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There was once a wise man who opened a perfume shop for his son on a street frequented by prostitutes. The women on the street made a fine profit, the perfume shop did its share, and the young shopkeeper, as an indirect result of his profitable business, feel, shall we say, into "evil ways." When the father came and found his son amidst the prostitutes, he began to shout: "I am going to kill you!" But a friend of his was there and interceding on the son's behalf, said: "You were the means for destroying the character of your son, and yet you shout at him! You ignored other professions and told him to be a perfumer, and you passed other locations only to open this shop on the street where the prostitutes live and work!"

This parable, says at midrush, is a lot like the golden calf episode. The children of Israel, because of their experience in slavery, could not help but fall prey to their doubts and insecurity – and so they demanded an idol to worship like their former Egyptian captors. Moses, in the midrush, using the same argument as the understanding friend pleads with God: "Lord of the Universe! You ignored the entire world and caused your people to be enslaved in Egypt, where everyone worshiped lambs, and your children learned corrupt ways. It is for this reason that they have made a calf..."

Like the young man in the midrush, all of us today live, work, or go to school in conditions and situations that are "seductive" [in more ways than one]. Like the young man, and like the children of Israel on their tract from slavery to freedom, we, too, unwittingly fall prey to many forces – both internal and external – that sway us from the correct and desirable path in life. This midrush, if it were to comment on our lapses of moral strength, would probably say that we are not entirely at fault, for we, too, are but slaves of this sort, vulnerable to our own human weaknesses and to our own modern-day forms of idol worship.

Although most of us try to do our best and to be our best we must struggle daily to free ourselves from negative influences and impulses. When we fail, as we often do, we are but slaves to the Yetzerhara – the evil inclination. When we succeed, however, we become their masters and God is of the Yetzerhatov – the good inclination, and in the process, we

discover a kind of freedom and a sense of wholeness that comes from making right choices. We walk a precarious road between these two, always struggling to distance ourselves from the Yetzerhara, to climb to the heights of the Yetzerhatov. Like our ancestors in the desert, we, too, are voyagers on a journey between slavery and freedom.

Let me further illustrate these metaphors and expand on this idea with three examples that touch all our lives. There are three essential sources of freedom that can all be corrupted by us into forms of slavery. They are knowledge, love, and belief.

First – knowledge. All of us have at one time or another engaged in some form of academic pursuit. disciplining ourselves to hour of study so we can read or write or forego immediate pleasures in life to master somebody of knowledge. Yet, there is a real freedom that comes as a result of this discipline, for "though is a universe of freedom." For some the immediate goal of study is a degree and the knowledge and privileges which it carries. For others it is the publication of an article or a book, or the "discovery" of a new idea or concept that expands the frontiers of human knowledge and broadens our world.

Our academic achievements to a large degree are both symbols and products of our intelligence, of our creativity, and of hard and diligent work. If we seek knowledge, however, only out of vanity, serving only to make ourselves grandiose, we corrupt this discipline to slavery. Knowledge that does not improve the world or make it a better place is selfishness taken to an extreme – and we become slaves when our ambitions are purely selfish. there will always be someone smarter, someone more learned, someone with a new idea that contradicts or supersedes our own, or just takes away the limelight. If we use the pursuit of knowledge for our own gain, we will be forced to run a never-ending treadmill that will isolate, enslave, embitter us. We all know very well the foibles and the polar realities of the academic world. It can be a place of warm cooperation and mutual support or a cold and sterile cut-throat environment of competition and mistrust...

The second source of freedom is love. Healthy love and the acceptance, support, and nourishment that come along with it is one of the basic needs all humans share in common. From the moment we are born the quality of our lives and the stability of our emotions is largely determined by the quality and nature of our relationships with significant

others. If we receive the right amount of love from our parents, for instance, we build positive concepts, and are prepared to navigate through this world in a productive way – on our own. Our love needs are in balance. We are then free to love ourselves, and free to establish mutually beneficial love relationships with others. If we receive too much love, however, then we are smothered and shackled. "When the price of love is domination, even love between children and parents," then it becomes slavery.

Parents who "love" their children too much, who need their relationships to substitute for some void in their own lives, inhibit their children's growth and actualization. A mutual dependence is formed that festers and grows with time and may result in emotional disturbance. Sadly, this kind of unhealthy love is often passed down from generation to generation.

This same kind of "love gone amuck" can also occur between two consenting adults. Although a love relationship can create a wonderful entity that is greater than the sum of its parts, the two individuals must maintain their own separate identities that emanate from their own sources of strength and individuality. Their relationship should not hinder but enhance their individuality. They need to be equal partners in a complementary, yet distinguishable matrix. It takes just the right amount for a relationship to be a constantly renewing vehicle for growth and mutual support and this kind of relationship fosters emotional freedom. To be dominated effectively by another person is slavery.

The third source of freedom is belief. This basic freedom has never been taken for granted by the Jewish people for we have experienced much pain and suffering at the hands that have tried to impose their beliefs and dogmas on us – to enslave us with their prejudices. We know how precious and how fragile the freedom of belief is. But we can also become slaves to our own beliefs. We can close our minds to new ideas, and we can avoid or imagine certain truths about ourselves and our world if we refuse to accept objective realities. We pass up many opportunities for growth when we do this.

A person, for instance, might think that he is inadequate, or undesirable, and so he might not try to succeed, or he might not try to establish rapport with others. The end result

of this lethargy will most likely be failure and loneliness. When we become slaves to these kinds of self-perceptions, they too easily become self-fulfilling prophesies.

Perhaps the most dangerous and destructive kind of self-delusion, however, is to believe that our material possessions are reflections of who we are as people. it is a wonderful thing to have stylish clothing, beautiful and comfortable homes, or nice cars, but these are not measuring of our worth as human beings. As Jews, we believe that all people are created "B'tzelenelohim – in the image of God," with the resulting notion that we are all equal. Each one of us, regardless of our social standing, is a living reflection of God, and this idea should guide our relationships with one another. When our worship or lust of possessions blinds and prevents us from seeing the divine in every human being, we fall prey to the chains of slavery. We become enslaved to our baser selves. Like our ancestors at the foot of Mt. Sinai, we lose faith and perspective and turn away from the path to a better and more meaningful existence. We sacrifice integrity and righteousness for our own golden calves. In the words of a well-known writer.

"When belief turns to idolatry
when a man worships any part of the universe
as though it were whole
then freedom to believe
is corrupted into a slavery of belief."

These three freedoms I have outlined, "knowledge," "love," "belief," must all be carefully protected as we move along the paths of our lives, for they can all be easily corrupted. At every turn and at every moment we must be prepared to choose between slavery and freedom – to choose between serving ourselves alone and serving humanity, between narcissism and love for all people.

We are compelled to walk through a wilderness of selfishness, idolatry, and self-doubt, but we have the power and the ability to free ourselves, to make better choices for our lives. The road which we travel to freedom is largely unprotected – it requires vigilance and will, and a clearer understanding of our place on this earth. Our presence here in this

synagogue tonight is, perhaps, evidence of our will. It is a step in the right direction. It took our ancestors forty years to reach the Promised Land, to be free, yet – yet the past continues in every generation.

The poem:

We must strengthen our choices
By walking with the great people of all ages
Who are on the same journey with us?
And in our own generation we must invite
All those we can to share the journey with us
To help each other, to serve and free each other.