly be at home. Every path home begins with a first step. And as said long ago, in a place over the rainbow, "there's no place like home."