

# Passover and Freedom

A few thoughts about liberty and what it could mean to us in the 21 century

In a few days we will be celebrating Passover. While the name Passover refers to a relatively insignificant aspect of the biblical story in Exodus, another name of it, the feast of freedom, Chag haCherut, nails it. Passover celebrates the moment of liberation of the children of Israel. That's what we learn, from age zero. עֲבָדִים הָיִינוּ, עֲתָה בְּנֵי חוֹרִין, once we were slaves, now we are free people.

And yet, that freedom, that idea of liberation, needs a little bit more attention than a polite and self content nod to ourselves, paired with a vague neurotic fear of the future. We should honestly and sincerely ask ourselves what that freedom means for us. Because there is more than one option to choose from. And some of them clash pretty harshly.

I recently stumbled upon [the recording of a discussion round from a few years ago](#), with, among others, the Russian philosopher Alexandr Dugin. In the discussion, he says something remarkable [1:50]: "in Russian, we have a special word. *Svoboda*. It means freedom. But it also means identity. Being identical to itself." While I personally am certainly, very much and absolutely *not* Mr. Dugin's biggest fan, I have to admit that I love that idea. It gives recognition to a duality, to a gap I feel is wise and authentic to point out and precisely describes my own experience: our selves are split. There is the conscious, visible part, the one we experience every day. And there is a deeper, ideal and potential self, a kind of counterpart. We might not always be fully aware of it and there is a good chance we will never "unlock" it. But it's always there and can serve as a guide through life. I would go as far as claiming that life's journey is, more than anything, about uncovering that deeper self and figuring out who we really are and what we really want and need. If we think of it in Plato's terms, it is the self at the outside of the cave. We can stare at our cave's wall and be content. But if we don't turn around at some point and look for that true self, and then attempt to live a life as much aligned with that true self as possible, we will always look at a shadow of who we really, truly are.

True freedom, thus, according to Dugin, is living our lives as authentically as possible, in line with that deeper "true self".

There is, of course, something inherently *unfree* about a concept of freedom that comes down to "finding out" as opposed to "creating". The freest we can be, if Dugin is right, is by submitting to who we already truly are, anyway. And given the fact that we are

dialectic beings and hence the sum of everything that influenced us, *our* experiences as well as those of our ancestors, we inevitably end up with a very collectivist kind of identity. You know, if I'm just the sum of my experiences as well as everything handed down to me by my ancestors, my siblings, but as well people who grew up in the same cultural context as I will inevitably be very *very* similar to me. And oops, there we go, no place for pretty snowflakes and an endless list of pronouns that were invented since yesterday evening.

And so indeed, Dugin goes on, constructing a pretty bleak, authoritarian, deeply and explicitly illiberal political vision. In his own words, I kid you not, he propagates a world view "built on the total and radical negation of the individual and his centrality".

I'll be honest? Not really my thing.

To me, freedom starts with "freedom from". The collective should stay out of the individuals life as much as possible, no matter if that collective is the state with its power to lock me up, the shtetl with its power to socially sanction me or academia, with its power to tell me what I may think and say and what I am allowed to paint. In that sense, I'm an anarchist.

Yes.

Still.

Even at the ripe age of 42.

Some people just refuse to grow up, I guess.

And so I turn to liberalism. Dugin's arch enemy. Liberalism, at least in its earlier form, allows for everything Dugin hates. It lets gay people marry each other, *chas vechalila*. It allows for citizens to express opinions government, *chas veshalom*, might not like. It makes space for new ideas, even if they are, *yishmor haShem*, not in line with tradition and yes, even if in their earlier stages they are not coherent. Artistic expression is possible without having to take into consideration what some powerful people may think of it.

At first glance, it looks exactly like the society I would like to live in.

But then, I actually do. We *all* do. We all live in some kind of liberal society. And I think that if we close our eyes and listen carefully, we have to admit that something is still missing.

We are allowed and encouraged not only to *do*, but also to *be* what we please. In the process of looking for true individual freedom, we have chosen to cast aside as many things as we could that hold us back. Our obligation to tradition, our obligation to

religion, our obligation to our nation and so on. In the process, with or without noticing, we got rid of that essentialist, ideal self. The soul. We are no longer expected to live up to our own true, fixed, established form. On the contrary. We decided that there is no set "true self". Rather than that, we are expected to *create* that form. While in 500 BC, the philosophical maxime was "know thyself"<sup>1</sup>, 2500 years later, our identities have become "a sum of all your choices"<sup>2</sup>. See what happened there? We lost that own, inner, absolute, role model.

And liberating ourselves from the constraints of our own identities, getting rid of Plato's own personal outside beings, we have managed to liberate ourselves from the possibility of true freedom. Yes, in the Western world "everything is optional", as Dugin puts it. Everything is allowed and can be deconstructed and reconstructed. Life has become a list of free individual choices, of stuff we can subscribe to and unsubscribe from. And politically, socially, it *should* indeed be that way. No one on the outside of us should be able to tell us who we are or what we should do.

But identity, in the end, is that thing that we cannot just freely choose. Analyze it? Yes. Understand it? Yes. Deconstruct it? Yes. But change it? Replace it? Not really. The attempt to actively change our true self is the attempt to change the self that is outside of our Platonic cave. And that attempt will inevitably lead us to ignoring it, losing sight of it and eventually being left with only its shadow on the wall of our cave. Left rootless and without direction other than whatever the current fashion is willing to offer us.

Now, when I personally think of that deeper self we lost, I think of the soul. But we don't need to get all spiritual in order to notice the duality I mean. Let me give you an example: somebody with the drug issue. Believe me, I know. That somebody was me, a decade ago. Freedom, on some superficial level, was another line of coke. Freedom was giving in to that desire for the next kick. But whoever experienced addiction knows that true freedom is the exact opposite. True freedom is the ability to overcome that immediate desire. And there we have it again, there we have that duality, that separation between the immediate, the superficial self, and a "truer" self, something that might not be visible at times, but does exist beneath everything. And if you're thinking now "OK, but is it really objectively better to free yourself from addiction? Am I allowed to impose that choice on someone else, even in theory? Camus and Sartre would disagree!", go ahead and imagine yourself, facing your addicted daughter. I guess you'd have no doubt that getting off whatever she's using is the right thing to do. Because deep down, you actually know that there's a "balanced state", a "right way to be". There is a Platonic "form" of human life. And I would like to argue that that's true collectively, stuff that's right for all humans. And that's true individually, for each of us as subjects.

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<sup>1</sup> "Know thyself" (Greek: Γνῶθι σαυτόν, gnōthi sauton) is the philosophical maxim inscribed upon the Temple of Apollo in the ancient Greek precinct of Delphi.

<sup>2</sup> Albert Camus, L'Hôte (The Guest), 1957

We just lost sight of that fact on our highway to individual freedom.

So what do we do about it? Are we stuck with the choice between totalitarianism and rootless consumerism? Between Dugin's vision of National Bolshevism and a society of anatomized individuals, erratically looking for the next kick?

I believe we are not.

All we have to do is remember an idea that was popularized by the French revolution: the separation between the public and the private. Rousseau described how those two spheres balance each other and how that balance is basic to a functioning participatory society<sup>3</sup>. He championed the idea of the "natural man" who exists in a state of nature, free from the constraints of society. If we think of Rabbi Nachman, he has the same idea of connecting to God when we're alone, in nature, far from others and their gaze. That's when we're able to meet the divine, ourselves, the universe. Now, Rousseau has a very different idea of how society should work than I do, but the separation between public and private, for him as well as for me, is crucial. He recognizes that some things are only possible in the privacy of our own solitude. And other things are necessary for a functioning society.

260 years later, Harald Welzer wisely points out how liberal societies are on the brink of letting go of that separation between the private and the public<sup>4</sup>. Both Dugin and his authoritarian tendencies and liberalism in its current form have lost sight of the importance of that separation. The former, because of his totalitarian dreams. The latter, because of the false assumption that the absence of positive values and any trace of essentialism, things that do make sense in the public arena, are helpful for the private individual and should hence be imposed.

But true freedom needs both. Self and identity on the one hand - and on the other, freedom and space. We need it because the safety privacy provides is important, but a public space that is all about safety is sterile and rigid. And vice versa, we need it because extending the logic of the public into the private will expose and erase those roots, and erode that ground we stand on, as individuals.

As individuals, freedom is first and foremost an inward movement, finding out who we truly are and then constructing a life from the inside that is in line with that true inner self.

Politically, freedom should be as absolute as possible. No one should tell me what I may and what I may not do and think and paint and say. Not explicitly and not subtly. As a society, freedom is a forward movement.

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<sup>3</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Du contrat social*, 1762

<sup>4</sup> Harald Welzer, *Die Vierte Gewalt*, 2022

Privately, between me and myself, the search for true freedom is in sharp contrast with that public freedom. It is anything but capricious. Finding true freedom is inevitably an act of self restriction, of weeding out, of contraction. As individuals, freedom is first and foremost an inward movement, finding out who we truly are and then constructing a life from the inside that is in line with that true inner self.

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