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The Meaning of Religious Freedom

By Robert Rabinowitz

In the weeks since the bombing attacks of September 11th, I have gradually felt more certain that America, along with the West more generally, is now involved in a *kulturkampf*, a struggle for freedom. Whether or not the bombers' actions should be explained primarily by reference to the nature of evil or as inevitable consequences of Cold War *realpolitik*, it is apparent that the people who commit or support such terrorist acts have a deep animus against the values that America represents. And since the attack was made in the name of religion, this poses a challenge to which all religious people must respond directly.

As a British Jew, the very strong identification that many, if not most, American Jews make between American and Jewish values is very striking. This identification is illustrated by the way American Jews tell the story of Hanukkah. Unlike in Israel, where the motif of national liberation is emphasized, or in the strictly Orthodox world in which the miracle of the oil is highlighted, American Jews tend to view the Maccabees as fighting for the very religious freedom that was later enshrined in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. Very few British Jews would claim such a central role for Britain in Jewish history.

The choice facing American Jews as the military strikes in Afghanistan commence, in common with followers of all religions, is just what meaning they are prepared to assign to the freedom America has granted them. The religious freedom celebrated in the Hanukkah story can be understood in two ways. One interpretation would hold that freedom is merely an instrumental good in that it gives Jews the ability to practice their religion without restraint. A broader interpretation would also emphasize the intrinsic spiritual significance of political freedoms – including democracy and freedom of conscience, expression and association – and economic freedoms, quite apart from whether they are conducive to traditional Jewish practice.

The contrasts between these alternative understandings of the religious significance of freedom are highlighted in a passage in Diane Eck's [A New Religious America](#) in which she discusses the consonance between American ideals and various religious values:

...Buddhists have found the individual responsibility and the pioneering spirit of American life to be consonant with the spiritual pioneers, the bodhisattvas, the freedom seekers of their own tradition. Jains have stressed the importance of their ancient doctrine of *anekantavada*, the manyness of perspectives on Truth, for the project of pluralism.... An orthodox Jewish scholar in Boston summed up his experience of America in a way that the others might also agree with: "What America means to an Orthodox Jew is that after centuries of being persecuted precisely because of the way he looks and he eats, he is for the first time in a place where it is perfectly all right for him to wear a black coat and to talk Yiddish, and to teach his children the *aleph-bet* before he teaches them the alphabet. He appreciates it because America gives him the chance to be himself without losing his humanity" (p. 338).

The Orthodox Jewish scholar quoted in the passage espouses an instrumental view of freedom that contrasts with the claims on behalf of the intrinsic religious value of freedom that Eck attributes to the American Buddhists and Jains. This instrumental view of freedom stems from two thousand years of relative Jewish powerlessness in which Jews' fondest wishes were simply to be left in peace to practice their religion. While this aspiration is legitimate, its primary relevance is in a context in which Jews are living as a minority within a dominant culture. It says nothing about whether and what sort of freedom should be granted to the followers of other religions in a Jewish state or in a state in which Jews are in the majority. Indeed, it is quite possible to hold both the instrumental view of freedom expressed in the above passage *and* highly authoritarian, theocratic views of the way other religions should be treated in a Jewish country.

No doubt someone who held such authoritarian views would support the campaign against Moslem terrorism that America, Britain and their allies have just launched. But that person's motivation would hardly be to support the cause of freedom in its struggle against authoritarianism. It is therefore necessary, I believe, for Jews to articulate a more principled and Jewishly grounded religious justification for the freedoms of American life that we are currently preparing to defend in conflict with the terrorists and those who support them.

There are many resources in the Jewish tradition that offer crucial insights into the nature and importance of freedom conceived as an end in itself. As a small beginning, I offer just one source as an example of how Jews might draw upon their tradition to argue strongly for the intrinsic religious significance of democracy and freedom.

According to the Torah, Israelites can sell themselves into slavery if they are unable to repay debts they owe in any other way. The Torah commands, however, that a Hebrew slave should not work as a slave for more than six years and that if he insists on doing so, "then his master shall bring him to the judges; he shall also bring him to the door, or to the doorpost; and his master shall bore his ear through with an awl; and he shall serve him forever" (*Exodus* 21:6). The Talmud suggests a reason for this procedure:

Rabban Johanan b. Zakkai used to expound this verse as a precious stone. Why was the ear singled out from all the other limbs of the body? The Holy One, blessed be He, said: This ear, which heard my Voice on Mount Sinai when I proclaimed, For unto me the children of Israel are servants, they are my servants,

and not servants of servants, and yet this [man] went and acquired a master for himself — let it be bored! R. Simeon b. Rabbi too expounded this verse as a precious stone. Why were the door and doorpost singled out from all other parts of the house? The Holy One, blessed be He, said: The door and the doorpost, which were witnesses in Egypt when I passed over the lintel and the doorposts and proclaimed, For unto me the children of Israel are servants, they are my servants, and not servants of servants, and so I brought them forth from bondage to freedom, yet this [man] went and acquired a master for himself — let him be bored in their presence!

Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 22b

It is no accident that both Rabban Johanan b. Zakkai and R. Simeon b. Rabbi choose to draw on the narrative of the Exodus and the receiving of the Torah to explain why the slave's ear is bored, for that narrative is the tradition's paradigm for the escape from slavery into spiritual freedom. The rabbis' message is that dominance by another human being distorts one's spiritual integrity. In the economic realm, financial dependence on another person, whether that be within a marriage, a family or community, can stunt one's sense of initiative, dignity and responsibility and can surely poison both sides of the relationship. That perhaps is why the rabbis incorporated a prayer for economic independence into the Grace After Meals, requesting that "we should not become dependent on the gifts of flesh and blood." Subjection to all forms of control by another human being inhibits a person's full intellectual and emotional growth because of a fear of expressing unacceptable thoughts or emotions. The soul of one who is "a servant of servants" cannot expand to its full spiritual potential. Religious and spiritual integrity requires freedom.

Today, all in the West who take religion seriously stand at a point of decision. I have no idea how the events of the future months will unfold. I don't believe that anybody knows that. It could be that the terrible attacks of September 11 will be little more than a blip, however tragic, in the inevitable evolution of a truly globalized world in which people, ideas and goods flow smoothly across former boundaries. Or these attacks may mark the beginning of a new Cold War in which the world breaks into feuding alliances.

But the choice we face has little to do with what will happen in the coming months and years, for the attacks on New York and Washington, D.C. have shown us one face of religion, an authoritarian face which has flowered in the shadows of the repressive regimes of the Middle East. The challenge facing American Jews at this time of crisis is whether they are able to uncover religion's other face, a face that prizes freedom as a spiritual end in itself, no matter its impact on any other aspect of traditional religious practice.



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