

Episode 9

Vayeshev

The other day, someone accused me of being a liar and spreading “fake news.” How did this happen? I was in a conversation a young woman I had met in Berlin. I have a tendency to shamelessly self-promote this podcast, so naturally the topic of my podcast came up. Yet, this was a person who I just couldn’t quite get over the hump to become a listener of *The Schrift*. As soon as she saw that *The Schrift* was connected with the Bible, she recoiled. She said that she didn’t believe in God, but rather that she was a hippie and believed in the holiness of nature.

I thought perhaps I could turn her on to my way of thinking, so, when she said she believed in the holiness of nature but not in God, I said to her what I said to all of you devoted *Schrift* listeners already know from Episode 5. I said how, in Hebrew, Being and God have the same name; I also pointed out how, in Hebrew, the word for wind and spirit—*ruach*—has the same word as well, and how *breath* and *soul*—*neshima*—also use the same word. I did, however, make a mistake. In German, the word for *breath* is *Atem*. I told her that this word is connected with the name of the First Man, *Adam*, whom God breathed life into. On this last connection between *Adam* and *Atem*, I was kind of just conjecturing. Well, through a quick Wikipedia search, she found out that *Atem* and *Adam* are not related. Ignoring my other pieces of evidence, she jumped on this mistake I had made. It was at that point that she triumphantly called me a liar and accused me of spreading “fake news.”

Now, as you’ll remember from last week’s episode on revenge, I’m not such a big fan of turning the other cheek. And I wasn’t feeling very much like Mirabeau on this particular day either. So I said to her: “You know, to be honest, for someone who is such a hippie and a free spirit, you’re awfully close-minded to new ideas.” And then I added: “And for someone who is so against religion, you are quite dogmatic.”

That was the end of our conversation.

Now, this might sound like it was just a petty spat between two highly opinionated and stubborn people. But actually, I think there was more going on here. The fact was that her insistence on the absolute correctness of her way of seeing the universe had something strikingly religious about it. Normally, when a person aggressively tells others who God is and what the meaning of life is and what laws we must follow and that there can be no other alternative to this point of view, then this person is a religious dogmatist. These types of people would have sat on the jury at the Salem Witch Trials, or would have tortured Jews during the Spanish Inquisition, or would have argued with you until three in the morning in your college dorm room about how Jesus is obviously the Son of God. But atheists, scientists, secular philosophers, and so forth, can become equally ideological and aggressive, such that they become, in a way, just as “religious” as religious freaks. This is not good.

Let’s think about communism, for a moment. A central belief of communism was to be atheist and against organized religion. Yet, communism itself *is* just a kind of replacement religion. They don’t have the Bible, but they have Marx’s *Das Kapital*. This book from Marx explained why communism was the only true way. In communist regimes, families often showcased Marx’s *Das Kapital* just as the Bible would be in religious homes. Communism preached that a future Utopia awaited those who would devoutly follow the laws laid out in Marx’s guidebook. This is awfully similar to Christianity’s promise of a future Utopia in heaven for those who followed all of its religious laws.

All of this is a very long-winded way of saying that which will be the theme for this week's episode of *The Schrift*. That theme is: it is often the case that those which seem to be opposites are, in fact, often the same.

In the parsha for this week, *Vayeshev*, Jacob's seventeen-year old son Joseph takes the center stage, as it were. Joseph is Jacob's favorite son, because he is the first-born son of his wife Rachel. The remainder of the Book of Genesis will be about Joseph and his relationship with his eleven other brothers.

The great German novelist Thomas Mann was enamored with the story of Joseph. So enamored, in fact, that he wrote a thousand-page epic novel about this story which he entitled *Joseph and His Brothers*, *Joseph und seine Brüder*. Mann wrote this epic work over a sixteen-year period, eventually completing it while in exile in America during World War II. In the Torah, the story of Joseph would be perhaps the equivalent of fifty or sixty pages or so. Mann's book, as mentioned, was a thousand. Mann provides luscious and detailed description of Joseph's life, going far beyond the outlines and sparse writing of the Torah. Mann, in short, gives one-hundred sentences for each one sentence given in the Torah. Just as Joseph was Jacob's favorite son, *Joseph und seine Brüder* was Mann's favorite of his books. And this is despite having written perhaps a dozen other classics of German literature, including *Death in Venice*, *The Magic Mountain*, and *Doktor Faustus*.

In one scene in *Joseph and his Brothers*, Jacob and Joseph are sitting together in Jacob's tent. And something very strange occurs indeed. Jacob and Joseph are preparing for the upcoming Passover holiday. Yes, the upcoming Passover holiday. Now, I started *The Schrift* with you all from the very beginning of the Torah, from the Parsha Bereishit, the creation of the World. Have you ever heard me mention Passover to date? No. Passover is a holiday which celebrates the mass exodus of the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt. But at this point, the Hebrews haven't even settled in Egypt yet. So why are Jacob and Joseph preparing for Passover in Mann's novel if Passover is hundreds of years in the future?

What is going on here? In fact, one of Thomas Mann's fans wrote him a letter in 1939. Robert Smith of Long Island wrote to Mann asking why he had put this *anachronism* in his story. Mann, writing in exile from Princeton University, answered Mr. Smith as follows. "What I wrote about the Passover is not an anachronism. Passover dates back to a much older celebration of semi-pagan character, which was known even before Joseph's time. This fact has been shown by scholars of ancient mythology and history. The old Passover had to do with astral bodies and the worship of the stars. You are not alone in thinking that I had made an error in computing time, and had made the Joseph of my book talk in a manner out of harmony with chronological events. I am grateful to you for writing to me and hope that I have succeeded in explaining the matter to your satisfaction. Yours sincerely, Thomas Mann."

Thomas Mann's explanation is one which would perhaps make certain religious Jews uncomfortable. It is an undermining of the holiness of the Torah. It suggests that Passover was not a *Jewish* holiday but rather a pagan holiday which the Jews had to explain. Mann's explanation suggests that scholars of ancient mythology have more authority and credibility on the Torah than rabbis or priests would. I don't know about you, but I've never been to a Passover Seder in which we worship the sun and the stars.

I brought this predicament up once with a rabbi, whom I greatly admire. He had an explanation which fascinated and surprised me. He said that there was nothing *anachronistic* about Thomas Mann's book. He said that Jacob and Joseph, as well as Abraham, Isaac, Rebecca, etc. etc., all would have celebrated Passover, *even though* the Exodus from Egypt was still four-

hundred years in the future. But the reason why was the exact opposite as that given by Mann. My rabbi friend said that the Jewish Patriarchs and Matriarchs could *intuit* all of the Commandments which God would later give to Moses at Mount Sinai, including the commandment to keep Passover. The founders of the Hebrew Nation would have kept kosher, would have fasted on Yom Kippur, and would have eaten *Matzoh*, centuries before God gives these laws to Moses. The rabbi's answer was, essentially, that our conception of time does not matter in the Torah. Time does not move from point A to point B. And so, the first Hebrews would have known of things hundreds of years in the future yet to occur.

The rabbi's reasoning for this comes from the Talmud. In Talmud Tractate Yoma 28b, verses 9 to 10, it is stated that Abraham kept the entire Torah because he was simply filled with the Divine Inspiration and therefore just could *intuit* all of the laws which would come hundreds of years later.

So we have, then, two explanations for why Joseph and Jacob are celebrating Passover. Thomas Mann's explanation to Robert Smith of Long Island is the secular one, based in reason and archaeological evidence. My rabbi's and the Talmud's explanation is the theological one, which can argue around with notions of time and which can be, let's just say, a bit more flexible with deductive reasoning.

Now, as I've mentioned many times on *The Schrift*, I am not a rabbi—I don't even have my PhD, yet. And it could be that the Talmud Tractate Yoma had a flawless and incontestable explanation for why Joseph and Jacob would have kept Passover, even though Passover didn't exist yet. But I felt rather unsatisfied with this explanation. It seemed to me too easy, too convenient a way to argue that the patriarchs would have kept commandments which had yet to exist.

However, at the same time, Thomas Mann's explanation also seemed to me "too easily" reached. If Passover is not a holy day but rather just a weird pagan ritual that has changed over the years, why is Mann even discussing it? On that note, why is he even talking about Joseph and Jacob as if they are real people? There is no proof they existed, or that any of these stories occurred, so why is Mann writing a thousand-page epic novel on the assumption that they existed?

Thomas Mann put on his biblical scholar hat, as it were, when he wrote the letter to Mr. Smith of Rhode Island. But remember: this was just a letter Mann never thought would be published, which he probably wrote while having his coffee one morning. Indeed, if there was ever anyone who was willing to blend the holy and the secular, to see the world as both divine and mundane, it was Thomas Mann. Mann's novel, *Joseph und seine Brüder*, stands, in fact, for the very principle that the Torah can be both fiction and reality, holy and secular, true and untrue.

Mann makes this very clear in his prelude to *Joseph and his Brothers*. Mann talks about how, when we discuss the Torah, we are entering a world of time which the human mind cannot grasp. Mann writes that Abraham could not really have been Joseph's great-grandfather, but that Joseph often became confused and thought Abraham was his great-grandfather. On one hand, Joseph knew that Abraham was his ancestor, but on the other hand, he could not quite trace the exact connection. Mann writes: "In his desire to put a beginning to the events of which he was part, Joseph ... was met with the same difficulty that confronts every such endeavor—the fact that everyone has a father and nothing is first, comes of itself, or is its own cause, but rather everything has been engendered and points backward, deeper into the first foundations, the depths and abysses of the well of the past. Joseph knew, of course, that Abraham's father ... also

had to have had a father with whom his own personal history would then have had to begin ... as far back as Adapa or Adama, the first man.”

What Mann is doing here is blending fact and fiction, myth and reality, in an effort to show that we, as humans, are in the dark, both as to fantasy and as to science. As such, it is almost a ridiculous effort to try to even pretend like there is a distinction between *history* and *story*. We cannot ever “locate” who the exact Abraham was or if he even existed. We do not know if Adam was really “the first man.” But, if we use archaeology to try to discern who the first humans were, we become equally lost and confused. Mann concludes by explaining that the only way out of this mess is to *knowingly confuse* “pseudo-beginnings” with “real beginnings” just as Joseph confused Abraham with his own great-grandfather. If we do not allow ourselves to blend fiction and fact in this way, we will, to quote Mann, “be lured backward, ever backward, from one coastal backdrop to another and into an immeasurable abyss.”

Let’s return to a moment to Jacob and Joseph having a Passover Seder four-hundred years before the Exodus from Egypt. We can look at this in two ways: through the eyes of an archaeologist, who would say that Passover originated as a pagan holiday, centuries before the Hebrews were freed from Egypt. Or we can look at it through the eyes of a theologian, who would say that Jacob and Joseph were so infused with the spirit of God that they could see into the future.

I don’t know about you, but I find both of these responses rather disappointing and unsatisfying. Both are, for me, “too easy.” They don’t want to grapple with the compelling argument made by their opponent. They both seem to want to just stay in their corner and hold fast to the beliefs which make them comfortable. In a strange way, though they are opposites, they are also the same. This is the problem I had with the anti-fan of *The Schrift*. She was trying to use her ideal of being a free spirit and a hippie as a way to tear down religion. But all she did was just create her own religion in the process.

To approach Truth with a capital “T,” we need to be able to hold contradictions together as one, even if they disprove each other. In Episode “O” of this podcast, I talked about Early German Romanticism. The Early German Romantics believed that the most *complete* Art form was the fragment, because it was always in a state of becoming. As I mentioned in Episode 0, this is a contradiction—the imperfect is the perfect, the incomplete is the complete, that which his becoming is that which is being. These are all obvious contradictions, but it is precisely because they are holding two simultaneous truths together that they form a single Truth.

However, this answer is also a bit unsatisfying and is “too easy,” in my opinion. Anyone can just say, I believe simultaneously in contradictory ideas, therefore I’ve found the Truth, now let’s go have lunch. The reason this answer is unsatisfying is twofold. The first reason is that the highly logical and methodical language I am using with you now cannot express these concepts. Language itself may be limited to express this concept of Truth in contradiction. This is why the Early German Romantics, and Nietzsche, and pre-Socratic philosophers, often chose to express their philosophy in poetry, in aphorisms, and in paradoxes.

The second reason is a bit more interesting and more helpful. It is that, to come to Belief, and Faith, and Truth, it is not sufficient just to hold on to two contradictory ideas. Rather, you must stare down the opposite, the opponent, acknowledge its existence, and then vanquish it. But it cannot be vanquished through logic or through a persuasive argument, but through your own will. In oversimplified terms, this would sound as follows: “Joseph celebrated Passover because it was a pagan holiday. Joseph celebrated Passover because he was infused with God’s spirit. I have seen all of the archaeological evidence in support of the first statement, yet I am choosing

the second.” In short, the theologian would need to allow himself to stare down the archaeologist or Religious Studies professor, and then make a kind of “leap of faith” into theology. But this is a rather dull way of explaining it to you.

Perhaps I can better explain with an example from my personal life. I have meditated thousands of times. Most of the time I meditate, I feel more relaxed, more connected with myself and with the world, more aware of sounds and of thoughts. These are all great benefits to meditation. But the truth is, when I meditate, I rarely experience those kinds of supreme moments that you read about in novels or see in movies or hear “gurus” talk about. I pretty much never feel like I am totally at bliss, or that I am having an out-of-body experience, or that I see the light, etc. etc. The Buddhist term for this state is *Nirvana* which Buddhists acknowledge is awfully hard to achieve.

I’ve never experienced Nirvana while meditating. Except one time, I think I came very close. And strangely, this was one of the most empty and frightening moments of my meditation experience. What happened? If you meditate for long enough, and properly, you will notice that so many of the stories you tell yourself about who you are, what is important to you, what defines you, will just melt away. All of the thoughts and the worries and the judgments disappear. This is what happened to me. And I recall, for the first time, feeling like I wasn’t “Steve Weinberg” but just some weird animal sitting on a rock and breathing. All of the comforts of my ego were gone. I was just some weird animal with no purpose. What was I experiencing? I was living in the moment. Our culture romanticizes this idea of living in the moment, as though if you take an extra moment to look at a flower instead of check your phone, you’ll be blissful for life. But, in fact, there is the moment, and then there is, the moment. The moment can feel rather empty, boring, dull, even depressing. The moment actually kind of sucks. Who wants to live in the moment when you can live with your ego which fills your life with adventure, drama, scandal, romance, heartbreak, ecstasy, terror?

When I finally dwelt in the moment during this meditation, what I was experiencing was a feeling of true *nothingness*. Yet, in Buddhism, it is when one experiences absolute *nothingness* that one is on the very cusp of Nirvana, of ultimate meaning and enlightenment. I never got to Nirvana. But that is not the point. The point is that, the step just before ultimate meaning and enlightenment is not “half-meaning” or “almost ultimate meaning” but rather ultimate meaning’s opposite—nothingness. In his book *The Power of Now*, meditation guru Eckhart Tolle captures this concept when he says that we must feel ourselves die in the moment before we can live in the moment.

I love practicing yoga. But one of my least favorite sequences of a yoga session is at the end. It is a common practice for everyone to sit together and say “om” several times before concluding. Om... om... om... The room seems to be filled with meaning, spirituality, and enlightenment. We are all chanting “om” like we are monks up in the Himalayas. But ironically, this is the moment of yoga where I feel most removed from the eternal and the infinite, when I feel most like “Steve Weinberg,” when my ego takes over. Why? Because this chanting of “om” is, in my opinion, *forcing* a feeling of transcendence. Instead of first going into nothingness and then crossing over into absolute meaning, the chanting of “Om” almost tries to impose transcendence on the yoga participants, and thereby has the opposite effect, such that they go further into their own egos and sense of self.

This is a problem Nietzsche dealt with in his book 1885 work *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Nietzsche, being an atheist, did not believe that the world was created by God. Nietzsche famously said “God is dead.” Nietzsche saw it as his task to create a philosophy which would fill

this void, which would overcome nihilism, the belief that nothing matters. Past efforts to defeat nihilism often relied on religion or on reason. As soon as you say there is a God, then nihilism is dead. Yet, Nietzsche was working under the assumption that “God is dead.” But to defeat nihilism, Nietzsche knew that he had to go deep into nihilism itself and then come out of it on the other side, as it were. He had to battle with his enemy and triumph over it. This attitude was very much unlike that of the anti-fan of the Schrift and the rabbi with whom I spoke. Neither seemed to want to grapple with the other side. Moreover, neither seemed to want to acknowledge how similar their attitudes were—that is, both were dogmatic and believed in an absolute Truth.

Not only did Nietzsche need to stare down nihilism to overcome it, he also needed to acknowledge how *similar* nihilism was to ultimate meaning and transcendence. Again, paradoxically, it is often the case that polar opposites are actually *razor thin* in differences. In the beginning of Part III of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche provides a fascinating parable which demonstrates this idea. The hero of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Zarathustra, is in a conversation with a dwarf. Zarathustra says to the dwarf to imagine that where they stand is a gateway with the word “Moment” written above the door. Time stretches into infinity in both directions. They stand in the gateway, in the moment, where infinity meets. The dwarf says to Zarathustra, “all that is straight lies, truth is crooked, time is a circle.” But when Zarathustra hears this response, he roars at the dwarf, “You spirit of gravity! Do not make it too easy on yourself!” The dwarf does not want to summon the strength to take that extra step into meaning. The dwarf’s conception of the Moment is one of emptiness and meaninglessness. It is just one moment among infinite moments, to be repeated endlessly, just coming and going.

Yet Zarathustra has another conception of time. Exactly like the dwarf, he acknowledges that time stretches to infinity. But Zarathustra sees the two lines of infinity not as moving away from the doorway of the moment, but as *crashing together* in the moment. Under this conception, the moment is not just one of infinite meaningless points in the infinity of time. Rather, under Zarathustra’s conception, the moment, this snippet of time, becomes a point of absolute transcendence, enlightenment, even salvation. But for Zarathustra to achieve this vision, he first took the dwarf’s concept of the infinity of time as his starting point. To overcome nihilism, Zarathustra had to first go deep into nihilism. Both Zarathustra and the dwarf’s conception of the universe are almost exactly the same. Both agree on the infinity of time. Yet, Zarathustra takes the dwarf’s vision and overcomes it. Whereas the dwarf sees time as a meaningless circle, gliding calmly through each meaningless moment, Zarathustra sees each moment as a crashing together of the infinite, each moment as a chance at nirvana.

Zarathustra took that one extra step further to cross over into nirvana. When I meditated, I experienced nothingness, but I did not take that extra step into the infinite. But I know that I was on the gateway. This idea culminates in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in the paradoxical line: “the narrowest gap is the hardest to bridge.”

There is another scene in this parsha, which I haven’t yet mentioned. Judah has gotten Tamar, who happens to be his daughter-in-law, pregnant. Tamar is pregnant and is about to give birth. It is said that she had twins in her womb. One baby sticks out his hand, and the midwife ties a red ribbon around the baby’s finger in order to declare him to be the first baby. But then, the first baby’s hand went back in, and the second baby came out. So which baby was first? Both were first, and neither was first. This little story seems to encourage us to be open to allowing for contradictory ideas to both simultaneously be correct. But then we must decide for ourselves on which idea to tie the red ribbon. We must choose to see the Moment, not as a smoothing out of

the infinity of time, in which all is the same, but as a collision of time, in which all is of supreme significance.