THEODORE BIKEL

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FROM BONDAGE TO FREEDOM

SONGS OF MANY LANDS, OF TYRANTS AND SLAVES, OF FREE MEN AND LIBERTY.
“I have sworn upon the altar of God eternal hostility to every form of tyranny over the mind of man.” Thomas Jefferson’s words strike a most responsive chord in our hearts, for among all the deprivations of freedom, among all forms of human bondage, the most terrible is the oppression of the mind. The idea of breaking free from the yoke was born only through the indomitable spirit of freedom within the mind of man. Among the festivals and holidays I keep, there are but two which are of an exclusively religious nature: all the others also commemorate an event in which a person’s spirit triumphed over the oppressor’s whip. It is not difficult, therefore, to think of the struggle for freedom as something not remote and alien to one’s nature, but as an intimately personal involvement, a household word, as it were. One was born with it, grew with it, and lives with it constantly.

No privilege, no even the smallest one, can ever be granted; man’s very birthright needs to be fought for over and over again. Freedom cannot be won and stored away; in almost every generation the flame of freedom must be rekindled. And the quest for freedom in one people is contagious; before long your neighbors will take up the cry, and will in turn pass on the idea to their neighbors. It is like a marathon race, only that the runners are many and their paths lead in every direction, so that the original holy flame serves to kindle the torches throughout the nations.

It is not surprising that, when it comes to songs of freedom, the variations are almost infinite; differences seem to recede into the background and there appears a great similarity between the freedom songs of one nation and its counterpart in another. To be sure, the differences are still there by virtue of language and perhaps historic traditions, but the emotion is so universal, the will to emerge from bondage to liberty so all-embracing, that there seems almost no difference between the torch carried by a peasant in the French Revolution, the lantern that hung in a corner while the I.R.A. was planning to fight, and Judah Maccabee’s single flame which made the oil last for one day last for eight.

The strongest emotions are always the ones to be clad in stark and simple terms. For it is only the visionary who is capable of saying, “Here lies my path,” without the necessity to elaborate, explain, or apologize. But while our definition of freedom is a simple one, born in one block of granite, the ways of striving for it are manifold, and only they who have known bondage, slavery, and oppression are capable of seeing the vision of freedom, giving it shape and substance, giving it words and song.

I should like to add a few words about the songs.

*Di Shu‘e* is a solemn dedication of the Jewish freedom fighter to the ideals and purposes of his struggle. *Las Guiteras de L’exil*, a haunting French song, comforts the Spanish Civil War exile with the thought that the guitar of Paris knows how to sympathize with the guitar of Madrid in its plight. *Follow the Drinking Gourd* is a song of the Underground Railway which tells the slaves, in veiled language, that the road to freedom lay toward the north. A drinking gourd, that was how they saw the constellation of the Big Dipper, which contains the North Star. *Un Du Akers* is a Jewish H Ashkenazi song dating back to the early days of the century. *MacPherson’s Lament* is the defiant plea of a free Scotsman, who dies bearing his nation and all those who have come to view the bearer as an entertainment. The Yiddish song *Etel B'lud* is one of the many prophesies that foretold the freedom to come; “Once more we shall plant trees in the desert,” so say the words of Isaiah.

*Scotts Wha Hae* is a song from Robert Burns’ impassioned words a powerful plea of the “slavery or freedom” theme. *Die Moorsoldaten* is a German song, several hundred years old, which was revived by the International Brigade during the Spanish Civil War. *One Sunday Morning* and *The Rising of the Moon* are both Irish, of course, the former an only half-narrated song of the struggle between Irish Catholic and Irish Protestant, the latter harking back to the bloody rebellion of 1798.

Three songs on the album I have left for last, because the reason for their presence in the record must be clear, at first hearing, he chimes. Take, *Mrs. McGrath* for instance. It is Irish too, but it is not a song of freedom; it is a song of bondage. Listen to the words, and the tremendous difference in spirit will hit you immediately. In the case of *Oz*, why did I choose, as the only Russian song presented, one that is so many centuries old, and not one pertaining to the Russian Revolution? I consider the Russians in this century to have made a trip not from slavery to freedom, but from freedom to bondage. So I selected a song that expresses the will to freedom of the soul, an eternal Russian quest.

Lastly, *The Vision of the Bones* (Ezekiel 37) is a work that, for me, has been many years in the making and one that expresses most eloquently the overwhelming feeling of any call for liberty: “You can be free if you but will it so!”

The musical setting for *The Vision of the Bones* was composed especially for this album by Dov Selzer, who also arranged his own composition *Etel B'lud* and *Di Shu‘e*. *Un Du Akers*, *Follow the Drinking Gourd*, *Mrs. McGrath*, and *Die Moorsoldaten* were arranged by Fred Hellerman.

Production supervisor — JAC HOLZMAN, editing & mixing — MARK ABRAMSON & MIKE SCOTT, engineering — JOHN QUINN, cover design — WILLIAM S. HARVEY, bass — BILL LEE, second guitar — RAY BOGUSLAY

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