At the beginning of the book of Exodus, God’s people are enslaved to a false god; by the book’s end, they have been liberated to serve the real One.

The king of Egypt is not just a brutal taskmaster; he is a brazen and delusional despot: “My Nile is my own,” he declares; “I made it for myself” (Ezekiel 29:3). A medieval midrash imagines him going even further in his insolence: “I have no need of God,” he says; “I created myself” (Midrash HaGadol to Exodus 5:2). For Pharaoh, grandiosity and cruelty go hand-in-hand: Neither knows any limits at all. In response to the request Moses and Aaron make for a brief opportunity to worship God in the wilderness, Pharaoh places more and more onerous burdens on his increasingly desperate slaves. He disdainfully condemns Moses and Aaron for wanting to cause the Israelites to desist from their labors—and tellingly, the word the narrator places in his mouth is “hishbatem” (Exodus 5:5), from the same root as the word Shabbat, a day of rest. The reader knows (as Pharaoh and the slaves do not yet) that Shabbat is intended to acknowledge that God, and God alone, is the Creator (Exodus 20:11). Thus, in upbraiding Moses and Aaron for wanting to give the

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1 An earlier, shorter version of this essay appeared in Sh’ma (September 2013), a journal that creates a “conversation” in print, digital, and online forms that bring together an array of voices around a single theme (www.shma.com). Parts reprinted with permission.
Israelites a Sabbath, Pharaoh unwittingly reveals the vast gulf separating enslavement to a human master from dignified service of the God of Israel.

Exodus begins with the Israelites forced to build cities for a human king who views them as a potential threat to his rule and treats them accordingly; it ends with the people engaged in building a tabernacle (mishkan) in which the God who has redeemed them can dwell. This trajectory is crucial to Jewish theology: In Bible scholar Ellen Davis’ words, the people move from “perverted work, designed by Pharaoh to destroy God’s people… [to] divinely mandated work, designed to bring together God and God’s people, in the closest proximity possible in this life.” As slaves in Egypt, the Israelites work without respite against their will. When they build the mishkan in this week’s parashah, in stark contrast, Moses asks for voluntary contributions: “Take from among you gifts to the Lord; everyone whose heart so moves him shall bring them” (Exodus 35:5). Finally freed from slavery, the Israelites are slowly being taught that there is a form of service radically different from slavery, one that honors and nurtures one’s sense of agency rather than degrading it and whittling it away.

Not surprisingly, then, as Moses lays out instructions for how to build the tabernacle, he starts by invoking Shabbat: “On six days work may be done, but on the seventh day you shall have a sabbath of complete rest (Shabbat Shabbaton), holy to the Lord…” (35:2). An unbridgeable chasm divides enslavement to a human tyrant and service of the God of creation and covenant: Whereas the tyrant prohibits even a moment of Shabbat, God actually mandates and regularizes it.

Whereas serving Pharaoh had stripped the Israelites of their dignity, serving God will now affirm it. Moreover, and critically, God commands them to take their own dignity seriously.

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Is Shabbat about affirming that God, and God alone, is God, or is Shabbat a testimony to human dignity and the importance of rest? The biblical answer is that it is both. The Torah sees no contradiction between a day aimed at affirming God as sovereign over the entirety of creation, on the one hand, and a day aimed at insisting that everyone, including slaves male and female, is entitled and obligated to rest (20:10), on the other. Observing Shabbat is both a claim about Who the Israelites serve, and also, crucially, about how the One they serve understands and treats them. Herein lies a key difference between service of God and enslavement to a human pretender: Whereas the latter systematically dehumanizes his subjects, the former values and cherishes them. Work and service come in dignified and degrading versions; the Torah is about a journey from the latter toward the former.

The Torah captures the transition the Israelites undergo linguistically as well. In Egypt, their mode of labor is called avodah, from the same root as evev, or slave. In building the mishkan, in contrast, the word predominantly used to describe their work is melakhah, from the same root as mal’akh, or messenger. The word melakhah conveys immense dignity, since it is the same term used to depict God’s work in creation (Genesis 2:2-3). The Israelites, in building the mishkan, are in some sense mirroring God’s work in creating the world. So far from degrading slave-labor, melakhah is godly work.

What do the two terms melakhah and avodah actually mean? According to contemporary commentator Moshe Sokolow, “melakhah appears to be work done by an independent agent, while avodah is (the same) work done by a servant. The former implies a measure of equality between the principal and his agent, while the latter just as clearly implies the subordination
of the laborer to a master.” Furthermore, Sokolow adds, one who engages in *melakhah* commits to completing a task “guided and informed by his own experience and expertise,” whereas one who performs *avodah* contracts to complete his task only “according to the instructions and specifications of the principal.” The work of constructing a dwelling place for God is referred to again and again (twenty-five times in the book of Exodus) as *melakhah*, which Sokolow in this context renders “agency,” and it calls for the participation of artisans and those expert in “every kind of designer’s craft” (*melekhet machashevet*—literally, work that requires knowledge) (Exodus 35:33). In leaving Egypt, therefore, the Israelites leave behind slave labor for work inextricably linked to dignity, wisdom, and skill.

The journey the Israelites take is, crucially, from one building project to another. They are transformed from slaves of an earthly ruler to servants of a Heavenly One. Freedom, as imagined by the book of Exodus, is decidedly not about casting off the burdens of service altogether. In fact, it says a great deal about our secularized society that while we often cite the demand that Pharaoh “let my people go!” we usually omit the *telos* of that call, “that they may serve Me.” The Torah is passionately concerned with a journey from slavery to freedom, but it imagines freedom in ways that are different from (one is tempted to say antithetical to) the ways freedom is commonly spoken of in contemporary consumerist America. Doing *whatever* I want, *whenever* I want, is arguably not freedom at all, but enslavement to impulse. The depths of freedom are discovered not in self-assertion but in rare moments of authentic self-transcendence. Authentic freedom, Jewish theology insists, is found in service of something (and Someone) greater than oneself.

*Freedom, as imagined by the book of Exodus, is decidedly not about casting off the burdens of service altogether.*

And yet we should tread carefully here,

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because as Isaiah Berlin famously warned, invocations of “positive liberty” are a favored tool of totalitarians—and, we ought to add, of religious bullies of all stripes. We need to talk not just about freedom from external constraint (“let my people go”), but also about freedom for a sacred purpose (“that they may serve me”). But we need to be extraordinarily careful about the political dangers of that way of talking: Once some people presume to know who other people really are deep down, and thus to have greater insight than they into what they truly want, the very real danger of political oppression in the name of “self-mastery” or some purportedly higher freedom emerges in full force. This sobering fact, all too often ignored by rabbis and preachers, points to a critical line we ought to uphold: Invocations of self-transcendence and of realer, deeper, truer selves must rely on persuasion rather than force. We should allow people the freedom and dignity to discover what we insist is their true freedom.

Shabbat shalom.

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