

Passover, 2002 Stan Stahl, Ph.D.

According to the Jewish tradition, Passover is a time when we tell each other the story of freedom. The story, as it will be told this week in Jewish homes throughout the world, is the story of Moses leading his people out of Egypt, out of slavery and into freedom. It is a powerful story, one that has been told and retold for over 150 generations.

Powerful as it is, the exodus from Egypt seems to me to be only part of the story. It neglects what must have been an intriguing pre-history of freedom, stories of individual moments of freedom as the concept gradually emerged into human consciousness. And it equally neglects all the stories of freedom that have flowed from freedom's emergence in Egypt 3,500 years ago.

If we are to explore the richness of freedom, then we should also tell these other stories. Telling stories of freedom serves to expand our understanding of it, while strengthening our commitment to it.

Those of you who have read others of my essays know that I hold the American revolution as commencing a grand experiment in freedom, one that has been a beacon to the world for over 225 years.

More recently we have begun to understand freedom as a necessary precursor to economic development and the benefits it promises ... ending hunger, curing disease ... providing everyone on the planet with the opportunity to live a fulfilled life.

My own coming-of-age occurred at a time when America was exploring the dark side of freedom. Our own American revolution was won, in part, on the backs of slaves. The American expansion coincided with the near-elimination of native Americans. And lest anyone think this was all in the past, Enron is here to remind us that the dark side is still present in America.

The dark side of freedom necessitates that we voluntarily put limits on our freedoms, that we acknowledge and accept that with freedom comes responsibility.

My parents and teachers taught me my responsibilities. They taught me to respect everyone, regardless of differences in color, and not to judge others until I've walked in their moccasins. They taught me to work hard, to use my opportunity to make something of myself. They taught me respect for the property of others. They taught me to honor the past and improve the future. And, more than anything else, they taught me that I had a responsibility to give back.

On September 11 we were put on notice that others are at war with us, seeking to take away our freedoms. It is a war that we have no alternative but to win. We must protect and defend our freedom lest we lose it.

Winning this war requires that we have the courage and commitment to live up to the ideals of American freedom, embracing the responsibilities that accompany our freedom.

Now is the time to redouble our efforts to treat everyone we meet with respect; to redouble our efforts to make deep connections with each other; to redouble our efforts to help those less fortunate and to pay increased attention to the quality of the environment.

Now is also the time for us to hold the 'guys at the top' to a higher standard of responsibility. Because the consequences of misconduct -- whether purposeful misconduct, as in Enron's case, or negligence, as in the Exxon Valdez -- can be so devastating to so many, criminal and civil punishment must be swift certain and significant.

We must also, I believe, hold our 'political' leaders to a higher standard of responsibility. No matter which side of which battle we are on -- Israeli or Palestinian, Irish Catholic or Protestant, pro-choice or pro-life -- whatever the battlegrounds on which we happen to find ourselves, we must demand of our leaders that the battle be 'civil,' that they take the 'high ground' of dialogue and not descend into the darkness of terror.

This is our task, our responsibility, as we grow from the atrocity of 9/11.

Our duty in this post-9/11 world is to embrace the responsibilities of freedom so our descendants, free men and women throughout the world, can tell each other glorious stories of freedom.

There is, I acknowledge, a seeming philosophical quandary in what I have written. We are killing our Al Qaeda enemies, not dialoging with them. What are the limits of acceptable behavior and how should one behave in the presence of those who would destroy us? The resolution to the quandary flows out of a beautiful body of mathematics known as the "Prisoner's Dilemma" (related to the mathematics of "A Beautiful Mind's" John Nash). The Prisoner's Dilemma instructs us that the best way to encourage cooperation is to generously reward acts of cooperation while proportionally -- but aggressively -- punishing transgressions. 9/11 was a transgression of monumental proportion; it requires a monumental response. By acting in accord with this cooperation-inducing strategy, America can encourage the spread of freedom around the world while protecting us from those who seek our destruction.

Let freedom ring.