

The Choice of the Pierced Ear

By CRAIG RALSTON

THE world does not agree on what freedom means. It never has.

The stouthearted want to be free to come and go, to do what they like, to think what they please, to speak what they think. Those who embrace this philosophy must assume risk and responsibility for their acts. They must be on their own.

Others proclaim a different freedom—freedom from responsibilities and care. They dodge risks, seek the sheltered life. In ancient times, they clung to the kind master—in medieval times to the benevolent Seigneur, in our day to the benign totalitarian state.

Seeking each its way of life, these two groups have split our world into warring camps. The first upholds the “democratic” way. The second acclaims what Anne Morrow Lindbergh calls “the wave of the future.”

If we go back far enough, we will find Moses, leader of the ancient Hebrews, tussling with both groups. People sloshed around in Mrs. Lindbergh’s wave of the future thirty-five centuries ago. Perhaps it is what beauticians call a permanent wave.

Moses solved his problem. His novel program rejoiced libertarian and totalitarian hearts alike. The libertarian dwelt in peace and the totalitarian never got organized for a start.

Moses had the help of Jehovah: *Jehovah spake unto Moses in Mount Sinai. Jehovah started at the beginning. He brushed early landlords aside: And the land shall not be sold in perpetuity; for the land is mine; for ye are strangers and sojourners with me.*

This conception of title vested in God gave Moses command of an instrumentality of which modern statesmen are apparently unaware. Moses utilized land to enable the first of the two conflicting social groups to realize its aspirations.

The Promised Land, whither Moses conducted the twelve Israelite tribes, was thrown open to settlement on a plan like that adopted much later in our western land drawings. Each homesteader designated his allotment by landmarks, which were safeguarded by this mandate: *Thou shalt not remove thy neighbor’s landmark, which they of old time have set in the inheritance which thou shalt inherit in the land that Jehovah thy God giveth thee to possess it.*

Moses enjoined strict obedience to this mandate. He commanded that when the Israelites crossed the Jordan, the Levites should pronounce a separate curse upon each of twelve abominations. Ten curses were hurled at religious and moral offenses. One was economic: *Cursed be he who moves his neighbor’s landmark.*

Unless landmarks could be obliterated, it was impossible to

concentrate landownership into great estates such as we find in our times. The curse upon those who removed landmarks was therefore a curse on all who sought to destroy the freeholds of the people. The twelve curses placed Hebrew landgrabbers in a category with idolaters, unfilial sons and daughters, miscreants who cheat the blind or rob widows and orphans, sodomists, three types of incestuous offenders, secret assassins, and scoundrels who for money connive the murder of the innocent. The final curse was upon every Hebrew who did not give force to the other curses—in effect, a double curse.

Landlordism could not even clothe itself in the garb of the clergy. The church could own no estates. If a pious person wished to consecrate a field to Jehovah, he could do so, but—*In the year of Jubilee, the field shall return unto him of whom it was bought, even to him to whom the possession of the land belongeth.* Jehovah himself instituted this year of Jubilee.

Fourth of July orators often quote Jehovah. The words they quote are engraved on our Liberty Bell. They were uttered when Jehovah decreed the year of Jubilee in speech to Moses: *And ye shall hallow the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof . . . And ye shall return every man unto his possession, and ye shall return every man unto his family. . . . And . . . ye shall grant a redemption for the land. If thy brother be waxed poor and sell some of his possession, then shall his kinsman that is next unto him come, and shall redeem that which his brother hath sold. And if a man have no one to redeem it, and he be waxed rich and find sufficient to redeem it . . . he shall return unto his possession. But if he be not able to get it back for himself, then that which he hath sold shall remain in the hand of him that hath bought it until the year of Jubilee; and in the year of Jubilee it shall go out [be released] and he shall return unto his possession.*

The year of Jubilee secured to each Hebrew his stake in the country. The spendthrift and ne’er do well might trifle with his heritage, but he could not alienate it.

Universal rights in land founded the Hebrew nation on principles of economic freedom and self-dependency. Each citizen was his own boss. He made his own career. It was his right to go as far as his capabilities would take him. The complement of equal economic rights was equality before the law: *Ye shall do no unrighteousness in judgment; thou shalt not respect the person of the poor, nor honor the person of the mighty; and in righteousness shall thou judge thy neighbor.*

This was the plan. It left some of the retired Israelitish brick molders cold. It lacked trimmings. Social climbers desired fags of their own. Others had rather be slaves. It also seems likely that the Hebrews had their share of “liberals”—

liberals like those we know. Soap boxers popped up among them, the Bible text shows. These soap boxers cherished fond memories of gay life on the Nile, where Pharaoh furnished a planned economy, and Hebrews furnished the sweat and backaches and rustled the straw to make the economy hang together. In the rough going of the desert, these tub thumpers oft reminded Moses of the good old days in Egypt—the leeks, onions and fleshpots they left behind.

How Moses adjusted his social scheme to these groups should be of more than fleeting interest at a time when the same problem vexes us. His slave code portrays his method.

Considered as a whole, the Mosaic slave-code, so far as it related to Hebrews, might be interpreted as an abolitionist measure. It made it harder to be a slave and easier to become free.

A striking exception to its trend is this: *And as for thy bondmen and thy bondmaids whom thou shalt have; of the nations that are round about you, of them shall ye buy bondmen and bondmaids.* This jarring note is a sharp reminder that Moses was not world-wide reformer—his duty ended with his Hebrew brothers. Centuries were to pass before a greater than Moses was to proclaim the brotherhood of all men.

The code leaves no doubt as to Moses' attitude toward slavery among the "brothers." "Blackbirding" was punished by death: *If a man be found stealing any of his brethren of the children of Israel, and he deal with him as a slave, or sell him; then that thief shall die; so shalt thou put away the evil from the midst of thee.* The bankrupt "brother" earned discharge by serving till the year of Jubilee—*then shall he go out, he and his children with him, and shall return unto his own family and unto the possession of his fathers shall he return.*

This was Moses' fugitive slave law: *Thou shalt not deliver unto his master a servant that is escaped from his master unto thee; he shall dwell with thee, in the midst of thee, in the place which he shall choose in one of thy gates where it pleaseth him best; thou shalt not oppress him.*

The text shows that Hebrews were in servitude in Moses' time. How these Hebrews first became slaves—whether by act of their own or otherwise—we do not know. But they were there, afloat on an ancient wave of the future. Many slaves liked the wave.

This liking is duplicated in our times. People who have never enjoyed freedom, or had knowledge of it, often fear and flee it, and fight ferociously for their wave.

Moses did not disturb the wave-enamored Hebrews. He let them have their wave. This was his solution: *If thy brother, a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman, be sold unto thee, and serve thee six years, then in the seventh year, thou shalt let him go free from thee. . . . And it shall be, if he say unto thee, I will not go out from thee, because he loveth thee and thy house, because he is well with thee; then thou shalt take*

an awl and thrust it through his ear into the door and he shall be thy servant forever. And also unto thy maid servant thou shalt do likewise.

To his Hebrew brothers, Moses opened two ways of life. To the courageous brothers, who wanted to tackle life in their own way, he gave inalienable right to land. For the gun-shy brothers—ne'er-do-wells, perhaps, unhappy wights frustrated by the day's riddles or too indolent or dull to undertake their solution—he provided escape—a punch through the ear with an awl.

It might not be amiss for our disordered world to ponder this perforationist device.

The Hebrew "liberal" was inducted into the "new order" by personal, private initiation. He furnished only his own ear to be punched; others could do as they liked about their ears. He fixed his ear against his master's door. Brad poised, the benevolent totalitarian approached—a punch and a yelp did it. The voluntary slave chose his own master; he adjusted the yoke to his own neck with his own hands, and presumably lived happily ever after. This Hebrew, too, had his way of life.

The Mosaic plan—two ways of life—contrasts with the stilted statecraft of our times.

Our statesmen open no way of life. They have thrust Jehovah and his land laws out of the world, into a remote place called Heaven. Squatters, who call themselves landlords, usurp Jehovah's title. They build toll gates over our free way of life. From land users—that is, from all of us—they collect all the traffic will bear. Those who can pay travel that road. Devil take the others.

Barred from the free way, millions stampede to the alternative way of life. That road—the road to slavery—is closed, too. Our constitutions and peonage acts block it. Our statesmen pride themselves on their abolitionist exploits. To punch holes in peoples' ears would shock their sensibilities.

The upshot of this delicacy is that ear-punching has passed to the realm of outlawed arts. It is become a ponderous and complex pursuit. It must be undertaken collectively, *en masse*. This elevates it to the dignity of a Cause. Like all Causes, it possesses its own philosophers, intelligentsia, martyrs, and statesmen. Heroic forms move on its horizons—the famed Knights of the Punched Ear, Adolf, Joe, Benito, Hirohito.

To get his ear punched, the modern "liberal" treads paths devious and violent. He cons Marxian tracts, proclaims proletarian philosophies, devises crack-pot reforms, consorts in dim cellars with Communists, Nazis, Fascists, Fifth Columnists and Fellow Travelers, and darkly plots the social revolution. When he gets the power, he transforms the state into a benevolent ear-punching instrumentality and bombs and bothers everybody, and drags whole nations to the punching post.

Moses was more broadminded than we are.