

## **Freedom within Suffering**

Right now, in this moment, your awareness is potentially free from the entire content of your personality. You need not be controlled by any of your feelings, cravings or thoughts. But to bring this potential into actuality, you must notice that this is so; you must notice that *you* are the noticer! There must be a willingness to see the truth, to see that you *are* awareness, that you are not your thoughts or feelings.

However, this can be difficult in moments when you are already trapped within your thoughts and feelings. When the egoic qualities have a hold on you, how do you awaken from them and “notice the noticer”?

You have probably heard of the “Ten Commandments”. According to the Torah, Moses led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt to the foot of Mount Sinai. He went up on the mountain and communed with God for forty days and nights, during which time he received two stone tablets upon which were written Ten Commandments. Throughout history, commentators have agreed that there were Ten Commandments written on the tablets. However, there has been much debate on how to number them. According to the Talmud, the first commandment reads, “I am *Hashem* your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage” (Ex 20:2). (*Hashem* means The Name, and refers to the unpronounceable four-letter name of God.) This is strange- what exactly is the commandment? A clue comes if we look at the whole verse. According to this verse, God is the Liberator who frees us from bondage. So, the commandment must have something to do with the connection between God and liberation.

The stories of the Torah are not merely literal narratives; they symbolize spiritual realities. Let’s look a little more deeply at this first commandment. The word for Egypt, *Mitzrayim*, actually means “narrows”- referring probably to the narrow shape of the country that evolved around the narrow Nile river. But metaphorically, *Mitzrayim* refers to the narrowness with which we tend to define ourselves. Our consciousness becomes “enslaved” to our inner world- our thoughts and feelings. This actually results in a *feeling* of narrowness, of being constricted, dissatisfied, of *resisting what is*. Believing that we *are* our thoughts and feelings, the various ego qualities can take hold and dominate us, without our even noticing what has happened. So to “notice the noticer” and awaken to yourself as the awareness behind your thoughts and feelings, you must first notice that you are suffering. Rather than simply having a feeling, take a moment to notice: “there is the feeling of anger” or “there is the feeling of fear” or whatever.

The *Midrash* (Ancient Rabbinic writings on the Torah stories) says that the Exodus from Egypt couldn’t happen until the Israelites cried out in their misery. The enslavement had

happened gradually, without any complaint. Then, after enough time had elapsed, they became aware of their own suffering; this was the beginning of redemption.

It is the same for us. We must first become aware that we are trapped, then liberation is possible. In fact, as soon as we become aware of ourselves, liberation begins automatically. This is because we are *seeing* our suffering, and to *see* it is to not *be* it. When we become aware of what is happening inside, we can begin to notice that our awareness is not trapped within our experience; rather, our experience happens inside our awareness. Our awareness is bigger- infinitely bigger- than any particular experience.

In the Exodus story, the Israelites must leave Egypt in haste, without time for their bread to rise. This reflects the immediacy of liberation: it is not a process with various steps. Rather, once we become aware of our suffering, we must take the leap of noticing that we are *not* our suffering. If we don't, we remain identified with our suffering; we remain victims. The task is to learn to see our experience as happening *within* our awareness, so that our awareness does not become trapped by the experience. This is also represented by the Israelites baking the bread before it has time to rise. The rising bread represents ego: just as the dough rises from the gasses of the yeast, so too our thoughts and feelings get "puffed up" with a sense of self if we are not aware. Baking the bread, *before it rises*, means to not allow this formation of ego. It means to take the radical step into freedom from your "self". This is also why the unleavened bread, or *matzah*, is called the "bread of poverty" in the Passover ceremony: wealth represents ego, while poverty represents egolessness.

In the broad sense, we can think of ourselves as consisting of two basic parts: first, there is our experience- including all of our perceptions, emotions and thoughts. Secondly, there is our *awareness of* our experience. Ordinarily people are not conscious of these two parts, and awareness is "trapped" inside their experience. Rather than noticing, "there is the experience of hunger" or "there is the impulse to say something" or "there is a thought arising", a person simply thinks "I am hungry", or blurts out some words, or starts thinking about something, without any consciousness of what's going on. For most of us, there is no awareness of being separate and free from our inner world. In this sense, most of us are constantly "enslaved in Egypt"- we are controlled by our thoughts, feelings and perceptions.

But the first of the Ten Commandments, (in Hebrew called the *Esrei Dibrot*, or "ten sayings") tells us- "I am Hashem your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage". There is a way out, and that "way" speaks to us as the voice of God in the story. Furthermore, it is stated in the past- "who *brought* you out". It has happened before, and it can happen again. The first "commandment", then, is really

to remember that *liberation is possible now*, and then to take that immediate leap into freedom. It is the commandment *to wake up now*.

But how do we take that leap? As we have seen, a first step is to notice what is happening in your thoughts and feelings. From here, you can begin to notice that you are the awareness who is noticing; you are not your thoughts and feelings. However, this is a place where people can often get stuck. When you put your awareness on what is going on inside you, your thoughts and feelings can be overwhelming, and it is easy to get trapped by them. To avoid this, it can be very helpful to remember the main *quality* of pure awareness, and practice that quality. In this way, your sense of self identifies with the quality of your awareness, rather than the qualities of your ego. Then you can begin to actually feel the quality of your awareness, which strengthens your ability to remain awake.

What is the main quality of pure awareness? It is the opposite of the main quality of ego, which is *resistance to what is*. The main quality of awareness, then, is *acceptance of what is*- even acceptance of the resistance you may be experiencing! This can be a bit of a paradox, which is why it can be tricky.

### Questions

1. List examples of when you felt the ego qualities of the four elements.
2. What is the first of the Ten Commandments? Why is it strange to call this a “commandment”?
3. What is Egypt in Hebrew? What does this word literally mean? What does it represent spiritually, according to this text?
4. What do Matzah and bread represent?
5. According to this, what is the first Commandment really saying?
6. What is the main quality of awareness? What is the paradox, or contradiction, at the end of this piece?