

Episode 34

Korach

Every morning, when I wake up and get dressed, I turn on a morning talk show in Germany called Live nach Neun [Live after nine]. Whenever I watch German TV, I always compare it with American TV. And I usually find it rather humorous. Because I see how painstakingly the Germans have tried to imitate the Americans in their media, advertisements, and even culture. In fact, the Germans—and most of the world—have copied pretty much all of the ideas from American media and television, and morning talk shows are no exception. So, you can just substitute here whichever morning talk show you watch for the one I like to put on in Berlin.

When I watch this morning show, Live nach Neun, I pay extra-close attention to the finer details. I am almost like an anthropologist when I watch, observing these strange creatures called German news anchors.

What I have noticed is that the show goes to extraordinary lengths to make the hosts seem as relatable, average, “regular guy,” “Average Joe,” girl-next-door as possible. The hosts are all craftily dressed and costumed as people you could meet at your neighborhood barbeque, in the checkout line at the supermarket, sitting in coach on the airplane (this last example is a point I will return to later, so don’t forget it). They dress nice, of course, but never “too nice.” Usually a sweater and jeans is sufficient. The idea of any of them wearing a Rolex watch or carrying a Gucci bag on the air would be unthinkable. They are reasonably good-looking, but never *too* good-looking. They crack jokes, but the jokes are almost *never* actually funny.

It’s not just the hosts themselves, but the entire set and production. The entire set is built to make us think of a middle-class, bourgeois living room. In short, it’s built to look like *our* living room, or at least the living room of our neighbor down the street. The hosts sit on a couch together, perhaps with a cup of coffee and some plants to the side. They talk with each other and to the audience as though everyone is just hanging out in the morning, drinking coffee, and shooting the breeze. Aside from the fact that they address the audience as “Sie” and not as “du,” all formalities have also been expunged.

News shows were, of course, not always this way. A generation or two ago, the news was a rather formal affair. The host wore a suit and tie. There was no chit-chat. The division between audience and performer was clear.

The same dynamic can be witnessed in politics. It seems as though with each decade politicians market themselves more and more as “average Joes,” as just some dude down the street picking up a case of beer. One reason for this is the political character of democracy itself. In order to get people to vote for you, you need to appeal to them. And so, politicians, in trying to appeal to the masses, will try to *behave* like the millions of average Joes strolling around. But what’s interesting is that, in recent years, this *political need* to be seen as average and crude has become stronger than ever. Did America just become a democracy in 2016 or 2000? No, American democracy has been around for over two hundred years. Yet, the desire for a leader who is just one of the rest of us is relatively new. I remember, for example, in college, doing a research project on president Warren G. Harding. He was president during the 1920s. I had to read newspaper articles from the 1920s about Harding. The way the press speaks of President Harding, you would almost think he is a *king*. Newspapers gratuitously flattered him, referring to him as “our most wonderful president.” The media discussed all of the leisurely, extravagant activities he would engage in—like playing polo at the club, going on luxurious vacations, and

driving in expensive automobiles. Back then, in the 1920s—and I stress that this wasn't even *that* long ago—the division between *president* and *citizen* was clear. He was the great president, and we were the measly, pathetic citizens. And everyone just kind of accepted it. He was better than us, because he was the president, and we were just citizens. And that was okay. Obviously, today, that doesn't really fly anymore.

But it actually used to be much, much worse. Let's think, for example, of Louis XIV of France, the Sun King. He represents the antithesis of modern politicians or these news anchors on morning shows. His entire image was crafted around showing that he was one-thousand times superior to his people. Nothing about this man was business casual. His body was bedecked in gold, silver, rubies, precious stones of all kinds. His clothes were luscious and ostentatious. This was, indeed, a far cry from Mark Zuckerberg who, despite his billions of dollars, wears the same t-shirt every day. In short, the attire and image of Louis XIV was designed to continually alert people: I am *richer* than you, *more successful* than you, *more holy* than you, in short, *better than* you. And everyone went along with this. A lot of people actually even seemed to kind of like it. This was not *just* Louis XIV's personal predilections. This was also good politics. Indeed, this is how many people thought: We *want* our ruler to be godlike, we *want* to feel like pathetic scum next to our ruler, we *want* to feel *unequal*. How times have changed.

This phenomenon—if we can call it that—was even more pronounced in England. England is a country *notorious* for its love affair with ranking and hierarchy. The continual existence of the royal family shows how difficult it has been for England to totally shake its addiction to hierarchy. A few centuries ago in England, there was an endless stream of titles for the aristocracy and clergy—dukes, viscounts, counts, lords, barons, bishops, archbishops, and so forth. Not only this, but if you were walking down the street and you encountered one of these superiors, you were required to tip your cap to them and move out of the way so they could walk past. And not only *this*, but there was actually a book published annually in England with five-thousand titles across the land. The book gave a ranking from one to five-thousand, showing the hierarchy and precedence across all titles. And if you were some lord who was five-thousandth on the list and you walked past some count who was four thousand, nine-hundred and ninety-nine, you had to *tip* your cap and move out of the way, because he was *better* than you, and there was no disputing that.

Today, if anyone ever says directly or even *hints* that he or she is superior to *you*, our egos get all ruffled up, we get insulted, we seek justice and reprove. But I would like to stress how recent this phenomenon is. In the past, it was just accepted in society that some folks were better than others. And everyone just went on with their lives.

It was during the eighteenth-century Enlightenment in which this sentiment began to *shift*. The Enlightenment believed in applying Reason to all aspects of life. And naturally this was applied to politics and government. Just because he is king doesn't make him any better or any different than I am, people reasoned. He was just lucky enough to be born into the right family. I'm just as good as he is. Much eighteenth-century literature and theater contains these themes about the equality between peasants and aristocrats. Beaumarchais' play *The Marriage of Figaro* from 1778, which Mozart famously set to music, makes the hero *not* the prince but rather a common man—Figaro. The German playwright Lessing composed the well-known work *Emilia Galotti* in 1772. This play depicts the prince as abusive of his power and the peasants and commoners as far more noble and Enlightened than the immature and lecherous prince.

Politically, of course, this new sentiment of equality would explode, first, during the American Revolution of 1776, based on the principles of the Enlightenment. If you've ever heard

phrases like “We the People,” or “All men are created equal,” you can hear how intertwined the American Revolution was with the Enlightenment. The next explosion came in 1789 during the French Revolution, also driven by these new-agey and weird Enlightenment values which had just come on the scene.

Now, it is tempting to view these revolutions as progress. We cannot help but be repulsed at the idea of moving out of the way on the sidewalk so that someone who is “better than us” and “higher in rank” can pass while we politely doff our cap. Society is moving in the direction, we think. We are making progress, we think. Equality is a good thing, we think. We are *better*, or at least more Enlightened, than the people who lived before us, we think.

All of these thoughts and sentiments are probably true. But I would merely like to question how reliable of judges we can be of our own cultural values. After all, probably everyone listening to this podcast, including myself, grew up in societies in which we were taught, over and over again, that equality is indisputably good, that no one should ever be seen as “better” than anybody else, and, finally, that anyone who shows off their wealth, degrees, status is an immoral jerk. Put another way, we are the distant grandchildren of the Enlightenment. And in each passing generation, the principles of the Enlightenment have become stronger, more ingrained, more indisputable, more “normal.” These principles may, indeed, be *wonderful* principles and values. But we cannot fool ourselves into thinking we can judge them objectively as we sit here in 2021. In short, it is not a *coincidence* that we live in a liberal democracy and we and our leaders all believe in the values of liberal democracy. Or at least, *should* believe—hint hint. There are probably still some folks out there who think society would be better with kings and queens and peasants and guilds. But those folks don’t have any power any more, so we don’t hear from them, and they can’t spread their ideas.

One man who was rather skeptical of the Enlightenment conception of equality was Friedrich Nietzsche. He saw how demands for equality were growing louder and louder from the population. He saw how rank and hierarchy was being purged from society. And he was skeptical.

In his 1882 book, *The Science of Joy*, Nietzsche wrote, “What they sing – ‘equal rights,’ ‘free society,’ no more masters and more servants’—has no allure for us ... We do not want justice and concord on earth because it would mean a leveling down to mediocrity ... rather we want love, danger, war, and adventure; we refuse to compromise, to be captured, to reconcile, to be castrated.”

So: What, for Nietzsche, was *wrong* with equality? The first reason is that valuing equality, for Nietzsche, encourages us to be *mediocre* and *average* rather than to flourish and become excellent. If you look around at society today, you see how many of Nietzsche’s fears have come true. As I mentioned, politicians now strive to be average and are often punished at the voting box if they, say, are too erudite or too educated. During these morning news shows, no doubt the producers are telling the hosts: you need to *speak* more average, you need to *look* and *appear* more average. This will increase our ratings. Our society also tends to castigate those who boast about themselves or take pride in themselves. The following words have negative connotations: over-achiever, Ivy League, elitist, *Francophile*. Instead, we praise people for being “modest” and “humble.” Today, in a perverted twist, a man is more likely to be shamed for having a six pack than for having a beer belly. The forces of averageness have won. Somewhere in France, Louis XIV is turning over in his grave.

But there is a second reason as well why Nietzsche had an issue with equality. Obviously, equality breeds feelings of resentment. If you want to be equal with another person, and for

whatever reason, you *are* not equal, then you become angry, resentful, hateful, miserable. Resentment is, for Nietzsche, one of the worst possible emotions to ever befall the human race. And, for Nietzsche, it began when slaves got together during the Roman Empire and began to say things like: it's not *fair* that we are slaves and our bosses are *masters*. Why should they be *masters* and not *us*? In short, why should we not be *equal*? These complaining slaves and peasants were, according to Nietzsche, the first Christians. The problem, however, is not that the Roman peasants wanted to be *equal* to the Roman masters. The problem was that, when they saw that they *couldn't* be equal, their strategy was to invert the value system of master and slave. For the masters, it had always been self-evident that it was *good* to be a master, to be powerful, wealthy, successful, strong, superior. And to be a slave was self-evidently *bad*: to be weak, unpowerful, poor, inferior. The slaves took this value system and reversed it. Suddenly, to be powerful and wealthy was shameful and to be poor and weak was admirable. This reversal of all values has stayed with us right up until the decades into the twenty-first century. Even though Christianity no longer has the power it once did, its value system is so deep in our culture that it is not going to go gently into that good night. The same goes for the Enlightenment. I have already discussed master and slave morality in episode four. I am only rehashing it here to come to my next point.

One of the values to come out of this slave revolt against master morality was equality. Equality, then, was born through feelings of resentment and hatred, the resentment of the slaves against the masters.

Now, here I should pause for a moment and say that I completely support equal rights under the law and treating all humans and animals with dignity and fairness. It is a wonderful thing for people and animals to be treated equal with one another. The problem is: what emotion is fueling this desire for equality. Is it coming from a place of love and strength? Or is it coming from a place of *weakness, bitterness, hatred*, or, in a word, *resentment*?

Resentment is an unhealthy emotion. Why? Because it is insatiable. If you desire equality out of love, then at some point, enough equality will be reached. Actually, if you wish equality out of love, then the word "equality" isn't really the right word at all. Equality immediately presumes that you are comparing one group of people with another. Equality from love would better be described as, say, kindness, support, benevolence. When you really love someone, you don't compare them to others, but instead just wish to give them the best life they can have under their circumstances. When love determines how you treat someone, then equality comes in through the backdoor, organically, incidentally. Equality comes *naturally* out of love. But when equality is the *goal*, then the emotion at work is often not *love* but rather *hatred*, *hatred* of those who are superior.

But resentment is insatiable. It stems from hatred. And if you wish equality out of feelings of resentment, then you will never be satisfied. Actually, in this case, too, equality is again the "wrong word." Because if you wish equality out resentment, what you really want is not *equality* at all but rather revenge, retaliation, payback. And when it comes to revenge and retaliation, the goal is never to enjoy equality with your "enemy." The goal is really to vanquish your enemy. And if you vanquish someone, you're not exactly equal anymore now are you.

This phenomenon is the central theme of the novel *Michael Kohlhaas* by the German writer Heinrich von Kleist. Kleist wrote this novel in 1810. It is the story of a horse dealer in Brandenburg named Michael Kohlhaas. Kohlhaas is traveling through the countryside with his horses when he comes upon the land of a nobleman named Wenzel von Tronka. In order to pass through this land, Tronka demands that Kohlhaas leave two of his horses with Tronka as

collateral. Kohlhaas is told that he can pick them up again on his way home. Well, when he returns later to pick up his horses, he learns that he has been tricked by Wenzel von Tronka. Tronka has been using and abusing Kohlhaas' horses the whole time Kohlhaas was away.

Kohlhaas is outraged and demands justice. Yet, because Kohlhaas is a mere horse trader and Wenzel von Tronka is a nobleman, Kohlhaas' lawsuit never gets heard in court. Tronka is too powerful and has too many friends in government.

At this point, Kohlhaas is outraged. He is incensed and decides to take matters into his own hands. He more or less starts a private war against Tronka, burning down Tronka's castle, and leading a mob throughout the country. In his pursuit of revenge—oops, I mean, equality—Kohlhaas loses everything: his wife, his horses, and even his own life. He is sentenced to death for his rebellion. Yet, he does get what he sought out for at the beginning: justice and equality. Before he is beheaded, he receives court papers declaring that the nobleman Tronka wrongly used Kohlhaas' horses and that Tronka will need to pay compensation. Kohlhaas then ascends to the chopping block.

Kohlhaas' problem was not the wish for equality *per se*. There's nothing necessarily wrong with equality and under the right conditions it can be a very good thing. But Kohlhaas confused equality with hatred and resentment. To the reader of the novel, it is obvious that Kohlhaas' drive for equal treatment is really just a mask for revenge. If Kohlhaas really loved his horses, and his family, and even himself, he would not have *cared* so much about equality. He hated the nobleman Tronka more than he loved himself and his family. He cared about equality more than love. And he fatefully and tragically used the mask of "equality" to justify his rampage.

In the parsha for this week, we find resentment take root in the Hebrew camp under the guise of equality. A man named Korach is part of the tribe of Levi. The Levites, as you may remember, are responsible for taking care of the Temple. They are Temple employees and administrators. Within the Levite tribe is a select group known as the Cohanim—the *Cohens*. This group is superior to the Levites. They are the *priests* and are far more than just servants of the Temple, like the Levites. Rather, the priests lead the sacrificial ceremonies. They are treated as the holiest and most important of the Cohanim. They are upper-class. Aaron, Moshe's brother, was the first Cohen.

When the parsha opens up, the Levite Korach begins by *complaining* about Aaron and the priestly subset of the Levites. Korach cries: But... it's not fair. It's not equal. Why aren't all of the Levites priests? Why just Aaron and his descendants? Why not me?

Now, at first glance, perhaps we can sympathize with Korach. After all, isn't it *unfair* that Aaron gets to be a priest, and Korach gets to be a mere Levite, a mere Temple employee? The cry of equality is so seductive. It almost always causes our sympathy to bubble up. But the Torah wishes to show us how Korach's outcry is coming from an unhealthy place. The Torah goes out of its way to show how Korach is *petty* and still thinks like a *slave*.

Korach makes the obnoxious comment to Moses: you brought us *out of a land of milk and honey* to die in the wilderness. Well, that is a real slap in the face. It is the Land of Israel to which they are headed which is the Land of Milk and Honey. Yet here, Korach is telling Moses that *Egypt* was the *real* land of milk and honey. Obviously, this is a petty and obnoxious comment. But the Torah here seems to wish to communicate to us something very important as well. Some people still *think* like slaves and peasants but then wish to be equals with the masters and the aristocrats. Korach's outcry that he should be equal to Aaron is mocked by the Torah as a race to the bottom. Korach *wants* to be equal by showing how much of a *slave and peasant*

he still is. This is the significance of his belief that the land of slavery was the land of milk and honey. This is the notion of equality from one who simply wants to settle the score and to soothe his insecurities. The Torah seems to be telling us: you can't achieve equality by doubling down on being a slave. Because this only demonstrates that you are not *ready* for and not worthy of equality. You can't say I want to go back to Egypt and I want to be treated with privilege in the same breath.

Yet, the Torah goes out of its way to tell us something more about Korach which is of supreme significance. Korach is *already* a Levite. That is, he is already *above* the eleven other tribes of Israel. While Korach may "only" be a Temple employee, the other tribes aren't allowed to participate in the Temple at all. Not only that, but the Torah tells us how Korach and the other men supporting his rebellion were the most powerful and elite group within the Israelite people.

This is, indeed, a bitter irony. Those complaining about not having equality are those same people who are already exceedingly more *privileged* than the vast majority of the population. Korach is in the most prestigious tribe and is a powerful magnate within the Hebrew nation, and yet it is this same *Korach* who is complaining that he is not receiving fair treatment.

The Torah, then, seems to be making a profound point here. When equality comes from resentment and from a slavish mentality, it is a bottomless pit. You can never be equal enough when you think this way. You will never be satisfied. Even though Korach already had *more rights and privileges* than 99.99% of the Israelite people, it was still not enough for him.

I recently took a flight from Berlin to Philadelphia. Being a mere *Schrift* host, I naturally could not afford first-class. So instead, I had to sit in what we call "second-class" or "coach." Or, at least I thought it was called "coach." In fact, as I stood in line to board the flight, I noticed that it was not called "coach" or "second-class" but rather, *economy* class. Economy class. I laughed to myself, as this was obviously a euphemism. It's not economy class, it's *second-class*. It's the inferior class to *first class*. But the airline, it seemed, didn't want to offend us coach passengers. It worried that it might hurt our feelings if we saw ourselves as *unequal* to the first-class passengers. Yet, anyone who can afford to fly across the Atlantic is already doing pretty well in life. But might it be that these relatively privileged people, these coach or economy class passengers, are susceptible to the same tendencies as Korach? That, the more privileged we become, the more we attain equality, the more sensitive we become to not being treated as equals? Don't lie to me and tell me I am economy class. Tell me what I really am: second-class. I can handle it.

In psychology, for a long time, self-esteem was heralded as critically important for happiness and well-being. You may remember from back in the nineties when psychological gurus stressed building up your self-esteem and positive notions of self. Yet, more recent research has shown how dangerous self-esteem can be for people. The problem with self-esteem is that it always requires you to compare yourself to someone else. If you want to feel self-esteem about your intelligence, wealth, morality, generosity, or whatever, you need to feel that you are *better* than average, *better* than the person next to you. Self-esteem is a positive and healthy feeling, to be sure. But the problem with self-esteem is that you cannot *always* be better than average, better than your neighbor, in all things. Sometimes, you're going to be worse, maybe a lot worse. And then what happens to your self-esteem? It plummets. Self-esteem is, in short, always shifting based on the competition around you.

More recent psychological research has stressed shifting the focus from self-esteem to self-compassion. Self-compassion has nothing to do with comparing yourself with others. It is stable and constant. Self-compassion simply advocates treating yourself with the same kindness

and thoughtfulness as you would treat others who are struggling with a problem. Self-compassion requires that we ask ourselves merely, “What do I *need* in this moment to feel good?” What do I need? This question—what do I need?—is a question which can be answered without having to judge yourself alongside others. Self-esteem, by contrast, quickly descends into a bottomless pit, in which you are always at the mercy of your competition.

The Roman slaves, Michael Kohlhaas, and Korach, were all bitter and unhappy for various reasons. Yet they seem to have asked themselves the wrong question. They asked themselves: how can I boost my self-esteem? How can I feel *equal* to or *better* than others? What they did not ask is: what do I need right now to feel comforted and secure? What can I *tell myself* to feel better about my situation? Had they asked treated themselves with self-compassion rather than tortured themselves with self-esteem, they might have found some relief.