

Robespierre and Saadyah

Robespierre (1758 –1794) was one of the most controversial figures of the French Revolution. He rose from obscurity to play an important part in the fall of the French Monarchy. In the chaos that followed, France was torn apart by civil strife, conflicting ideologies on the left and the right, a reign of terror with thousands guillotined, civil war, famine, and the breakdown of civil society. The ramifications continued with almost a century of instability, and some would argue, prepared the ground for two World Wars. He is admired and reviled to this very day.

Robespierre for a brief period ruled supreme in post-Revolutionary France. He headed The *Committee for Public Safety* that effectively controlled the state where he controversially signed 542 arrests during the Reign of Terror in the spring and summer of 1794.

Most of us would still identify with the ideas he believed in. Individual freedom, equality, rights of the whole citizenry, the abolition of privilege, and state religion. A true democrat, in theory. But he faced opposition both from the right and the left as well as the Church for trying to establish an alternative. He was so committed to his ideas he ended up alienating almost everyone and within two years he was himself, deposed and guillotined.

I believe this is a lesson essential for us who value genuine democracy need to learn. If you try to impose an ideological, agenda roughshod over a majority of citizenship you will eventually end up losing even the praiseworthy ideals.

He believed that human beings had to abide by a moral standard, but that it had to be imposed from above, whether it was religion or the state. Humans were not capable of agreeing by themselves. But the question was and is, where does this morality come from? He shared with the French Philosopher *J.J Rousseau (1712 1788)* the idea that even if humans were inherently good, they became corrupted by society. In his *Social Contract (1762)* he advocated an external standard of morality. Unlike *Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)* who thought we did have an inner sense of good. This dichotomy continues to run through Western societies, fluctuating between the extremes.

My position, based on a traditional Jewish point of view is that humans are neither inherently good nor bad but have a capacity for both. Some may be more naturally one or the other. In the main, we tend to be motivated by self-interest, and we are not very good at seeing other points of view. The result is that all political and social systems are potentially corrupt and self-serving. The only feature that Democracy has, its saving grace, is that other systems do not have this capacity for relatively peaceful change. But I do not trust in princes, and I do not like what I see in human systems when they are put into practice. Chaos seems to be the natural state of humanity. The miracle is that somehow some of us manage to pull through and survive with our standards as intact as possible. The only way we can do this is by

choosing a definite moral code and standard. But which one?

In my most confusing moments, I derive a lot of solace intellectually, if not emotionally, from the great Egyptian-born giant of the Jewish world *Saadya Gaon (892-942 CE)*. Born in Egypt he became the Gaon of Babylonia, the spiritual head of the Jewish religious world. He was contentious, argumentative, and a fighter for what he believed. He was a brilliant polymath. The first grammarian, and linguist, he wrote the first Hebrew Arabic prayer Book, was a poet and philosopher, and the head of two of the major academies in Mesopotamia. His was the first book of Jewish Philosophy (Philo of Alexandria wrote in Greek), called *Emunot Ve Deot, Beliefs and Opinions*, that may have been superseded by Maimonides, but laid the ground for him. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emunoth_ve-Deoth

In his introduction, he says that one must go on challenging, thinking, and exploring the world of science and knowledge to try to understand what is meant by God and how to live a good life. This has to be a lifelong pursuit. But what if one waits until one has the answers before one decides how to act? One may never find the answers. So, what does one do meanwhile?

One has to be loyal to one's inherited or revealed tradition and use that as a basis upon which to build. This way one will have a system of morals while continuing to refine and explore. Of course, the danger is that you might think you have found a better or different set of morals. What does one do then? Ideally, find a way of reconciling them.

This is precisely how I deal with challenges within both my religious and political life. I have inherited and been educated in two different systems. Sometimes they align. Often, they do not. I can see the values in both. I know I will be in a minority in both. But I take comfort from the sense of tradition that I have a safety net, whenever I feel I may stray.

I am neither completely at home in the fractious secular, indulgent world of right versus left, complete freedom or excessive restriction. I recognize the need for rules designed to protect human beings from violence. I recognize the need for government. But both leak poison into each other. I oppose trying to impose views and refusing to compromise. All or nothing. Choice or Life. Black or White. Good or Bad. Similarly in my religious world, all or nothing, fundamentalism, or de-construction, nationalism or messianism, Chassidism or Lithuanian, Ashkenazi or Sephardi. I advocate personal responsibility and personal choice.

I am everywhere and nowhere exclusively. And even so, I feel strangely comfortable. Whatever happens to me depends on factors within and beyond my control. But the one thing I definitely will not do is use the guillotine to enforce my views or think that violence solves anything beyond self-preservation. And I hope that Putin comes to a very sticky end.

King Lear said, "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods." But I think we are complex creatures of creation who can rise, as the Talmud says, to the stars or sink to the dirt.