

Part XV

Believer: You still haven't addressed my point. You still maintain that "freedom" includes the "right" to unbridled greed and hedonism, even at the expense of human suffering. You graciously offer to temper these "freedoms" so as to lessen their adverse effects, but, as you yourself acknowledge, there is always "a price to pay." So whom shall we choose to pay this price? In my view, if today we have the resources and technology to comfortably provide for the needs of all the earth's inhabitants, a single hungry child is one too many.

Skeptic: And you, my friend, still haven't addressed my point---aside from laying a guilt trip on me over all those children who are starving because I am not ready to submit to the dictates of a global theocracy. If Moshiach represents the world as envisioned by G-d at creation, why does it preclude freedom? Is man's desire for freedom not part of the "Divine image" in which he was created?

Believer: It certainly is---although, perhaps, we have different ideas of what exactly is "freedom." I suggest that we examine the terms "freedom" and "servitude" more critically: What is true "freedom?" What does it mean to "serve?"

Skeptic: I know exactly what you're going to say---I've heard that polemic so many times from believers of every faith and persuasion that I can recite it in my sleep. I know---everyone serves something, be it the dogma of his religion or of social convention. A person might worship the dollar, fame, the dictates of fashion, or his vision of a split-level suburban home with two cars in the driveway. In either case, he subordinates himself to a "god" which he sets as the prime priority of his life, at the expense (or even the ruination) of all else. The most pathetic slave, many a believer has expounded to me, is the unfortunate hedonist. He is a virtual hostage to his basest passions. His desires are never sated---no matter what he attains, he always lusts for more. He never enjoys a moment of inner peace. True freedom, maintains the believer, is to be a servant of what is highest and most sublime in your potentials. By serving the G-dly ideal, you free yourself of the constraints of your mundane, temporal self. To the believer, the materialist's freedom is slavery, and what the materialist would regard as slavery is freedom. One who follows the whims of his heart is enslaving himself to his own ego and his lowliest animal passions, while he who devotes his life to the purpose of his creation experiences the ultimate in freedom and transcendence.

Believer: And what do you say to that?

Skeptic: That's all fine and well---if that's the freedom you want. But you're what (to my mind, anyway) is the most important freedom of all---the freedom to define "freedom." Believe it or not, some people want to devote their lives to the pursuit of physical comfort and gratification. For them, freedom is the freedom to choose such "slavery" for themselves. There are many types of freedom, and I think that each person should be free to choose whatever freedom he desires for himself. To impose (what to your mind is) the "highest" form of freedom on everyone else, is the very opposite of freedom.

Believer: Let me ask you something. You eat three times a day, right? Does it disturb you that you have to eat? That you have no choice in the matter? Or how about the fact that, want to or not, you are always thinking. Is your sense of freedom outraged by the fact that you are compelled to engage in these activities? Of course not. But why not? Because that's what you are---a human being who eats and thinks and does countless other things by "force" of nature. You recognize that these activities are crucial to your being what you are---and you want to be what you are, not something else. You do not (if you are psychologically sound) want to be a chimpanzee, a rock, or a mathematical equation; you do not feel limited by the fact that you have don't have three legs or that you're not ten feet tall---you want to be you. Freedom is the freedom to be you, to be free of all that constrains you from being truly and uninhibitedly yourself. The fact that your nature compels you to be yourself and prevents you from destroying yourself is certainly not perceived by you as "servitude"

Skeptic: When my doctor told me that I must stop smoking, I did not like it in the least. It sure did feel like “servitude” being compelled by the physiology of my body to refrain from something that I greatly enjoy...

Believer: Only because you do not tangibly and directly perceive the damage that it does to you. You take the doctor's word for it, you know that your health is deteriorating as a result of your addiction, but you don't see it. So although your mind wants to stop smoking, your body still wants to smoke, and you must enforce what your “higher” objective self wants on your “lower” subjective cravings. But if each time you were to light up you were to perceive the shortening of your life in some immediate and concrete way, you certainly would feel only revulsion to cigarette smoke.

Skeptic: Maybe you should take out a patent on your method. You can call it “The Messianic Way to Stop Smoking.”

Believer: Believe me, it would work. Imagine that a person was hooked-up to a computer that was able to calculate exactly how long he will live and his medical prognosis for the rest of his lifetime, and that each time he inhales a puff of smoke he would see, on the screen, how his life has been shortened and the quality of his life reduced. Do you think he will even want to smoke? The most basic and powerful drive of the human body, the drive from which all other drives and desires stem, is the drive for continued existence (the will to live and procreate). So how is it that we can even desire things that run contrary to the ultimate objective of all our desires? Only because at times we lose sight of what we truly want and engage in all sorts of self- delusions and denials. True, we know the statistics on lung cancer, but these are only statistics---who says that it's going to happen to me? The mind may understand that it is the pleasure of smoking is hardly worth the dangers involved, but smoking can still be a “pleasure” as long as its effects are not immediately and concretely felt. This, in fact, is the difference between our present reality and the reality of Moshiach...

Skeptic: You sure have a one-track mind. I mention smoking and you turn it into a metaphor for Moshiach...