

Freedom to Be You and Me



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It is sometimes challenging to write my column for the Jewish Journal – as this needs to be submitted up to four weeks before publication. My initial inclination was to write about the “Yoms.”

We are in the season of Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Remembrance Day), Yom HaZikaron (Israel Remembrance Day), Yom HaAtzmaut (Israel Independence

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Day), and a bit later Yom Yerushalayim (Jerusalem Day). In the business we call this season “the Yoms” since one falls right after the other and there is often programming, commemorations, and/or celebrations to be planned. This is also the lead-up to Shavuot, the festival seven weeks after Passover marking the giving of the Torah.

I wanted to explore what these days represent or signify today? When most people are far removed (geographically or experiential) from these occasions... and we are in the midst of also living in crazy times? And how should we approach them in a way that is relevant and meaningful?

Then I read Bret Stephens’ article in

Commentary (see my other essay on page 3), and somehow this theme paled a bit in comparison. Still important and relevant, just less pressing and perhaps hard-hitting. However, there is a point worth noting here.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, when commenting on the aspect of freedom we talk about during the seder, describes both a freedom “from” and a freedom “to.” We tend to focus on Passover about the freedom from slavery that took place. Yet that wasn’t – and isn’t – sufficient. In order for there to be a lasting identity and legacy for a people, there also has to be a goal...a purpose. What are we going to do with this freedom? What will be the driver of solidarity, allegiance, and integrity in the future?

That’s where Sinai comes in. The initial destination of the Jewish people when leaving Egypt (and which I had the privilege to pass by when heading back to Israel before Passover) also represents its destiny. We are a people with a purpose and with values that, as Bret Stephens points out, are countercultural.

The challenge is that many among our people, especially among the younger generation, don’t appreciate this. They accept the labels that are applied to us without understanding or internalizing our own definition of who we are. That’s not only a shame...that’s why our community is so fragile and anxious when it comes to the rise of antisemitism today. Not that antisemitism isn’t something to worry about, but we would be far more prepared and prideful in response if we were more connected to this identity and what makes us who we are as Jews.

Ultimately, that’s where the “Yoms” come in. The goal is to help us feel connected, to remember, to learn and understand, and to celebrate as a community. And it makes sense that this happens on the metaphoric path to Shavuot – when we embrace the DNA of who we are as a people. We should revisit and reinforce the traits and values that set us apart – and embrace the labels of Jew and Zionist that get applied to us. We have a lot of work to do.