Evgenii Chiriko)—the warp and woof of this particular incident simply won't let us alone. Stephen Zipperstein's new book comes to explain why and, perhaps, to lay to rest the Kishinev ghost at last.

*Pogrom* begins with vivid tableaus of unremarkable "Lower Kishinev," home to Jewish and gentile families. A central chapter in *Pogrom* tracks, hour-by-hour and street-by-street, the progress of the violence over three days, synthesizing official reports and testimony gathered in the wake of events. After this absorbing, horrific narrative, Zipperstein turns to Kishinev's considerable and ongoing reverberations beyond its borders, and into our own day.

Zionism in Europe, and later in Israel, capitalized on Bialik's depiction of male passivity in the face of the rape of their wives and daughters (a likely false claim) to shape a national identity predicated on defense, and a robust response to physical threats. In the United States, the Hearst syndicate ran extensive and often sensational coverage of Kishinev. Pogroms were twinned with American racism, including riots and lynching. According to Zipperstein, sensitivity to parallels between these two realms of violence shaped the founding of the NAACP. Zipperstein's book brings Eastern European xenophobia sadly up-to-date with a disturbing survey of Moldovan nationalism in current-day Chisinau, now a seedy, post-Soviet center of graft and a grey economy.

Passover has always told the story of trauma and redemption. This April also marks the 75th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. *Pogrom* is a necessary reminder of the meaning of these events for subsequent generations.



TORAH FROM JTS

JTS

Last days of Pesah 5778 יום טוב אחרון של פסח תשע"ח

# Freedom through Torah

**Rabbi David Hoffman, Vice Chancellor and Chief Advancement Officer, JTS**

> "The tablets were God's work, and the writing was God's writing, incised upon the tablets" (Exod. 32:17). Do not read, "incised," (*harut*), rather [read] "freedom" (*herut*)—for no person is truly free except the one who labors in Torah. (Mishnah Avot 6:2)
>
> [Passover] is the time of our freedom (*zeman herutenu*). (Passover Liturgy)

Freedom in biblical and rabbinic Judaism is a highly complex idea. Consider the mishnah above. At first glance one might think the law, the Ten Commandments carved on the two tablets, would be limiting, constraining human freedom. Counterintuitively, the Sages argue that true freedom only comes from an engagement with Torah! How might "laboring in Torah" and living a life according to the demands of the Torah induce freedom?

I am reminded of the midrash where God offers the Torah to the nations of the world before offering the Torah to the Israelites. Each of these nations rejects the "gift" of the Torah because it is too constraining (Sifrei Devarim 343:6). While the Rabbis in this mishnah speak of Torah as an experience of freedom, they at other times also speak of "the yoke of heaven" or "the yoke of the mitzvot" when referring to living a life observing the Torah's commandments. A beast walking under the burden of its yoke is not the imagery Rousseau or Hobbes might employ to describe their notions of a life lived in freedom!

Perhaps more problematic is the complexity present in the Bible's description of the liberty granted to the Israelites with their redemption from the slavery of Egypt. God commands Moses to go to the Israelites and introduce them to the God of their ancestors with the words, "I am the Lord. I will free you from the labors of the Egyptians and deliver you from their bondage" (Exod. 6:2). And yet God redeems the Israelites from the "house of bondage" and from Pharaoh only to substitute another master: "For it is to Me that the Israelites are servants: they are My servants, whom I freed from the land of Egypt" (Lev. 25:55).

Acknowledging at once the irony of this situation as well as its religious meaningfulness, the Rabbis of the Midrash depict God reassuring the Israelites, "You are My servants and not servants to servants!" (Mekhilta *Masekhet Bahodesh*, 5).

Put simply: What are these often-conflicting notions telling us about biblical and rabbinic conceptions of freedom and its relationship to a life of Torah?

How are we to experience *zeman herutenu*, the season of our freedom?

Modern western or American notions of freedom challenge some of these biblical and rabbinic definitions of freedom. Isaiah Berlin, in one of his more influential essays, "Two Concepts of Liberty," made an interesting distinction between two types of freedom—negative and positive. He defined "negative freedom" as the freedom *from* constraints and coercion. "Positive freedom" constituted the freedom to realize one's destiny and best interests. Ultimately, Berlin thought positive freedom was susceptible to political abuse and might be a source of oppression for some. He argued that the safest form of freedom was "negative" freedom—the absence of constraints and interference. For many of us, this iteration of freedom has become our ultimate moral value.

However, the rhythm of this season in the Jewish calendar provides an alternative understanding to the value and meaning of *zeman herutenu* and helps resolve some of the tensions and ambivalence toward freedom in our sources.

With the second night of Passover we begin the count-up to Shavuot, unique among all the festivals in the Torah. Each festival in the Torah has a specific date, in a specific month in the Jewish calendar. Only Shavuot is not anchored in our calendar, and yet we know we celebrate it on the same date every year—always on the fiftieth day after the second day of Passover. Indeed, the Torah mandates that we engage in this counting every year from the second night of Passover to the offering of the grain on the holiday of Shavuot.

The rabbis of the medieval period were the first to articulate that this counting is not exclusively about the offering of the new grain that was brought while the Temple still stood. We count from Passover to Shavuot because these two holidays are conceptually tied to one another. Passover is the holiday of our liberation and freedom. Shavuot, according to the Rabbis, is the holiday of the receiving of the Torah—the holiday where we enter our covenantal relationship with God.

Freedom (Passover) without Shavuot (Torah) is incomplete; and Shavuot (Torah) would be impossible without Passover—the holiday that gave us the freedom to enter into this relationship with God. A life of Torah is not a life of freedom. Freedom is not an absolute value for the Rabbis, or for the Bible. Freedom is utilitarian. The freedom of Pesah gives us the opportunity to enter into *relationship* with God.

Like every human relationship, a relationship with God limits our freedom. Lovers, friends, mothers and daughters, fathers and sons—every human relationship that we freely enter into and continue to be engaged with limits our choices and inevitably comes with responsibilities. And yet we choose to voluntarily enter these relationships. Ultimately, we believe that a life lived in relationship, deeply connected and responsible to someone is more meaningful than a life lived where we may possess the unconstrained freedom to act.

Counting up to Shavuot reminds us that a life lived in relationship with others and with God, with all the attendant responsibilities that flow from these relationships, is more meaningful than a life lived free of constraints. Each day with our counting we are asked to transform our freedom into a covenantal relationship with God that will allow us to create lives rich in responsibility, and thus, meaning.

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# Speaking of Text

**A WEEKLY EXPLORATION OF THE JEWISH BOOKSHELF**

## The Pogrom that Endured

**Dr. Barbara Mann, Simon H. Fabian Chair in Hebrew Literature, JTS**

*Pogrom: Kishinev and the Tilt of History* by Steven J. Zipperstein (W. W. Norton, 2018).

> The sun shone, the blossom bloomed, and the slaughterer slaughtered.
>
> —H. N. Bialik, "In the City of Slaughter" (1903)

The image of the slaughterer in springtime is an indelible part of the DNA of twentieth-century Jewish experience, juxtaposing as it does the casual brutality of history with the most mundane of natural events. Its source is Bialik's epic poem about the Kishinev pogrom of 1903. Despite the many words written about the events of that April—personal testimony, journalistic reportage, memorial texts, poetry, and even a Broadway play (*The Chosen People* by