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## Love of Freedom, Impatient of Oppression

Passover is called זמן חרותינו, “The season of our freedom.” But as we celebrate our ancient ancestors’ mythic release from bondage, we must be careful not to focus only on *cheiruteinu*, our freedom. Indeed, the Torah does show the Hebrews exercising their power to conquer and enslave others – yet these stories reflect only the earliest stages in our people’s ongoing quest for freedom. The principles of justice and liberation are foundational to our ethical tradition, and celebrating Passover generation after generation is an exercise in continuing to expand those we number among the free.

This is a familiar feeling for Americans who still keep faith with our country’s founding ideals. As in Jewish history, America’s legacy is stained by centuries of violence and xenophobia, as we observe far too acutely today. But also like the Jewish tradition, America has always wrestled with its demons, aiming for the vaunted goals of liberty and justice for all.

Even in its earliest days, voices within America clamored for freedom, and in particular, for the end of African slavery. One such champion, Phillis Wheatley, powerfully connected the story of the Exodus with her dreams of abolition in the United States. Born in Gambia in 1753, she was kidnapped at the age of eight and transported on a ship called *Phillis* to be sold to a family called Wheatley. Her captors taught her to read and write and quickly realized she was a prodigy. By the time she was 14, Phillis Wheatley was already a published poet. She would become the first African American and second American woman to publish a book of poetry.

In 1774, a year before the onset of the Revolutionary War, Wheatley wrote a letter to Reverend Samson Occum, a Native American minister who had condemned slavery.<sup>1</sup> “[I] am greatly satisfied with your Reasons respecting the Negroes,” she wrote, “and think highly reasonable what you offer in Vindication of their natural Rights.” She continued to extol the ideas of a budding America, which promised “the glorious Dispensation of civil and religious Liberty,” and argued that true religious freedom must be accompanied by civil rights for Americans of all races. She referred to the Israelites’ “Freedom from Egyptian slavery” and drew this conclusion from our escape from bondage: “in every human Breast, God has implanted a Principle, which we call Love of Freedom; it is impatient of Oppression, and pants for Deliverance.” These words might well be inscribed on our Passover Haggadah, reflecting the deepest lessons of our story of redemption.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part2/2h19t.html>

Wheatley's was not a confined voice. She was regarded in her time as a prime example of the humanity and potential of enslaved people in America. In 1775, she sent a poem about George Washington to the esteemed general himself, and in the midst of fighting against the British, Washington wrote back. He praised her talents and offered, "If you should ever come to Cambridge, or near Head Quarters, I shall be happy to see a person so favoured by the Muses, and to whom Nature has been so liberal and beneficent in her dispensations."<sup>2</sup> In other words, the general of the American army was inviting Wheatley to tea. Phillis Wheatley's renown and influence were extraordinary, making her one of the unsung heroes of America's founding.

In 1773, Wheatley published what has become her best-known poem, "On Being Brought from Africa to America." Emory University professor of English Sondra O'Neale summarizes that this poem "chides the Great Awakening audience to remember that Africans must be included in the Christian stream."<sup>3</sup> Wheatley exposes the willful disregard for core principles of religious dignity that clings to the practice of the enslavement of others.

On Being Brought from Africa to America  
by Phillis Wheatley<sup>4</sup>

'Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land,  
Taught my benighted soul to understand  
That there's a God, that there's a *Saviour* too:  
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.  
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,  
"Their colour is a diabolic die."  
Remember, *Christians, Negros*, black as *Cain*,  
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.

Four couplets in eight lines expose the hypocrisy of America's Christian slaveholders. Color does not define humanity, she insists, and God's love is open to all.

Critically, exposing American hypocrisy is not the same as denying the goodness of the American dream. After all, as Professor O'Neale teaches, "[many] of Wheatley's themes can be classified as celebrations of America."<sup>5</sup> She is regarded as the first person "to applaud this nation as glorious 'Columbia,'" and even in her later years – freed from servitude but consigned to a hard life of poverty – she remained "proud of her nation's

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.loc.gov/resource/mgw3h.001/?q=wheatley&sp=14&st=text>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/phillis-wheatley>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45465/on-being-brought-from-africa-to-america>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/phillis-wheatley>

intense struggle for freedom.”<sup>6</sup> Civil rights leaders of ensuing centuries, including Frederick Douglass,<sup>7</sup> Fannie Lou Hamer,<sup>8</sup> and William Barber<sup>9</sup> have all maintained this essential theme: the ideals America represents are worth fighting for. Not only this, but they demand defense, for apathy and inaction favor only the status quo, which remains woefully distant from our highest aspirations.

It is no accident that Jews have felt so at home in America. We, too, are heirs to a tradition of high hopes and noble causes, struggling generation after generation to bring nearer the day when all the world will be at peace. The work we commit to as a Jewish community, though idealistic, is not pie-in-the-sky. Like the advocacy of Phillis Wheatley, we remain grounded in the ugly realities of oppression. We must never forget our history; as the Haggadah insists: “In every generation, every person is obligated לְרֹאוֹת אֶת-עֲצָמוֹ, to see yourself as if you personally went forth from Egypt.” What’s more, Maimonides updates the text with a slight amendment: “In every generation, every person is obligated לְהִרְאוֹת אֶת-עֲצָמוֹ, to **show** yourself as if you personally went forth at this time from the slavery of Egypt.”<sup>10</sup> To show ourselves as freed from Egypt requires action, a display of commitment to the work of redemption.

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The year she died, Phillis Wheatley published “Liberty and Peace,”<sup>11</sup> expressing the tolls exacted by even the most justified war. She insisted to the end that freedom must be defended and expressed her undying belief that justice will ultimately be achieved.

Auspicious Heaven shall fill with fav’ring Gales,  
Where e’er *Columbia* spreads her swelling Sails:  
To every Realm shall *Peace* her Charms display,  
And Heavenly *Freedom* spread her golden Ray.

Two and a half centuries later, we may not place quite as much confidence in America’s swelling sails. Nevertheless, we may still adopt Wheatley’s posture of persistence and hope. This is the endeavor of our annual festival of freedom: to imagine and strive for a nation and a world that have broken the bonds of injustice and secured for all the promise of redemption.

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/what-to-the-slave-is-the-fourth-of-july/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/blackspeech/flhamer.html>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.breachrepairers.org/blogs/a-pastoral-letter-to-the-nation>

<sup>10</sup> Mishneh Torah, Laws of Chametz and Matzah 7:8.

<sup>11</sup> <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/evans/N14772.0001.001/1:2?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>