Free to Be the Jew in Me
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Lets start tonight with a question: What does freedom mean?

- Free to pray
- Free to speak
- Free from fear
- Free from want (hunger, shelter, security)

Roosevelt's four freedoms

It is without question that the US has been a unique experience for Jews in our history. From the founding of our nation – the US represented the first time that Jews did not have to be enfranchised into the protections of our nation and its laws, because we had never been disenfranchised.

Where Europe and the Middle East cut us out and excluded us based on our faith and culture – the US accepted us without specific mention. We were just .03 percent of the population in 1776 just 1350 people – barely worth a mention but the fact that we were not mentioned for good or for ill was historic in our experience.

In 1893 Rabbi Maurice Harris speaking n the impact of America on the American Jewish community wrote:

Jews are emancipated in America in the fullest sense; we are an integral part of the nation, sharing its duties and its rights, and at times indistinguishable from the Gentiles… The religious freedom for which we have fought 3,000 years is ours at last. But there are two sides to freedom--freedom to observe, freedom to neglect. In the Ghetto, it was easier to observe; in the larger world, it is easier to neglect.

That is the rub and the challenge of freedom for Jews in the united states – Hertlz wrote that in countries where we have been persecuted as strangers for centuries that persecution as much as the Torah and Talmud has keep Judaism and Jewish peoplehood alive. It is the old what doesn't kill us makes us stronger.

But beginning on July the 4th 1776 – American Jews for the first time in our history were able to live in a country were our freedom to worship, study, assemble, participate and excel was no longer in jeopardy. It began with Washington's famous letter to the Jews of Rhode Island thanking them for their important contributions in the war for independence. Washington quote the prophet Micah wrote:

> "May the children of the stock of Abraham who dwell in the land continue to merit and enjoy the goodwill of the other inhabitants.

> "While everyone shall sit safely under his own vine and fig-tree and there shall be none to make him afraid." (Micah 4:4)

It is indeed a blessing not to be afraid – freedom from fear – but you could also say that for the American Jewish community it has been our undoing as well.

As much as we have excelled and thrived as a people in America – we have done so in the American way – in spite of our Jewishness **not** because of it. It would not be appropriate for us to succeed in America because we are Jews, no more so than it would be for others to succeed because they are Christian, or because they are men, or because they are white. But our success highlights the two sides to freedom, the freedom to choose – means that we may choose not too.

Nowhere else in history have Jews been as eager and as successful in shedding their Jewishness, than in the United States. We have done it not as a life-saving act of conversion but as a willing selection in the cafeteria of American identity. The thoroughgoing assimilation of post-war America, the emergence of Jewishness as just another brand of white ethnicity that can be halved or quartered, attests most profoundly to Oscar Wilde's aphorism to be careful what you wish for, because you might get it.

It is not at all that I am trying to argue that freedom is bad for Judaism, or that America is somehow a curse rather than the great blessing it has been for our people. But what I am trying to make plain is that to be a Jew in America is harder by degree than being a Jew in any other place at any other time in our long history – precisely because we have the freedom to choose not to be.

And as Reform Jews I would add that we more than any other segment of the American Jewish community are the ones on the deciding line of that decision. We rightfully celebrate our individual autonomy as reform Jews. We celebrate the fact that we are not bound by old conventions or restrictions of Jewish law. If we want to have a cheeseburger, if we want to work on Shabbat, if we want to marry outside of our faith, we believe we can do so, in the words of Jewish Philosopher Eugene Borowitz, tradition has a vote but not a veto in our lives. And lets be honest for some tradition doesn't even have a voice, much less a vote in our decision, we are wholly free to do what we want, unbound in any way by torah or tradition, maybe Bubbie's guilt but that too is fading as we move further from that generation.

I am not trying tonight to make you regret your cheeseburgers – but I do think we need to appreciate the historical difference between the definition of freedom as it is commonly understood in the United States and how it has been historically applied throughout Jewish tradition. If American Freedom is the freedom to do when and what you want as long as it doesn't hurt others, Jewish freedom is the freedom that comes when certain choices, wants and desires are removed so as to create opportunities for more profound meaning.

In the old movie, "The Ten Commandments" with Charlton Heston, Moses descends Mount Sinai and sees the golden calf. He then holds the two tablets above his head and shouts to the Israelites, "There is no freedom outside the Law!"

For once, Hollywood got it right. It is a truly unfortunate situation that today, many people believe that freedom in their life means freedom from the Law. Lynn Harold Hough wrote, "The escape from the Ten Commandments through violating them has never kept its promise of giving a new freedom. The experience is like the attempt to escape from the law of gravity by defying it. The result is likely to be at least a bad fall… You cannot become free physically by defying the laws of nature. And you cannot become free morally by defying the laws of ethics."

We know that freedom in the US has its limits – we would not want people to be able to do whatever they want regardless of the consequences for us or maybe even for themselves. You can shout fire in a crowded theater if there is no fire. From the moment freedom was declared on the July 4th day our nation has been struggling to define its boundaries and limits to maximize its impact for all, the constitution, the bill or rights, all examples of American Torah, American Talmud of what you are free to do and not do within the law.

Freedom in Judaism is best illustrated by the true meaning of becoming a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. What does that moment truly mean in our society, not freedom from obligation or commitment but rather the attainment of a certain age and maturity where one can be obligated and committed to the Jewish community. In its intended sense a Bar Mitzvah is a son of the commandments obligated to the commandments of the torah just as a child is obligated to ones parents.

Freedom therefore in Judaism is a scolding, it is boundaries, a life lived within those boundaries is freed up from the natural human emotions and desires that can distract us from our greater purpose. The commandments are not limits on our free choice, rather they are guides and boundaries that enable us to make the right choices with our freedom to not squander our human potential or the blessing of our creation.

So what does this mean for us, progressive, reform Jews living in 21st century America – as far removed from the *shtelt* and the times of the bible as one could possibly be? What is freedom in American Judaism?

Its is the freedom to choose to be Jews and to live Jewishly – rather than having it forced upon us because of some external force that wishes to challenge our existence. We can chose Judaism of our own free will, because if ads meaning and purpose to our existence. Why chose to live Jewishly, when many around us have chosen otherwise, and embraced a new American multiculturalism? Why be Jewish? The best answer that I can give you, is the one that works for me personally, and it comes from my GPS in my car. My GPS in my car is a remarkable thing, but it is wasted on me if I don't know where I want to go. F I know where I

want to go, if I have a destination in mind then the GPS provides a path. There are many paths, there are many ways to live a life. Judaism is one of those paths, I would argue it is a pretty good path. The Israelites when they left Egypt they did not know freedom until they got to the other side of the Red sea but even then they did not know where to go and Moses says – lets go that way toward the promised land. What is freedom – freedom is a path in life. We are free to choose whatever path, but as with my GPS as with the Israelites as with so many things, if we don't find a path, if we don't find a road – we'll just run around in circles and we will waste our time.