Vaera: From the Four Languages of Redemption to the Four Freedoms

In Parashat Va'era, God speaks to Moses at one of the most difficult moments of the Exodus story. The people are crushed by labor, Pharaoh has hardened his heart, and even Moses begins to doubt. It is precisely there that God responds–not with one promise, but with a series of promises, expressed through four different verbs: "I will bring you out from under the burdens of Egypt… I will rescue you from their slavery… I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment… I will take you to Me as a people…" (Exodus 6:6-7)

The Torah could have said simply: *I will free you.* But it doesn't. Instead, it speaks in multiple languages of redemption. The Jerusalem Talmud (Yerushalmi, Pesachim 10:1) noticed this and taught that these four expressions of redemption are the reason we drink four cups of wine at the Passover Seder. Freedom, our tradition insists, is not a single moment. Freedom is a process.

That insight already shapes the Seder itself. The first cup of wine recalls the most basic and urgent freedom: physical freedom. The freedom of no longer living under the whips of Egypt. The freedom of bodies no longer owned by someone else. The freedom of movement, safety, and dignity. This freedom is essential. Judaism never minimizes it. Before anything else can happen, people must be physically free. Not enslaved. Not imprisoned. Not held hostage–God forbid. That is the first cup, and we understand it instinctively. But the Seder does not end there.

If physical freedom were enough, one cup would suffice. Yet the night continues, and we are commanded to drink three more cups. Which means the Torah is quietly telling us something profound: freedom does not end with the absence of chains. We all know this intuitively. A person can walk freely in the street and still not feel free. A person can live outside of prison and still be deeply trapped. So what are the other freedoms we are searching for?

Perhaps one is emotional or spiritual freedom. Not being enslaved to pain, to old wounds, to trauma. Not living our entire lives reacting to what hurt us in the past. Not being imprisoned by expectations imposed by others–by parents, by society, by previous generations. A freedom that allows us to ask: *Who am I, really? And who am I allowed to become?*

Perhaps another is intellectual freedom. We are often enslaved by our own thoughts–by preconceived ideas, by fears we learned long ago, by stories we tell ourselves about what is possible and what is not. We become prisoners of certainty. To be intellectually free is to be able to question, to learn, to open our minds, to imagine something new.

And perhaps another freedom is the freedom from constant pressure and self-imposed obligation–the sense that we must always perform, always prove, always satisfy expectations that were never truly ours. The Torah does not define these categories for us explicitly. It leaves space. The four languages of redemption invite us into interpretation. Each generation, each person, must ask: *What kind of freedom am I still missing?*

This idea appears again, centuries later, in a completely different context. In 1941, as the world stood on the edge of global war, President Franklin D. Roosevelt delivered his famous *Four Freedoms* speech. He envisioned a future founded on four essential freedoms:

- Freedom of speech and expression
- Freedom of worship
- Freedom from want
- Freedom from fear

Roosevelt understood something the Torah already knew: a society can be politically independent and still profoundly unfree. Freedom of speech matters because without it, truth suffocates. Freedom of worship cannot be taken for granted; it rests on a fragile commitment to pluralism and dignity, shaped deeply by Jewish and Christian values in the 20th century. Freedom from want reminds us that if our basic needs are not met–food, shelter, security–then we may be technically free, but we are still enslaved to survival. And freedom from fear may be the hardest of all: not living under constant anxiety, threat, or terror, unable to breathe fully.

Different language. Different century. And yet the same intuition: freedom has layers. The Passover Seder begins with physical liberation, but it pushes us further. With each cup of wine, we are invited to liberate another part of ourselves. And Parashat Va'era leaves us with a powerful question–not only as Jews remembering Egypt, but as human beings living today:

Beyond physical freedom, which freedoms do we still need to claim? What are the four languages of redemption that *we* are still waiting to speak?

May this journey from Egypt continue–not only in history, but within our own lives.

Shabbat Shalom,
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