When the Pope Hits Your Eye Like a Big Pizza Pie, That’s Ahmari

From neoconservatism to integralist cosplay to active worship of China and Russia, the ‘post-liberal’ right has had a giddy five years

BY JAMES KIRCHICK

I first met Sohrab Ahmari, one of the most influential and controversial writers on the American right, a little over a decade ago, during the secular neoconservative phase of his dizzying ideological pilgrimage from Marxist atheism to Catholic “post-liberal neo-traditionalism.” An intellectually restless law student, Ahmari aspired to a career in journalism, and a mutual friend—a human rights activist, as it happened—introduced us.

Like many immigrants to this country, Ahmari, who was born in Iran, had a way of making you feel obscenely lucky to be born an American, and that you should never take it for granted. The first things that struck me about him were his infectious optimism and seemingly old-world civility. This was about a year after the birth of the Green Movement, when millions of Iranians, mostly our age at the time, poured into the streets to protest the regime’s fraudulent presidential election. Ahmari was an eloquent advocate for their democratic aspirations. Though we came from very different backgrounds—he, the product of a broken home and a refugee from an Islamic theocracy; I, the son of upper-middle-class Jewish professionals in the most hospitable country Jews have ever known—we shared a love for the written word and the freedom that America represented.

I connected Ahmari to a few editors, but can’t take any credit for his subsequent rise, which has been dramatic. Not long after we met, he co-edited a collection of essays by dissidents from across the Middle East, Arab Spring Dreams: The Next Generation Speaks Out for Freedom and Justice from North Africa to Iran, which included a piece by a gay Moroccan man compelled to mourn his lover’s suicide in secret, and for which Ahmari managed to snag a foreword from Gloria Steinem. Around this time, Ahmari joined The Wall Street Journal editorial page, based first in New York and then in London, a perch he used to...
skewer authoritarians and bolster embattled democrats around the world. While in Britain, Ahmari converted to Catholicism, which he announced publicly in the summer of 2016 after the gruesome murder of a French priest by Islamists in Normandy. I’d recently started to notice a more pious bent in Ahmari’s writings, and given what I knew of his universalist commitments, this development (which he later recounted in a thoughtful memoir) did not come as a particular surprise. The following year, I attended the baptism of his first child.

When Donald Trump descended onto the political scene in a fit of nativist and isolationist bluster, Ahmari was exactly where I expected him to be. In the summer of 2016, he published a cover story for Commentary, “Illiberalism: The Worldwide Crisis,” which diagnosed a transnational, cross-ideological tendency distinguished by, among other things, an “impatience with norms and procedural niceties; a tendency toward populist leader-worship; and skepticism toward international treaties and institutions, such as NATO, that provide the scaffolding for the U.S.-led postwar order.” Ahmari included Trump alongside other practitioners of such politics like Russian President Vladimir Putin, the “xenophobic” French National Front leader Marine Le Pen, and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. The following year, after Trump’s shock election victory, and by then a Commentary senior writer, Ahmari published another cover story titled, “The Terrible American Turn Toward Illiberalism,” in which he presciently decried “the perils of conspiracism and romantic politics” on both sides of the U.S. political spectrum, but especially among his fellow conservatives. “Beginning when Trump clinched the GOP nomination last year,” he lamented, “a great deal of conservative ‘thinking’ has amounted to: You did X to us, now enjoy it as we dish it back to you and then some.”

Like other right-of-center Trump critics, Ahmari hoped to join a broad, bipartisan coalition committed to defending basic liberal values at home and abroad from the whims of a president who threatened to undermine both. But as what should have been a loyal opposition hardened into an often unethical and perpetually panic-stricken “resistance,” it became harder for self-respecting, intellectually consistent, anti-Trump conservatives to be the team players that their left-of-center peers demanded. In particular, the unscrupulous behavior of Senate Democrats and the media during the Brett Kavanaugh nomination battle, and the cynical promotion of the Russia “collusion” narrative, put Ahmari in the position of defending Trump from the hysterical excesses of his adversaries, a cause he would take up with gusto after leaving Commentary in 2018 to become editor of the New York Post op-ed page.

Now at a more populist, pugilistic media outlet than the Journal or Commentary (and one that had endorsed Trump in 2016), Ahmari’s targets shifted. Rather than fight an increasingly lonely battle against the enemies of liberal values on both right and left, Ahmari quite rapidly transmogrified into a partisan supporter of the president, in turn appearing to renounce the ideals that had, until quite recently, been his lodestar. He has since become representative of a new intellectual and political redoubt on the American right, one that is fundamentally pessimistic about the country, its people, its values, and its role in the world, imbuing his dizzying personal odyssey of the last 10 years with a broader cultural salience.

In March 2019, the conservative Catholic journal First Things published an open letter that Ahmari helped draft. Titled “Against the Dead Consensus,” it looked favorably on Trump’s takeover of the Republican Party, lambasted “consensus conservatives” for “fetishizing” “individual autonomy,” and condemned other aspects of “tyrannical liberalism” such as “the transhumanist project of radical self-identification.” Two months later, Ahmari went further. In “Against David French-ism,” also published in First Things, he singled out the even-keeled, evangelical political commentator as just the sort of spineless conservative “unsuitable to the depth of the present crisis facing religious conservatives.” (As the titles of his First Things manifestos suggest, Ahmari had become motivated more by his animosities than his passions.)

As Ahmari defined it, “David French-ism” is a posture of political engagement too “polite,” “guileless,” and respectful of a nonexistent “neutral” public square for our current predicament, which demands nothing less than an acceptance of “politics as war and enmity.” Engaged in existential struggle with “autonomy-maximizing liberalism,” American conservatism could no longer afford to be Burkean, soberly defending the accomplishments of civilization from revolutionary progressivism. Desperate times call for desperate measures, and conservatives must answer the call by becoming revolutionists themselves, harnessing the power of the state to fight mercilessly for “a public square re-ordered to the common good and ultimately the Highest Good.”

What incited Ahmari’s broadside against French, and what led him to embrace the very “impatience with norms and procedural niceties” he had warned against just three years earlier, was not the sort of event that future historians are likely to identify as having clearly distinguished an old political era from a new one, like Pearl Harbor or 9/11 or the murder of George Floyd. Ahmari was perusing Facebook one day when he came upon an ad for a “drag queen reading hour at a public library in Sacramento.” Organized by private organizations across the country, drag queen reading hours are what they sound like: drag queens reading children’s books aloud to children. “More than just exposing youth to different forms of beauty, performance, and experience, it dispels the stigma and stereotypes of predation and lechery that are so often and unfortunately projected onto LGBTQ youth workers,” is how one participant described the program. “And it does so in such an innocent, playful, and positive way. It’s a beautiful thing.”

Ahmari expressed his disgust on his popular Twitter feed: “If you can’t see why children belong nowhere near drag, with its currents of transvestic fetishism, we have nothing to say to each other,” he tweeted. “We are irrefocably opposed. There’s no polite, David French-ian third way around
the cultural civil war. The only way is through." Ahmari singled out French for abuse because French, who, before becoming a journalist had litigated cases for an ecumenical roster of clients on behalf of a conservative religious liberty group, is a prominent advocate of "viewpoint-neutral access to public facilities when those facilities are opened up for public use." This is the legal principle that allows, for example, both a private organization to host a drag queen reading hour at a public library in California and a Christian church to host weekend prayer services in public buildings in New York.

Besides the constitutional argument, the French position also represents the broader ethic of pluralism: Just as Ahmari would find it unconscionable for parents in San Francisco to dictate the terms of his children's education, so they expect noninterference from him. No family has ever been forced to send their child to a drag queen reading hour; it was the mere existence of this voluntary event, some 3,000 miles away in Sacramento, that whipped Ahmari into a frenzy. Never mind that putting a stop to it would require state intervention, thereby janking the First Amendment and its guarantee of free association, which also protects him and his fellow religious conservatives from overweening secularists. "This is demonic," Ahmari declared. "To hell with liberal order."

Observing Ahmari's breakdown from afar, I felt a pang of guilt. Several years earlier, before his conversion to Catholicism, I'd brought him and two other straight friends to a Sunday drag brunch at a restaurant near my home in Washington, D.C. Popular with tourists, the drag brunch is a weekly gay ritual where formers sing and strut around the room. And Bloody Marys, consume generous helpings of comfort food as drag performers sing and strut around the room. The person at our table who relished the Thanks, and Bloody Marys, consume generous helpings of comfort food as drag performers sing and strut around the room. The person at our table who relished the raucous affair most was, by far, Ahmari. Had I mistaken his apparent enjoyment that day for an inner turmoil? Had I helped seed it?

Even understanding that his Catholic conversion would almost certainly lead to a more socially conservative belief system, the nature of Ahmari's attack on French stunned me. It wasn't only that the person I'd known to be so unfailingly polite was now embracing public incivility as a positive good. I was also confused by how a drag queen reading hour for children could lead to a wholesale personal and intellectual break.

But homosexuality and nontraditional gender expression are high on the list of fears shared by Ahmari and his fellow travelers on the post-liberal "new right." Last year, in his inaugural column for The American Conservative (where he is now a contributing editor), Ahmari explained his trajectory from grateful immigrant convert to the creed of American exceptionalism to a chastened American citizen who now enjoins the leaders of his country to "Stop lecturing the world, and for God's sake, stop trying to remake other societies in your own image." Looking back on his earlier neoconservative political orientation in disbelief, he wondered who could possibly believe such things, "but a young opinion journalist with a mind self-marinated in the goopy abstractions of interventionism, nurtured by men like Bret Stephens, who on the day he hired me at the Journal told me that his ideal vision of freedom was the 82nd Airborne escorting a Pride parade through the streets of Tehran?"

Ahmari's self-examination was less notable for the intellectual evolution it tried to convey than for its inadvertent admission that, in the process, he'd evidently lost his sense of humor. I've never worked for Stephens, but I know him well enough to be certain that his comment was a joke. But Ahmari—whom I suspect took it as a joke at the time—must now, from the distance of a decade, take such things literally (if not seriously). Elsewhere in the column, Ahmari derided American leaders for being too busy with "LGBTQ rights in Uzbekistan" to notice the house is on fire at home.

Ahmari may have a point about the naiveté of the American foreign policy establishment, but he gives the impression of being preoccupied less with U.S. economic or political failures than with nightmare visions of men in thongs and dykes on bikes—that he is haunted by a fear, as H.L. Mencken defined Puritanism, that someone, somewhere, may be happy.

In his 1981 book Political Pilgrims: Travels of Western Intellectuals to the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba 1928–1979, the Hungarian-born political scientist Paul Hollander observed that communism enjoyed its greatest popularity among Western intellectuals during the Great Depression, "not when its performance was the most impressive or its policies most humane, but at a time when a severe economic crisis buffeted the Western world." Record-high unemployment and poverty at home "helped create a perception of the Soviet Union as an island of stability, order, economic rationality, and social justice." Likewise, during the wave of Western intellectual admiration for China and Cuba in the 1960s, the United States was undergoing major social upheaval over civil rights, the sexual revolution, and the Vietnam War. According to Hollander, the intellectual admirers of communism sought a "social order in which the individual
was free from aimlessness, confusion, and uncertainty—such as the intellectuals experienced in their own societies and which are endemic to contemporary, secular, pluralistic societies.”

Hollander’s subjects were men and women of the left whose disgust at the inequality produced by Western capitalism inspired a search for alternative models in countries where inequality had supposedly been eliminated. They shared an “amalgam of alienation and utopia-seeking.” But the yearning for a society devoid of “aimlessness, confusion, and uncertainty”—a society, as Ahmari might say, “reordered to the common good and ultimately the Highest Good”—is not specific to the left. Thirty years after the fall of the Soviet Union, a similar yearning is conspicuous among the post-liberal right, whose veneration of authoritarian regimes is—like Hollander’s Cold War intellectuals—moving from live-action role-playing to programmatic political ambition.

When I recently asked Ahmari to explain the new right’s take on foreign policy, he said it is a belief that “America needs retrenchment. There is nothing bad with a power saying we need domestic consolidation for a while.” Behind this belief is the “sense that America is internally incoherent, internally decaying, and that hawkishness of the kind that certainly I used to subscribe to and I got my entrée into the journalistic world through, a kind of secular neo-conservatism, that kind of hawkishness not only doesn’t address these internal crises but distract us from our ability to address them.” Ahmari pointed to the “vast number of underemployed men, fentanyl addiction,” and “visible social decay” as signs that America has become “a machine that runs itself without any sense of telos.”

Pretty standard fare, except that the alternative model most favored by Ahmari and the new right is, of all places, Hungary—and not the Hungarian system or economy or society per se, but the goulash authoritarianism of its current prime minister, Viktor Orbán. Last summer, Fox News host Tucker Carlson spent a week broadcasting his show from Hungary, which he lauded as a “small country with a lot of lessons for the rest of us”—so many, apparently, that he returned recently for another week of Budapest-based broadcasts. Carlson was followed by former Vice President Mike Pence, who praised the Orbán government’s curbs on abortion access at the Budapest Demographic Summit. This spring, the city will play host to the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC). Orbán was the first and one of the very few world leaders to endorse Trump in 2016, and Trump recently returned the favor, expressing his support for Orbán in Hungary’s upcoming parliamentary elections.

New right thinkers frequently cite Orbán’s ban on university gender studies programs as an example of the kind of thing they would like to do in America, and while some of them expressed perfunctory disapproval of Orbán’s expulsion of Central European University, they rarely hid their delight that the George Soros-funded campus was forced to relocate to Vienna. “The biggest difference between our conservative politicians and Viktor Orbán is this: Our team talks incessantly about how horrible wokeness is, but Prime Minister Orbán actually does something about it,” enthused Rod Dreher, Ahmari’s colleague at the American Conservative, last fall at the National Conservatism Conference in Orlando. Another source of admiration is the law, modeled on a 2013 Russian measure, prohibiting the “popularizing” of homosexuality to children. (The legislation was adopted in response to a series of sex scandals involving Hungarian officials, including one member of Orbán’s political party who was arrested while fleeing an all-male orgy held in defiance of COVID regulations.)

Like the Western intellectuals who thrilled to communist dictatorships during the Cold War, the American new right seems enchanted more by grand and highly symbolic gestures performed by the state (children, who still have access to the internet, will no longer be “taught” homosexuality!) than by, for example, per capita wealth, which is now lower in Hungary than in Romania, or with cultural and intellectual achievement, which has mostly deserted Hungary in the Orbán era.

As recently as 2016, Ahmari was castigating Orbán, who, he wrote, “hollowed out the country’s democratic institutions … politicized the judiciary, nationalized pensions by decree, proscribed ‘unbalanced’ media coverage, and removed a slew of other checks and balances on his own power.” Three years later, he was conducting a softball interview with Orbán’s foreign minister, Péter Szijjártó, and indignantly arguing that “Western elites should stop lecturing Hungary.” More recently, he appeared to endorse the Hungarian government’s imposition of price controls on groceries.

Ahmari’s new admiration for “eastern” alternatives to Western decadence does not stop at the Danube. “I’m at peace with a Chinese-led 21st century,” he announced last year in a (since deleted) tweet. “Late-liberal America is too dumb and decadent to last as a superpower. Chinese civilization, especially if it recovers more of its Confucian roots, will possess a great deal of natural virtue.” He has repeatedly praised Wang Huling, first secretary of the Secretariat of the Chinese Communist Party and a leading party intellectual, whose 1989 book, America Against America, assailed what one writer described as the “radical, nihilistic individualism at the heart of modern American liberalism.” When the Chinese government recently decided to ban depictions of “sissy men” in popular entertainment, Ahmari favorably contrasted the move with the United States, which “got rid of its restrictions against degeneracy in a flash of postwar ‘liberation,’ and it has definitely backfired.” China’s war on metrosexuals, Ahmari continued, “would’ve been commonplace in, e.g., an older Hollywood that wasn’t at war with nature and the family.”

This perception of Western society as enervated and effete and dictatorships
as vigorous and manly was shared by the political pilgrims of old. Hollander quotes the Polish American Sovietologist Adam Ulam, who observed in 1966 that “an intellectual often finds a certain morbid fascination in the puritanic and repressive aspects of the Soviet regime and also in its enormous outward self-assurance, which contrasts so saliently with the apologetic, hesitant self-image of the democratic world.”

Then there is Ahmari’s native Iran. “The lesson of the Islamic revolution is that rapid secularization of the kind that the Shah pursued was bound to create a backlash,” he told me in a recent conversation. It was startling to hear, especially considering his passionate, almost vocation support of the Green Movement when I met him a dozen years ago. As recently as 2018, he described the Pahlavi dynasty as overseeing a “benign autocracy,” but now he castigates the shah for having “owned half the casinos in Tehran” and “instituted a social welfare program for prostitutes.” While noting that the Iranian Revolution was a “tragedy for my family,” Ahmari cryptically warns that it offers an “interesting lesson for America liberals today and what kind of backlashes they may be fomenting.”

Ahmari is at pains to distinguish the new right’s approach to foreign policy from the isolationist right and the anti-imperialist left. The former, driven by nativism, fears and distrusts the world outside America’s borders, and believes that too much American engagement abroad can only corrupt it at home. The latter, driven by self-hatred, romanticizes the foreign, and believes that American racism, capitalism, and oppression of marginalized peoples corrupt the world. By way of distinguishing the new right, Ahmari pointed me to a “moronic and sinister” argument on Twitter from the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, a Washington think tank funded by both Charles Koch and George Soros, which depicts the Chinese government as the primary victim of violent attacks on Asian Americans, and advocates for toning down criticism of the CCP:

Anti-Asian violence is not an aberration. It’s a troubling phenomenon that runs through the course of US history and it threatens to surge again as politicians inflate the geopolitical threat from China.

The specific substance of Quincy’s strange take may be at odds with what Ahmari and the new right believe, but you’d be forgiven for noticing that they advocate a lot of the same things. The isolationist right, the woke left, and the new right are all pretty repulsed by their country (albeit for different reasons), and believe its unique repulsiveness disqualifies it from having an active role in the world.

Wary of the “Globalist American Empire,” Ahmari now argues for understanding small, vulnerable, but independent democracies as belonging instead to the “historic civilizational spheres” of revanchist great powers like Russia and China. With 130,000 Russian troops massed on Ukraine’s borders, Ahmari has recently been frothing at “Liberals and NATO jingoists.” Last August, during the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, he ghoulishly exulted in the humiliating defeat dealt to a decadent West: “Motherfucker, you couldn’t handle Afghan goatherders,” he taunted from his keyboard as U.S. Marines and Afghan civilians were being targeted by the Taliban. By contrast, that same week, he tweeted admiringly of the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council of Iran, who “Isn’t ashamed of his national heritage” and “Couldn’t give a shit about your pronouns.” Ahmari insists on calling the Biden administration “the regime,” lamenting “the bizarre fact of a regime that enacts laws referring to mothers as ‘birthing people.’” (His Twitter account has lately become a daily encyclical of Francoist pronunciamentos, juvenile invective, and praise for political extremists.)

Beyond the moral weirdness, Ahmari’s new creed is also notable for its incoherence. At the same time that he would like the U.S. government to adopt what he believes is the Russian model of state interference in the public square, he worries that “The repressive mechanisms used in America are a lot more sophisticated” than in Russia. It would seem, therefore, that the United States already uses state power to shape society along certain moral dimensions—just not the ones Ahmari likes. So is the point to have a repressive state apparatus that privileges his side in all places at all times, regardless of elections? If so, why on earth is such a transition from democracy to autocracy incumbent upon Americans in particular? Which America is that supposed to revive or save?

When I asked Ahmari why his writing and tweeting include not just criticisms of American liberals but praise of foreign autocrats, he responded that, “There are moments in which an adversary tells you a truth about yourself and it’s worthwhile to listen and look in the mirror and see if it matches reality.”

It wasn’t an answer to the question I asked, but on its own terms, I understood what he meant. Although I’m much more relaxed about issues of human sexuality than Ahmari, there are aspects of the new gender ideology, particularly its harmful effects on women and children, that I too find deeply troubling. But it remains a question how Ahmari gets from A to B: from defending Trump against fanatical anti-Trump ideologues to ditching liberalism and democracy altogether; from rolling his eyes at the use of silly new gender pronouns to admiring the perceived virility of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps. When Putin delivers a speech bemoaning American cancel culture and praising Martin Luther King Jr., why do Ahmari’s bullshit detectors suddenly fail and leave him as credulous as Anna Louise Strong reporting on Stalin?

Maybe, as a secular Jewish homosexual, I’ll never be able to understand...
Ahmari’s ... “transition.” And maybe I’m the fool for not being sufficiently chastened by the failure of America to promote democracy abroad and crush wokeness at home. But if the rah-rah neoconservatism of our misspent youth was naïve, Ahmari’s new preference for playing authoritarian, ethnically homogenous, Eastern European dress-up in a diverse, continental democracy of 330 million is no less romantic, and even less practical. Ahmari still acknowledges that the United States is “the only country in the world where someone like me could come from Iran and within that span become a leading intellectual on the right.” But he seems to be left with nothing but contempt for the system, principles, and people that made his American dream possible.

In each of his books, Ahmari has generously acknowledged “three men to whom I owe my career in journalism and whom I have resolved to thank in every book I publish till I pass from this earthly vale”—his former bosses Bret Stephens and John Podhoretz, and me. I used to feel a measure of slightly bemused pride at this tribute. But now the first thing that comes to mind is a question posed by a pair of my fellow degenerates: What have I done to deserve this?

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**ARTS & LETTERS**

Sheila Heti’s Abstract Love for an Imperfect Universe

The novelist’s latest, ‘Pure Colour,’ is a rare, playful synthesis of the universal and the intimate

**BY MARCO ROTH**

In his canonical treatise on abstract art, “Abstraction and Empathy,” the early-20th-century German aesthetic theorist Wilhem Worringer argued that abstraction is the way that the human creative impulse recognizes and represents itself to itself as a form of positive freedom. The ability and the will to participate in a larger universal creation—divinity within a larger divine space, or natural within a larger nature—that’s what artists (when uninfluenced by fame, competition, or the wish to be loved) are generally after. Worringer opposed the self-enjoyment that arises from the contemplation or production of abstract art to the demands of empathy in representational art, which asks us to answer a call for recognition, even if it’s only a single flower saying “look at me and see me clearly!”

Worringer’s theory was at least partly a polemic against the “evolutionist” or “progressive” school of art critics who thought 19th-century empathetic realism constituted an improvement over naïve and abstract modes. His argument was that both the abstract and empathic instincts coexisted in human art history, but not in the same individual work of art. Art could be empathic or abstract, but not both simultaneously.

As it happens, novels, like representational art, are not particularly conducive to abstraction. Irony, intended or not, is baked into the endeavor of novel writing. So is empathy. At the very least, there’s supposed to be a story that provides human interest and a world of sensuous objects for the reader’s pleasure, not the coldness of a created universe where God, as the Canadian Jewish novelist Sheila Heti’s apparently omniscient narrator in *Pure Colour* puts it, “has decided that the first draft of existence contained too many flaws” and is preparing its destruction.

Rather than fighting this tension, Heti seems to have taken it as a challenge to be embraced. *Pure Colour* both continues and raises the stakes of Heti’s earlier work. With the exception of her second book, *Ticknor* (2005), based on the lives of historical 19th-century Boston intellectuals, none of her previous works dubbed “novels” participated in ordinary games of realism: Scenes and scenery are sparse; history and historical concerns absent; characters mostly present themselves through speech and interior monologue; autobiographical elements blend with fictions; the life of the artist and questions about aesthetics are explicitly thematized.

In *How Should a Person Be* (2010), “Sheila,” the narrator, and her friend Margaux (based on Heti’s real-life friend, the painter Margaux Williamson) start a contest in their artist clique to make “the ugliest work of art.” Plot, in the sense of action—when it happens—occurs on the borderland with allegory (Heti’s character, in search of her calling, compares herself to Moses and gives graphically described, extravagant blowjobs to a boyfriend known only as “Israel.”)

*Pure Colour* offers a new variation on Heti’s previous modus operandi, but at the scale of the whole work: Imagine a desire that’s at odds with that desire’s form (like the ugly painting contest, or a woman who doesn’t want to have children, in *Motherhood*), then use the form to explore that tension to a breaking
point. In *Pure Colour*, it’s the desire for abstraction itself—to be lifted out or up from the world—that crashes against the formal horizons of novels.

Insofar as the book has a plot, it’s a schematic love triangle set in a placeless provincial town that sometimes feels like Heti’s native Toronto or could be a suburb of the end of history, a setting rather than a place. A young woman with vague artistic leanings grieves her father, who’d loved her with an absolute and overwhelming attachment that she didn’t know how to answer, while also realizing that she’s doomed to unrequited love for a woman who’s concerned above all with “collective conditions” rather than individual suffering or pleasure. These characters are made to fit into one of three types: the family-person, the artist, the socialist or communalist, or, in the cosmology of *Pure Colour*, Bear people, Bird people, and Fish people.

To give a sense of how casually yet seriously Heti takes this world-building, she’ll write things like, “A person born from the bear egg is like a person holding onto their very best doll.” A sentence like this is a mind-twisting mixture of naivety and sophistication. It is anything but “pure.” It sounds partly religious—like saying man was shaped from clay and woman from his rib—but also articulated in the still, small voice of a child possessed of an adult’s psychological perceptiveness. It’s also a sentence written by a 21st-century adult author who knows damn well that her readers understand that Bears are mammals and are not born from eggs. Writing that kind of sentence requires an absolute trust: both in oneself to write and one’s readers to accept. Many of the novel’s sentences myths, and arabesques perform this trust game with the reader. That the voice might be Heti’s or Mira’s, the bird person artist, only adds to the game. The narration is unreliable and entirely reliable.

Given Heti’s involvement in the world of painting and interests in philosophy and criticism (throughout the novel Mira and her fellow “Birds” are referred to as critics rather than as artists, in the sense that Oscar Wilde says that artists are “critics of reality”) the odds are high that she is aware of Worringer’s assertion of the universal coexistence of the abstract and the empathic and the nonuniversal belief that an artwork cannot serve both. Even if not, she seems to have set out to disprove or outdo him by producing a work that is both abstract and a critique of abstraction, empathic and a critique of the limits of representation to achieve empathic connections.

This is a literary-artistic ambition on a grand scale, but one that comes dressed modestly and speaks often in Mira’s naive visions. Understanding what Heti was attempting here also helped me make clearer sense of what Heti’s editor might have meant when she referred to Heti as “one of our freest literary minds” in her publicity copy. Surely all writers are free in this best of all possible publishing words, but some are certainly freer than others. Yet how as readers do we sense freedom on the page? And what sort of liberty are we really discussing?

The most boring answer remains the conventional avant-garde one: Heti has written herself free of some outworn, still persistent ideas of “how a novel should be.” With a background in contemporary theater, or “performance,” as it’s now called, rather than the usual American MFA mill and its emphasis on “roundedness” and empathic character-based realism, she repurposed a bunch of techniques from the canonical dramatists of the 1960s and 1970s—Stoppard, Sam Shepherd—whose originality is now a half-century old. Heti’s own contribution was to imbue these techniques with a more specifically philosophical sharpness and wit found in Wilde’s dramatic dialogues: “The Decay of Lying,” “The Critic as Artist” and “The Artist as Critic” and the nonpretentious idioms of Canadians who treat these questions with a seriousness that can only come from the good provincial fortune of having escaped the fate of living in New York or Los Angeles. The result, up to this point, has been a kind of circa 1990s “mumblecore” novel of ideas.

Freedom here appears negatively emancipatory, the shopworn act of rebellion against a tradition that then always ends up ratifying the tradition it rebelled against. By this point—we are at least several decades into the post-avant-garde era—this kind of act is an obvious, highly codified ritual. Such demonstrations are what Walter Benjamin said of fashion, “the tamed tiger’s leap in the arena.” The novel as a genre was always a kind of “loose baggy monster,” so the form contains within itself the potential to get looser, baggier, and less overtly “structured”—and ta-da! Do you like my new “novel,” mommy?

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What critics now call “autofiction”—reduced to an aesthetic idea—mostly comes across as this kind of run-of-the-mill performance, violations of form that are themselves well-codified.
children?—and then often treat relationships and situations as experimental sites in the search for answers. The tension inherent in this pursuit is a product of expectations related to traditional definitions of femininity: A male protagonist engaged in such pursuits is entirely familiar, and not in a desirable or even neutral way.

It's not just that no man could have written Heti's *Motherhood*, but that the sort of life in its pages, lived as a persistent philosophical inquiry, the ambivalence acted out in intimate conversations and the making and breaking of promises to partners and friends, what might be called the freedom to revise oneself, has been recently redefined—politically—as a female preserve. When this kind of questioning appears in contemporary fiction by men, it does so—out of guilty necessity—as a kind of pathology, evidence of immaturity, neurosis, or "narcissism" (compare Ben Kunkel's *Indecision*, the turgid evolutions of Ben Lerner's first-person narrator in *10:04*, or the Heti-obsessed, self-hating narrator of Sean Thor Conroe's soon-to-be-published novel, *Facceboi*). None of this is Heti's responsibility. But if her work feels freer to us than similarly themed novels by her male contemporaries, a lot of that is because she's less constrained by any external pressure or internalized need to perform guilt, or to demonstrate compensatory virtue and social awareness.

Another way to say this is that Heti, to a unique degree among her contemporaries, has an unembarrassed devotion to the idea of "the artist," and has, like all good modernists, developed her own sustaining mythology of what it means to fully inhabit that persona—and is generally left alone by career-killing critics and political scolds so she can write.

This too, however, is only a limited kind of freedom. "The poet nothing affirmed and so never lieth," as Sir Philip Sidney put it, in reply to the Platonists and censors of the Elizabethan age. And to "own" the identity of the artist, in this way, can deprive you of other kinds of freedom, including the freedom to be taken seriously. Also, as the history of modernism and modern art shows, it's all too easy to become a prisoner of one's own myth.

The "ne plus ultra" of artistic freedom, however, comes when the artist understands and seems to accept the provisionality of her own work, the restlessness of an experiment that undoes itself, but doesn't get too caught up in the dynamics of its own experimentalism. This is what happens in the climactic middle section of *Pure Colour*: Mira is fed up with her marginal existence as a lamp-store clerk (the lamps are Tiffany-style colored glass, one of the novel's few precise details and a neat one that hints at the relationship between the titular aspiration and reality, the filter and the harsh truth); she's haunted by what she thinks of as her failure to connect with her father; she feels her life to be a failure and finds her spirit dissolving into a leaf on a tree by the riverbank where she once sat with her father as a child. In the leaf, she feels both liberated and stuck, "The problem in life had always been that she wanted to be bigger, but she didn't know how ... She didn't even know what her right size was. But there, under the golden sun, she finally found out: it was the size of a leaf ... But the love of her father had made her think she was great, as giant as the universe and other people should know it ... She had gone into the world without him, thinking she could achieve it, but she achieved only a strange distance from this person she loved." This isn't magical realism, it's a kind of "spiritual realism": a difficult, human-scaled psychological insight about recognizing one's limitations in life is literalized as a change of scale. This isn't exactly allegory, nor parable, it's an embodiment of a thought experiment. A realization.

Inside the leaf, Mira has an additional series of realizations. She's able to commune with her father's spirit and the two embark on an open-ended series of transcendental musings, collectively voiced from no particular perspective. A section on the subjective existence of God begins, "All I'm trying to say is if you want to have a true picture of God in your head, you have to recognize you can have no true picture of him." The way to picture God, it turns out, is inherently subjective, but that subjectivity, the particularity of God to each person, is presented as a potential proof of a divine absolute, as if each one of us were squares of a Tiffany lampshade.

These meditations are also perspectival tricks that embody the formal risk Heti takes throughout: the conversations and disembodied soliloquies about the existence of God and the end of the world, the ruminations about Bear people and Bird people and Fish people, the thoughts about the proper size of one's spirit, these are simultaneously "transcendental" and particular ways of narrating an individual consciousness's awareness of loss, decay, change, and death. Each section of *Pure Colour* takes the reader up and down this ladder that connects low to high, the everyday to the eternal, the personal to the abstract, without managing to put one above the other. It's not "merely psychology" nor is it "purely religion". It's not showing off and it's not playing dumb.

But how does Heti manage to perform this rare synthesis of the universal and the intimate? Eventually, Heti lets her character out of the leaf, because the universe of this novel, like the universe it attempts to imitate, is provisional and self-revising. Feelings change along with the climate. If God is preparing to rip up the first draft of Creation, we may rip up the first drafts of our own lives, especially when stuck with the spirit of a dead father inside a leaf. Heti's empathetic abstract stems from her acceptance that there is no perfect creation, no absolute, and that all myths are provisional. But in this acceptance, the liberty it gives to play, there's also a pathos that Heti doesn't shy from. She allows herself and so also allows us to love this imperfect world that might not return our affections or requite us for the losses it inevitably inflicts, being imperfect.

This article was originally published on February 1, 2022.

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**TABLET RECIPES**

Hundreds of recipes at [tabletmag.com/recipes](http://tabletmag.com/recipes)
Let’s recap, so we can all follow this: CNN hired Gollust, who had formerly worked with then governor Andrew Cuomo, in 2013, the same year the network hired the governor’s brother, Chris Cuomo, as one of its marquee news anchors. Throughout the first year of the coronavirus pandemic, the network proceeded to lavish Andrew Cuomo with praise for his leadership while arranging interviews between him and his brother that brazenly violated the basic rules of journalistic ethics. The result of this fawning coverage was that Andrew Cuomo received an Emmy Award and a $5.1 million deal for a book offering “leadership lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic”—both of which he was later forced to return.

A former UCLA postdoctoral fellow and philosophy lecturer named Matthew Harris who threatened to carry out a mass shooting at the school and wrote an 803-page manifesto railing against Jews, Asians, White people, and women was arrested Monday in Colorado. “Violence against Jews should happen. Retaliation and retribution for what they have stolen is legitimate and a good thing,” Harris wrote in the manifesto, which The Jerusalem Post describes as espousing, “an erratic black supremacism ideology and claims of [Harris’] own messianic divinity.”

New laws taking effect in New York City aim to guarantee basic labor rights for approximately 80,000 delivery workers—service employees in the so-far chronically underrepresented “gig economy.” Delivery apps such as Uber Eats and DoorDash will now be required to provide workers with essential information about each job—addresses, route, length of trip, and tip—before couriers accept the assignment and to pay workers their full wages in a timely manner, without charging processing fees.

McDonald’s has confirmed the price hike for its U.S. stores. Menu prices have been bumped up 7.5% from those at the end of 2021, which were already up 6% compared to the previous year as the fast-food chain contended with labor shortages and slow foot traffic. However, the rising cost of burgers isn’t causing more people to turn to plant-based meal options. After major interest in plant-based products in restaurants and stores in 2020, when sales for the plant-based sector rose 46%, demand has flatlined and even started to decline in some parts of the country.

A Texas federal judge ruled earlier this month that the FDA will have to shorten the estimated 75 years and four months it said it would need to satisfy a public records request made by a group of research scientists who want the underlying documentation used by the agency to tap Pfizer for its COVID-19 vaccine. Now the FDA will have to provide the 450,000 or so pages by July, said U.S. District Judge Mark Pittman.

The men’s final of the Australian Open saw Rafael Nadal become the first men’s player to win 21 Grand Slam championships after defeating Daniil Medvedev, the reigning U.S. Open champion, in an epic five-set comeback. Medvedev, despite the tough loss, solidifies his place at the top of the pack of the next generation of tennis stars coming up from behind Nadal and the Big Three cohort.

The ADL’s embrace of a definition of racism inspired by critical race theory was not widely noticed until last week, and in light of Goldberg’s comments essentially endorsing its false premises, the organization swiftly updated its definition once again. Citing Professor Robert Livingston of the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard University, the ADL’s new definition states that “racism occurs when individuals or institutions show more favorable evaluation or treatment of an individual or group based on race or ethnicity.” Explaining the group’s decision to revert to a more traditional understanding of racism, the one still widely accepted by most Americans if not the elites who desire to rule them, Greenblatt acknowledged the criticism the ADL had received while defensively distinguishing between “allies operating in good faith who wanted us to do better” and “detractors who seized upon this issue as confirmation of a sinister plot to promote a political agenda or stop fighting antisemitism altogether.”

I suppose the ADL’s self-correction is to be welcomed. But that it took a dispute on a show where the level of intellectual discourse rarely rises above that of a South Florida mah-jongg table to pressure it into acknowledging the obvious fact that Jews can be victims of racism is a sorry commentary on the state of America’s Jewish institutional leadership.

—James Kirchick
N
erick Gavrielov was a frequent visitor to Berezka, a shop back in his hometown in Tajikistan—but he never went inside. “Only government officials could enter—it was a store for special people, and it sold imported products that you couldn’t buy anywhere else,” he said. “I would stand real up close and stare through the window, looking at what I could never have.”

When Gavrielov immigrated to New York in 1993, he dreamed of opening an Eastern European grocery that would be accessible to everyone. Following in the footsteps of his father, who had owned a store in Tajikistan—though much more modest than Berezka—Gavrielov opened his own delicatessen in 2006 on 108th Street, right in the center of Forest Hills, Queens, two short blocks down from the Jewish Center. The name was an obvious decision: Berezka #1 Deli in Forest Hills borrowed the name of the shop in Tajikistan (Russian for “birch tree”), as both vindication and tribute to the exclusive store from Gavrielov’s boyhood.

Berezka #1 Deli is always busy—especially on Friday afternoons before Shabbat, when the line for the register can run out the door. Gavrielov paces up and down his store’s single aisle in his black velvet loafers, shuffling items around into a meticulous order. He looks each person in the eye, he keeps his shoulders back, and he never minces his words, which appear before him at a relentless pace and with a heavy accent. The counters are crowded with piroshki (meat-filled hand pies) and sour cherry juice. The shelves overflow with roasted buckwheat kasha and nostalgia. The place is abuzz in Russian and Hebrew, with mothers buying khachapuri (Georgian cheese bread) and yahrzeit candles as their children are shoulder-deep in the ice-cream freezer. The walls are adorned with posters of Uncle Sam and Jewish blessings. And each morning, the grocery receives fresh boxes of the much sought after Borodinsky bread—a dry Russian sourdough made with rye, baked in an off-site brick oven. Gavrielov, stern but sweet, signaled to a customer behind me on a recent visit: “Bread here, you buy here.”

But what’s most eye-catching aren’t the products on the shelves or the signs on the walls—it’s what’s in the fridge: pork salami. It’s difficult to imagine anything more “unkosher” than Ukrainian salo (slabs of cured pork fat) or Polish kabanos (smoked pork sausage links)—especially sitting right next to the dairy fridge, staring directly across the aisle from the sizable selection of Israeli snacks.

The story of how this Eastern European Jewish delicatessen came to sell both kosher Israeli snacks and pork is a story of Soviet Jewry, and what gets altered in translation in the messy process of immigration.

Since the end of the Cold War in 1989, over 1 million Russian-speaking Jewish immigrants have settled in Israel and an estimated 300,000 in the United States, the majority in New York City.

“There was a war in Tajikistan and I had to flee,” Gavrielov said, referring to Tajikistan’s civil war, which lasted for five years from 1992 through 1997. While the war’s informal origins date back to anti-Soviet protests in February 1990—when KGB forces killed over 25 demonstrators—the war was formalized with the Soviet Union’s fall and the political vacuum it created for the unexpected new state of Tajikistan, which declared independence from Russia in 1991.

But as with all countries whose borders are drawn by leaders far away (in this case, in Moscow), Tajikistan’s newly defined borders were a grave misrepresentation, prompting a civil war and the displacement of over 600,000 Tajiks within their own country, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. With Uzbekistan closing off its eastern border in 1992 to Tajiks desperate to escape, over 150,000 Tajiks died as a result. Tajikistan’s President Emomali Rahmon, who was elected in 1994—in the middle of the country’s civil war—continues to hold the position to this day. Human Rights Watch has noted that at the time of Rahmon’s victory, the “current conditions in Tajikistan [did] not permit free and democratic elections.”

Gavrielov didn’t share the name of his hometown when I asked: “It wasn’t a good place for Jews, and that’s all there is to it.” He didn’t hesitate, as if he’d said this line a thousand times before.

Gavrielov never intended to immigrate to the United States—he was headed for Israel. But when his sister settled in Queens a few months before...
his planned departure from the Soviet Union, he changed his course of action to be closer to family.

Jewish communities within the far-reaching Soviet Union were not without their differences in customs and traditions—and they brought those traditions with them when they emigrated.

Bukharan Jews, like Gavrielov, hail from Central Asian countries such as Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, former members of the USSR. Unlike their Ashkenazi Jewish neighbors to the northwest, Bukharan Jews identify as Mizrahi, a term that translates to “Eastern” in Hebrew.

Given their geographic location, Bukharan Jewish communities were influenced by their exchanges with Slavic, Arabian, and Persian cultures.

Currently, Queens holds the highest numbers of Bukharan Jews in the world, at an estimated 50,000 as of 2017, according to the Times of Israel. Once a thriving center of Jewish life that dates back to their exile from Babylon in 538 BCE, the region is now home to only 100 Jews.

A minority that was forced underground by its anti-religious political leadership, now thousands of miles from its origin, Bukharan Judaism thrives in Queens—so much so that residents often make the joke that the borough should be more aptly named “Queensistan.” According to the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York, over 20% of the New York metropolitan area’s Jewish population speaks Russian.

Within a few miles of Gavrielov’s store are multiple Bukharan synagogues (Orthodox), a Bukharan Jewish center, multiple Bukharan restaurants, and a yeshiva funded by Israeli Bukharan diamond tycoon Lev Leviev. Their Mizrahi identity remains most apparent in the Bukharan synagogue, which is separate from Ashkenazi and Sephardic ones.

“But all Jews care about the same things,” Gavrielov reminded me. “We all just want to be together … and we want a fish on the table for dinner on Fridays.”

Angela Natnova, 17, works behind the counter at Berezka #1 Deli. Her mother, who immigrated to the U.S. from Russia in the 1990s, was friends with Gavrielov and helped get Natnova the job. Living five minutes away in a Russian-speaking neighborhood, Natnova described how “hard it is for [immigrants] to learn the language and switch to all the customs … It’s very different here than it was there.”

Glancing back at the door to check if any new customers entered, she continued: “Everyone who shops here speaks Russian, and the majority of customers are Jewish.”

I still didn’t know what to make of the pork salami. Natnova just shrugged her shoulders. “I mean, I’m Jewish but I’m not religious at all,” she said, “so I don’t have any problem.”

After all, even in Israel, Russian immigrant communities continue to sell pork in their groceries.

“The Soviet understanding of Judaism is that it’s an ethnicity and a culture, and has nothing to do with religion,” Olga Litvak, the Laurie B. and Eric M. Roth Professor of Modern European Jewish History at Cornell University, later told me, explaining how the Soviet Union’s communist leadership transformed what it meant to be Jewish. “The one thing the Soviet Union drummed into [Jews’] heads is that they are profoundly modern … and keeping kosher, for example, isn’t modern because it involves someone telling you what you can and can’t do.”

Heavily influenced by the politics of its speakers, the Russian language—Gavrielov’s native tongue—doesn’t even have its own world for religion, which underlines the depth to which Russia looks on the practice unfavorably. Rather, the term Russian-speakers most commonly use to describe the phenomenon is the English equivalent of “clericalism.” But the exact and lesser-used Russian translation for religion, религия, (pronounced religya) is a borrowed term from Latin.

“Jewishness for Soviets is very secular,” said Litvak. The reasons are historical; in a Soviet world where “religion is bad and culture is good,” she said, Jewishness adapts itself to fit that mold.

Following Soviet Jews’ immigration and the collapse of the USSR, these secular sentiments have continued to prevail among Soviet Jews. From Forest Hills to Brighton Beach—in neighborhoods where the storefronts are adorned with Cyrillic signs and neighborhoods isn’t the only Jewish deli to sell pork—Soviet Jews remain alienated from the American Jewish experience.

“Immigrants are created at their destination,” said Litvak, “not at their departure.”

A customer named Irene, who requested to withhold her last name for privacy concerns, placed an order with Natnova that included вобла, a salty dried fish typically eaten with beer, and thinly sliced Hungarian salami.

“You have to realize that most of us here came from the Soviet Union—where there was hunger, where there was ‘equality,’ which was certainly not ‘equality,’” said Irene, using air quotes. She left Georgia with her parents when she was 19 and first immigrated to Israel, where she went to medical school and became a pharmacist, before the family relocated to New York for her father’s work.

As Natnova handed the cold cuts over the counter, Irene described how this purchase would have been impossible for her mother in Georgia. “Food is how we stay connected to our culture, to our traditions,” Irene continued. “Any nostalgia you might have for food, you can satisfy it here.”

Ariel Khavasov, 17, is the son of Bukharan Jewish immigrants from Uzbekistan. Food, he told me, is his inheritance: “Food is how we keep our culture. Most cultures have their own style of cooking, but ours is a mix of a lot of stuff.”

When I asked him about the Bukharan community in Forest Hills, his face lit up.
You’re around your own people a lot, it’s amazing,” he said. “That’s the beauty of America—you can immigrate here and you can continue speaking the same language of where you came from. There are people I know in my community who have never even needed to learn English.”

Without hesitating, Khavasov continued, “Bukharan Jews put a lot of emphasis on family. We will work ourselves to the bone for our family. My dad works 12-hour shifts every day, for the family. The personal unit comes second, and the family unit comes first.”

Berezka #1 Deli isn’t American or Israeli—it isn’t trying to be anything that it’s not. Berezka is where Bulgarian cow cheese exists next to The Laughing Cow, where the poster of Uncle Sam hangs next to a poster of a rabbi, where you wonder if the Chanel bags around you were purchased from the corner hustle next door or the brand store in midtown. For Soviet Jews, it’s the best of where they came from, it’s home: where everyone speaks the same language and eats the same foods.

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COMMUNITY

Groundhog Day’s Christian—and Pre-Christian—Roots

It’s not just a strange American holiday, or the inspiration for a great movie

BY MAGGIE PHILLIPS

Some French friends of mine made the Tocquevillian observation that Americans have so many quirky national holidays, without ever getting the day off for them. (This practice is almost a complete inversion of European countries, where schools and businesses routinely close for Christian holy days, even though most Europeans are nonpracticing.) Groundhog Day seems like just such an “only in America” holiday: our Puritan heritage brooking no notion of a day off for something so frivolous, but good at least for friendly small talk with coworkers or one’s dentist. It garners at least a lighthearted annual news segment. Indeed, this is the premise of the film Groundhog Day, when a news crew led by a producer named Rita (played by Andie MacDowell) heads to Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, to cover the local festivities surrounding the groundhog’s emergence. “These people are great, some of them have been partying all night long. They sing songs till they get too cold, and then they go sit by the fire and they get warm, and then they come back and they sing some more!” she effuses about the town’s residents to Bill Murray’s nonplussed weatherman, Phil Connor. “Yeah,” he responds, “they’re hicks, Rita.”

Just as the groundhog cyclically emerges, returning to its den if it seizes its shadow, thus heralding six more weeks of winter, the Phil of Groundhog Day confronts his own shadows through the apparently endless repetition of the same winter day. He must make some personal changes for the better before he can fully embrace the fate of a “long and lustrous winter” among the people with whom he finds himself, no longer contemptuously regarding them as backward simpletons. While much has been written about the Buddhist themes in the Harold Ramis classic, fewer people are probably aware of the ancient roots of the holiday that forms the film’s thematic backdrop.

Yes, Groundhog Day is a Christmas movie. Kind of.

On its surface, Groundhog Day seems like a quaint mid-Atlantic American folk custom, a subject that everyone in the country inexplicably must learn about in elementary school, like the song “Polly Wolly Doodle” or the life of Helen Keller. However, like Saint Patrick’s Day, Halloween, or Mardi Gras, Groundhog Day has its roots in European Christian customs, themselves likely grafted onto pre-Christian rituals, and duly assimilated to become a weird American holiday that occurs in an apparent temporal vacuum.

Feb. 2 marks 40 days after Christmas, and early Christians observed this day as the “Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary.” It was a holy day recognizing events in the New Testament surrounding Christ’s first appearance in the Temple in Jerusalem, as an infant accompanying his mother for her ritual purification 40 days after giving birth, in accordance with the prescription found in Leviticus. Today called the “Presentation of the Lord” in the Roman Catholic liturgical calendar, the religious festival took on elements of different folk customs throughout Europe over the centuries to become a holiday known as Candlemas in English, when the faithful have traditionally brought candles to church to have them blessed by a priest. Historically, it was also when Christmas decorations came down. 
As is the case with Halloween and Christmas, Christian belief and pre-existing folk customs appear to have gradually fused in popular observances of Candlemas. In some cases, those customs are quite old. In Ancient Rome, Feb. 15 was the feast of Lupercalia, a fertility festival, regarded today by some as a precursor to Valentine's Day given that it included some raunchier erotic elements. However, Lupercalia was more broadly a winter festival of civic purification, and appears to be a more direct antecedent of Candlemas. There were torchlight processions instead of candles, and the name of the month of February actually comes from the Latin “februeare,” meaning “to purify,” and Lupercalia was called dies februatus, “Purified Day.” Lupercalia continued into the fifth century CE, when some scholars think that Pope Gelasius put an end to it by instituting the Church-sanctioned holiday of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary around the same time; before they settled on Dec. 25, early Christians celebrated Christmas on Jan. 6, which meant Feb. 14 fell 40 days after—right around Lupercalia.

The tradition of blessing candles is commonly associated with the motifs of fire and light in the scripture readings read at Mass on Candlemas (an abbreviation of Candle Mass, just as Christmas is an abbreviation of Christ’s Mass). The first passage read is from the prophet Micah, comparing the Lord of hosts to “a refiner’s fire,” and another is the account in the book of Luke of Mary and Christ in the Temple, 40 days after his birth, which refers to Christ as “a light for revelation to the Gentiles.”

Other vestigial pre-Christian customs are thought to remain in European Candlemas traditions. In France, it’s customary to serve crepes for dinner, a practice some hypothesize is associated with cakes eaten on Lupercalia, or even more primally, with the circular shape of the sun itself. The day is also accompanied by a superstitious hope for clear skies, indicating spring is on its way, instead of 40 days of rain showers that are presaged by rain. Candlemas as an augur of continued winter weather exists elsewhere in Europe and even the U.S.:

In Ireland, there’s apparently a legend about a magical hag who controls the sun, and in the U.K. and early New England, a genre of rhymes and traditions about the forecasting powers of Candlemas were widespread.

Like many folk customs, it is difficult to identify a single reason for the thematic consistency of Candlemas practices across cultures. As Christopher Hill put it in his book Holidays and Holy Nights: Celebrating the Twelve Seasonal Festivals of the Christian Year, “they just seem to fit, evocatively, tantalizingly, with the sense of the season.”

So what of Punxsutawney Phil? How do we get from the Palatine Hill to Gobbler’s Knob? Quite simply, Groundhog Day is the Americanized German Candlemas tradition of looking to a hedgehog or badger to forecast the length of winter based on whether or not it sees its shadow. The U.S. isn’t a native habitat for hedgehogs, which is why aside from Sonic, we don’t hear much about them here. By contrast, the American landscape is positively alive with groundhogs (also known as woodchucks). So German immigrants to Pennsylvania made the switch, with the first recorded Groundhog Day occurring in 1886.

However secular the holiday has become, the silliness of an entire country turning its lonely eyes to the activities of a Pennsylvania-based rodent would seem to gesture toward an underlying, deeply human truth: the eternal need to look for light in darkness, and to mark the rhythmic turning of the seasons. “When Chekhov saw the long winter,” Phil Connor says near the end of Groundhog Day, “he saw a winter bleak and dark and bereft of hope. Yet we know that winter is just another step in the cycle of life.” The folly of Groundhog Day, coming in the midst of the dark stillness of winter and over a month after the bright hustle of the holidays, serves as an infinitesimal loosening of the national pressure valve, a brief, absurd instant of civic unity, and a promise of warmth and light to come.

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The Vilna Collections
Newly digitized at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research

This flyer, created to appear as a supplement to a Yiddish newspaper, promoting Benny Adler’s comedy show in Łódz’s Momus Theater, June 10-16, 1932, is one of an extraordinary trove of documents, many saved from Nazi and Soviet hands, that together offer revolutionary access to the Eastern European Jewish past.

Earlier this month, the YIVO Institute completed the Edward Blank Vilna Online Collections project, the brainchild of YIVO’s director, Jonathan Brent, labored over by a team of archivists, and seen to fruition by director of the YIVO archives, Stefanie Halpern. Executed during a period of seven years at a cost of $7 million, the project was unprecedented in its complexity: because of the number of languages it spans (15), the participation of libraries on different continents (themselves operating in Yiddish, Lithuanian, and English), and the damage suffered by so many of its documents. To save them from the hands of the Nazis and then the Soviets, YIVO’s staff and its allies, including many non-Jews, had taken it upon themselves to stash them in attics, in the basements of churches, and in the ground.

—Alyssa Quint
The Challenge of Friday Lunch

You’re busy preparing food for Shabbat, and in the midst of that frenzy, you have to make a pre-Shabbat lunch. Fortunately, there are plenty of customs and recipes to make this ordinary meal memorable.

BY JANNA GUR

How can you produce your best meals when you can’t turn on a stove or an oven, let alone chop, fry, or bake? This fundamental paradox of Shabbat cooking has shaped Jewish cuisine and given birth to some of its most distinctive dishes. Getting ready for Shabbat is not only a gastronomic challenge, but a logistical one. For an observant homemaker, Friday is a frantic race against the clock, especially now, when the sun sets early and all house chores must be dealt with before 4 p.m. And smack in the middle of all this frenzy, there is another task that needs to be tackled: Friday lunch.

In Israel, as in most Mediterranean countries, lunch is the biggest meal of the day, so people are usually quite hungry at lunchtime. Curiously, even around this nuisance of a meal, there are a host of customs and customary dishes. Naturally, they are less regulated and more esoteric than those associated with Shabbat and holiday cooking—but that’s all the more reason to explore them.

My first encounter with a Friday lunch dish was pasta kabbalat Shabbat (literally, Shabbat greeting pasta). Hailing from Jewish Bulgarian cuisine, it is basically a Balkan version of mac and cheese, but instead of cheddar and milk, there are kashkaval and feta. Both cheeses are used to stuff burekas, stars of the Bulgarian Shabbat brunch that are prepared ahead of time on Friday—but the leftovers are mixed with olives, pasta, and eggs and sent to the oven for that day’s lunch. Scrumptious and a breeze to make, this looks like a logical solution for this rushed meal.

Logic and culinary traditions don’t always go hand in hand, however. Take Syrian fekh, Iraqi aruk, or Tunisian bentash: All three are pan-fried patties, made with eggs, herbs, and, in the Iraqi and Tunisian versions, mashed potatoes. Shaping and frying individual patties is pretty labor intensive; nevertheless all three are associated with Friday lunches in their respective communities.

Potatoes keep popping up in additional Friday lunch dishes—from the Ashkenazi potato kugel to Syrian hamoud. The latter is a fragrant, brothlike soup made with potatoes, celery, chard, and lots of lemon juice (hamoud means sour in Arabic). Other carb-based dishes are equally popular: rice with white beans (Turkish and Syrian), noodles with butter, sugar, and cocoa or poppy seed (Hungarian), or butter couscous (Moroccan), to name a few. Because all these dishes are quite filling, they are not served with bread, which might be the reason they have become associated with the pre-Shabbat meal in the first place. Rabbi Joe Schwartz explained: “According to Halacha, a meal—as opposed to a snack—entails the eating of bread (which demands that one wash and bless before and after). Avoiding bread on Friday lunch makes it less important, and in this way enhances the status of the Friday night dinner, the first of the three Shabbat meals.” This concept of playing down the pre-Shabbat meal is also reflected in the fact that most dishes for Friday lunch are meatless or prepared with the most humble cuts, like poultry offal, wings, or necks.

To help me discover more about Friday lunch traditions, I reached out to Tehilah Setton, an Israeli food writer and founder of Foodos—an online community of more than 30,000 observant foodies (dos is a local moniker for religious Jews). Setton posted a query on the Foodos Facebook wall, which sparked a lively discussion and generated hundreds of comments.

All of the traditional dishes I’ve described, and many others, came up in the online discussion, but usually as something that the responders remember from their parents’ or grandparents’ households. In the young, busy (often two-career) families that constitute this nuisance of a meal, there are a host of customs and customary dishes. Naturally, they are less regulated and more esoteric than those associated with Shabbat and holiday cooking—but that’s all the more reason to explore them.

“Shaping and frying individual patties is pretty labor intensive; nevertheless all three are associated with Friday lunches in their respective communities.”

My first encounter with a Friday lunch dish was pasta kabbalat Shabbat (literally, Shabbat greeting pasta). Hailing from Jewish Bulgarian cuisine, it is basically a Balkan version of mac and cheese, but instead of cheddar and milk, there are kashkaval and feta. Both cheeses are used to stuff burekas, stars of the Bulgarian Shabbat brunch that are prepared ahead of time on Friday—but the leftovers are mixed with olives, pasta, and eggs and sent to the oven for that day’s lunch. Scrumptious and a breeze to make, this looks like a logical solution for this rushed meal.

Logic and culinary traditions don’t always go hand in hand, however. Take Syrian fekh, Iraqi aruk, or Tunisian bentash: All three are pan-fried patties, made with eggs, herbs, and, in the Iraqi and Tunisian versions, mashed potatoes. Shaping and frying individual patties is pretty labor intensive; nevertheless all three are associated with Friday lunches in their respective communities.

Potatoes keep popping up in additional Friday lunch dishes—from the Ashkenazi potato kugel to Syrian hamoud. The latter is a fragrant, brothlike soup made with potatoes, celery, chard, and lots of lemon juice (hamoud means sour in Arabic). Other carb-based dishes are equally popular: rice with white beans (Turkish and Syrian), noodles with butter, sugar, and cocoa or poppy seed (Hungarian), or butter couscous (Moroccan), to name a few. Because all these dishes are quite filling, they are not served with bread, which might be the reason they have become associated with the pre-Shabbat meal in the first place. Rabbi Joe Schwartz explained: “According to Halacha, a meal—as opposed to a snack—entails the eating of bread (which demands that one wash and bless before and after). Avoiding bread on Friday lunch makes it less important, and in this way enhances the status of the Friday night dinner, the first of the three Shabbat meals.” This concept of playing down the pre-Shabbat meal is also reflected in the fact that most dishes for Friday lunch are meatless or prepared with the most humble cuts, like poultry offal, wings, or necks.

To help me discover more about Friday lunch traditions, I reached out to Tehilah Setton, an Israeli food writer and founder of Foodos—an online community of more than 30,000 observant foodies (dos is a local moniker for religious Jews). Setton posted a query on the Foodos Facebook wall, which sparked a lively discussion and generated hundreds of comments.

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one of the owners of Nurman, whose parents hail from Tunisia and Morocco. “Imagine a Friday afternoon in a typical North African household. The house is quiet and squeaky clean and a small army of pots and trays filled with delicious food is sitting on the kitchen counter. For lunch, my mom served us a plate of samples from Shabbat pots, but small ones, so we are properly hungry for the main event. And hungry we are! When my mom heads for the shower I quickly sneak into the kitchen, tear up a couple of thick chunks of challah, slather it with matbucha, fried eggplants, and a couple of schnitzels. I don’t dare to touch other stuff, like the spicy fish stew I love so much—my mom will know right away that someone has dug into the pot. But schnitzels are piled high—no one will notice if a couple are missing.”

Decades later, Hanya recreated the thieves’ sandwich at a family meal he cooked for his kitchen staff: “It was Friday, the restaurant was closed for cleaning and maintenance, the pantry and the fridge were almost empty. So I sliced a challah I have bought for Shabbat, spread it with matbucha my sister has brought over, and threw a few schnitzels in the hot oil. Everybody loved it and we decided then and there to add it to the menu.” The challah-schnitzel-matbucha-eggplant combo quickly became the most popular item at Nurman. When the pandemic hit and restaurants closed, the takeout sandwich became an even bigger hit (apparently it travels well) and according to Hanya kept the place afloat during those trying months. Nowadays it is widely imitated by many fast-food restaurants and is popular at home as well.

The Shabbat sampler plate that Hanya mentioned is yet another Friday lunch tradition, and a very convenient one at that. No extra cooking is required, all you need to do is put together a plate of tastings from whatever you made for Shabbat. And the best part: By having an early taste of Shabbat food you are actually doing a mitzvah—or at the very least following an ancient tradition. “The Halacha gives two reasons for the custom,” explained Schwartz. “The first is rather pragmatic: to make sure the food is to the liking of the husband in advance, so as to avoid strife in the family on Shabbat itself. The second is more mystical: to fulfill what is written in the prayer recited at Musaf of Shabbat: ‘Those who observe [the Sabbath] with delight will partake of honor everlasting, and those who taste of it will merit life.’”

All this is good and well, as long as you don’t overdo it. As it says in the Shulchan Aruch: “One is commanded not to eat a special festive meal on Friday so as to enter Shabbat with an appetite, and after the 9th hour on Friday, one is forbidden from eating a proper meal at all.”

This article was originally published on January 28, 2022.
Braised Eggplant With Yogurt Sauce

BY PAOLA GAVIN

INGREDIENTS

FOR THE BRAISED EGGPLANT

3 medium eggplants
peanut oil or extra virgin olive oil
1 medium onion, finely chopped
2 or 3 finely chopped garlic cloves
½ to 1 hot red chili pepper, deseeded and finely chopped, to taste
½ teaspoon ground turmeric
½ teaspoon chili powder, or to taste
salt
3 large tomatoes, peeled and sliced
fresh mint leaves, to serve

FOR THE YOGURT SAUCE

1½ cups yogurt
1 or 2 garlic cloves, crushed
2 teaspoons dried mint
Salt

PREPARATION

TO MAKE THE BRAISED EGGPLANT

Step 1
Peel the eggplant and cut into rounds about 1/2 inch thick. Arrange side by side on a well-oiled baking tin and brush both sides lightly with oil. Place under a hot grill and roast until golden on both sides.

Step 2
Heat 3 tablespoons oil in a large frying pan and add the onion. Cook over a moderate heat until the onion is softened. Add the garlic and chili and cook for 1 or 2 more minutes, without browning. Stir in the turmeric and cayenne and season with salt.

Step 3
Cover with the tomato slices and arrange the eggplant over the top. Pour in 1/4 cup hot water and bring to a boil. Cover and simmer for 10 to 15 minutes or until the tomatoes are tender and the sauce is reduced.

TO MAKE THE YOGURT SAUCE

Step 1
Combine the yogurt, dried mint, and salt in a bowl and mix well.

Step 2
Spoon half of the yogurt sauce into a large serving dish then carefully arrange the eggplant slices over the top. Spoon over the onion and tomato sauce. Top with dollops of yogurt sauce. Garnish with fresh mint and serve hot with the remaining yogurt sauce on the side.

Yield: Serves 4

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