

## Free to Be...

Contributed by [Esther Kustanowitz](#)

Source: By the Author, published in The NY Jewish Week

*(Author's Note: This was originally published in the NY Jewish Week in 2008.)*

### Free to Be...

Growing up, I often listened to a work of feminism undercover as children's album and book – "Free to Be You and Me." From "Free to Be," I learned that I could be anything, that parents were people and that "every boy in this land learns to be his own man, and in this land every girl grows to be her own woman." I learned that partners should not be your superiors, but equals, running neck-and-neck with you until you both cross the finish line together. I learned that those who expect to be treated like royalty because of their looks and who demand "ladies first" will probably be eaten by a pack of hungry tigers. (Metaphorical tigers, I'm sure.)

Today, with the girl in me having grown to be her own woman, living single and independent, even my profession has liberation in its name: I am a freelance writer. Friends are envious. I am my own boss, I choose my projects and my hours, and I'm flexible – able to work at a coffee shop or a library. When summer arrives early, I can take an hour to enjoy the sunshine or sit in the park, while my peers are chained to their desks.

But with no central employer, I'm also free to worry, buy my own health insurance, and to wonder if my doctors will suddenly decide – as they recently did – that they're no longer accepting my coverage. I wonder if I can stretch this month's earnings to cover next month's expenses. I've got to stay on top of my invoices, or my clients will feel free to not pay me. And if I can't make freelancing work, I'm free to either get a full-time job or, although I haven't asked them, to move back in with my parents.

So freelancing isn't really free. With no such thing as a free lunch, there are always obligations, strings attached, although they might not be visible at the time. Pessimists say that's what dating's all about – determining if the inevitable strings attached to supposedly free meals are strings you can live with. I don't love that definition, but it makes me realize that for all of my professional independence, financially, I'm not all that free.

I have often wished that I were part of a creative commune, where we would all work to provide each other with sustenance and shelter, with enough to enable us to focus on our creative work without worrying about financial security. We could judge each other by the content of our characters rather than have our perceptions tinted through money-colored glasses. On this creative kibbutz, a basic stability would free our minds. We wouldn't need excess, only comfort, to create. And by being more in touch with our inner muses, we'd be truer versions of ourselves, more open to relationships, and, to paraphrase the Bard, we would not admit impediments to the marriage of true minds.

For artists and other miscellaneous creatives, the search for comfort is constant. They hope that a deep enough excavation will uncover love, happiness or some other great truth. But once a dream is achieved or a truth is attained, everything shifts, compelling the creation of a new dream, a higher goal, a deeper truth. Writing itself – as profession, leisure activity, spiritual exercise, intellectual inquiry or demonic exorcism – is not a right; it's a luxury, living in the domain of the independent and the land of the free.

Every spring, Jews revisit freedom as a concept. And we don't think solely of our literally enslaved ancestors: we think of the restrictions that we have placed on ourselves, metaphorical enslavements of the heart, will and mind. We understand that our inability to move forward in relationships or our fear of change isn't slavery of the make-bricks-from-mud-and-straw variety. Actual slavery still exists throughout the world – from poverty in New York to Indian children born into brothels, from Russian prostitutes in Israel to poverty,

violence and atrocities in Darfur. And here I am, pondering my metaphorical freedom and my own professional “enslavement” to Manhattan rents and sub-par insurance plans and complaining that a month of JDate is too expensive.

My freedoms aren’t rights. They’re luxuries. And all of the smaller enslavements of daily existence for a single youngish American Jewish freelancer — even JDate — are insignificant when you consider the major benefit to living in a free society: I have the luxury to keep on dreaming.