

Tempering Freedom with Responsibility

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One of the most well-known distinctions in political philosophy is between positive and negative freedom, between "freedom from" and "freedom to" – compare the freedom from hunger with the freedom to choose strawberry or vanilla ice-cream, or the freedom from religious persecution with the freedom to practice your religion. Of course, as these examples hint, there are connections between positive and negative freedoms, just as there are connections between rights and duties; but that does not mean they are not conceptually distinct.

This is an interesting time of year in the Jewish calendar. Two weeks ago we celebrated the festival of Purim, which marks the deliverance of the Jews, then concentrated in the Persian Empire, from the threat of annihilation – the familiar story of the Book of Esther. In another two weeks we will celebrate Pesach, or Passover – the even more familiar story of the deliverance of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt, as told in the book of Exodus.

The text of the *Haggadah*, the narrative that we read at the Seder – the ritualised meal at which the Exodus is symbolically re-enacted over matzah and four cups of wine – makes the point that the Egyptians did not seek to annihilate the Jews, but merely to enslave them, to deprive them of liberty. By contrast, the Persians, today's Iranians, set a pattern still sadly familiar amongst antisemites and racists and hate-mongers of all kinds: generalising a personal dislike of one individual into a campaign, as the Book of Esther says, "to destroy and uproot and eradicate an entire race, from infants to the elderly, men and women, all in one day". We celebrate that physical survival with physical observances: parties, gifts to friends, and charity to the poor.

Pesach, on the other hand, also known as the Festival of Freedom, is generally regarded as the birthday of the Jewish people, when a mere tribe was forged into a nation by the experience of escaping from slavery in Egypt, and adopting a constitution, in the form of the revelation at Mount Sinai – "one nation under Gd", to borrow a phrase from a later freedom movement!

So this is a time to reflect on the responsibility that comes with freedom, on the fact that freedom is not licence, that one person's unfettered freedom can encroach on another's, that the uninhibited exercise of power is both oppressive and unstable, if for no other reason than that the next bully may be bigger and stronger. Even the celebration of Pesach is tempered by the recollection that victory only comes hand-in-hand with defeat, that others lost that we might win. For that reason, we spill wine from our glass to symbolise that our joy is mitigated by the knowledge that others have suffered, and many leave an empty chair at the table as a reminder of those who, for reason of poverty or persecution, are not able to celebrate for themselves. All in all, this celebration can be quite sobering!