

## Episode 29 Behar-Behukkotai

Several years ago, I was living in Be'er Sheva, Israel. I had organized a Shabbat dinner for my Israeli friends to come to. It was winter, and so I was making borscht. I was keeping Shabbat, so I knew that once the sun went down, I would have to stop cooking and turn everything off. But I didn't give myself enough time. I still had at tons of cooking to do even when it was fifteen minutes before Shabbat. What did I do? I pictured all of my guests coming over, eating half-cooked soup and hard potatoes, and I just couldn't let that happen. I told myself that Shabbat was a flexible concept and kept the fire on in my kitchen. In short, I broke Shabbat. About an hour later, the guests began to arrive. I grabbed the pot of soup to bring it into the living room to serve. But a beet had rolled onto the floor. As I walked holding the soup, I slipped on the beet. Everything came crashing down. I, the pot of soup, and my plans. I lay on the floor in a giant puddle of bright red borscht. Yet, at that moment, it was my face which was most red of all.

I learned a valuable lesson on that Shabbat evening. When you break the commandments, the *Mitzvot*, God will punish you somehow, someday. Indeed, I can safely say that I felt God's wrath, his unbridled wrath on that fateful evening. Now, I'm not necessarily saying that God saw me cooking past sunset and decided, "I'm going to make Steve slip on a beet and teach him a lesson." But it could be, instead, that the laws of Shabbat have their own logic. That I shouldn't have been cooking past dark, as I couldn't see as well in my kitchen. I couldn't see the red beet on the floor. Or that I should have prepared better and gave myself more time. Shabbat teaches us not to rush, and here I was, rushing. If we push ourselves over the limit, if we continue to work on Shabbat, we will bear the consequences. Shabbat will raise its fist up to us. And God will most certainly be watching.

Yet, dear Schrift listeners, there's just one problem with this story I've told you. None of it was true.

Well, I shouldn't say that none of it was true. All of it was true, actually, except for the last part. There was no beet on the floor. I didn't slip. I wasn't covered head-to-toe in a pot of steaming hot borscht. Actually, nothing happened. I broke Shabbat, my friends came, the borscht was delicious, we all had a good time, and everyone went home. I felt a bit guilty afterward for breaking Shabbat, but eventually I got over it.

This is the problem with the *Mitzvot*. There's no policeman or court enforcing them. Everyone kind of knows that if they break the commandments nothing will actually happen to them. Now, there is the argument that the *Mitzvot* have contained within them their own internal logic. If you follow them, you will be blessed and be happier. I believe this is true, to an extent. After all, fasting one day a year is good for your mind and body. Resting one day out of seven is extremely healthy and important. Not gorging yourself with all kinds of different animal meat mixed with dairy products is beneficial to you and the environment. And obviously, it's good for you and for society not to steal, murder, commit adultery, and so forth. But I have seen the *haredim* who keep the *Mitzvot* 1,000 times more than secular Jews ever have. They painstakingly, fastidiously, obsessively, observe every commandment and all of the sub-sub-sub commandments of these originals. I am not sure I can say they are happier, more fulfilled, or more at peace. If you've watched the shows *Shtisel* or *Unorthodox*, you know that the far-right orthodox have their own set of problems and their own dissatisfaction. Yet, having said that, it wouldn't kill the secular Jews out there to keep a few more of the *Mitzvot*. I do believe that

keeping the commandments is to your benefit, leaving aside the whole part about their being ordained by God and all. But it doesn't guarantee anything.

Some will argue that the *Mitzvot* function more on the macro level, on the Jewish people as a whole. God punishes all Jews even if only a handful disobey. Or even if you don't believe God Himself comes down to smite us, the argument could be made that, when some Jews are disobeying the laws, the entire community is out of sync, out of harmony, such that everyone feels the consequences.

I remember speaking to a very religious friend of mine once. He basically gave the impression that God was with him at every moment; that God was in constant communication with him. So, I asked him the natural question: what about the Holocaust? How can you believe in God if He let the Holocaust happen? My friend answered: "Jewish history is filled with examples where God punishes us if some of the community stop obeying the *Mitzvot*."

In a way, he was correct. As I've discussed before, the German Jews more or less blatantly flouted and mocked Judaism in the nineteenth and twentieth century. They began eating pork, getting baptized, working on Saturday, and so forth. My religious friend would have said that the Holocaust was a punishment for this. And even if you don't think God Himself said, "I am now going to punish the Jews of Europe," you could argue that the German Jews treasonous behavior poisoned and weakened the Jewish community at large. All of the Jews, the millions in Poland and Russia, even though they had nothing to do with the Jews of Germany, were therefore punished along with the "treasonous" German Jews. You can say they were punished by God or by the internal logic of the *Mitzvot*. Either way, it amounts to the same thing.

The problem with this theory, however, is that, if this were the case, there would be another apocalypse today. Have you ever been to Tel Aviv? Seen the tattoos? Eaten the cheeseburgers? Rode on a moped on a Friday night to a rave on the beach?

Granted, the Tel Aviv Jews are nowhere near as bad as the German Jews were. Though many of them are avowed atheists, none of them are getting baptized and not too many are intermarrying. Obviously, assimilation is also not a problem, as they live in a Jewish State. But still, we are soon going to discuss what God said he would do to the Israelites if they don't follow the commandments. And I can't imagine that secular Judaism today would have made God significantly more or less angry than during the nineteenth and twentieth century. And this is to say nothing of the Roman era, the Babylonian era, and the countless other times when Jews have misbehaved.

It used to be that we viewed suffering as divine intervention. But, as I showed with the soup example, people generally don't see their lives that way anymore. We, as humans, have kind of figured out that we can do immoral things and God won't smite us for it, at least not right away. Yet, we have substituted this divine intervention with the idea that the *universe* intervenes or that the "way of the world" intervenes. This is the point Dostoevsky wished to make in his novel *Crime and Punishment*. In *Crime and Punishment*, the protagonist, Raskolnikov, believes that morality is just a concept. It doesn't really exist. And so, in order to prove that he is above morality, he murders his landlady and another woman who happens to be there at the time. Raskolnikov expects to walk away from the murder and just go back to his life as before, albeit with a bit more money. But no, instead, guilt begins to creep in. How could I murder those two old women? But they were just meaningless specks in society. But still, two old women? And the blood. So much blood. What have I done? Nothing. You did nothing wrong.

The guilt gets stronger and stronger. Raskolnikov slowly loses the will to rationalize the murder. Eventually, he confesses, becomes a devout Christian, and at last achieves peace, marrying a prostitute named Sonya along the way.

Dostoevsky's point here is rather straightforward. If you mess with morality, if you mess with God's commandments, you're going to get punished—hence the title, *crime and punishment*. But God is not going to come down from heaven and punish you. No, instead, the universe is constructed so that these commandments have their own internal logic. Put another way, God will not punish you; rather, the commandments themselves will punish you. By committing murder, Raskolnikov felt the punishment of extreme, harrowing, haunting *guilt*. And he could not escape it.

So, the logic goes that if the Jews start breaking the commandments, maybe God won't come down and smite us, but the very *breach* of the commandments will smite us. I believe this is true, to an extent. Intermarrying, getting baptized, flying on planes on Shabbat, eating whatever the hell you want at any time—none of these are very good for the Jewish people. And history has shown that. But only to an extent. After all, I broke Shabbat to serve my friends Borscht, and everyone had a great time. Why didn't I fall onto the floor in a puddle of soup? Why does Tel Aviv have the best club scene in the world? Moreover, does anyone really think the world would be a better place if everyone became *Charedim* and kept each commandment to a tee?

Woody Allen very cynically dealt with this question in his 1989 film *Crimes and Misdemeanors*. This film is a kind of response to Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. In this film, the main character is named Judah—I'll leave it up to you to decide why Woody Allen named him Judah. Anyway, Judah is having an affair with a flight attendant named Dolores. Judah is a respectable family man. When he tells Dolores he is going to end the affair, Dolores threatens to tell Judah's wife about the affair and basically ruin Judah's life and reputation. Judah's therapist advises him to come clean to his wife and work through the unfathomable damage it will cause to his life. Instead, Judah decides to have Dolores murdered by a hitman so that no one will ever know about his affair. And so, Dolores is murdered.

Like Raskolnikov of *Crime and Punishment*, after the murder, Judah is wracked by guilt. Like Raskolnikov, he turns to religion, and believes that God is judging him and punishing him. Like Raskolnikov, he contemplates confessing and purging himself from his sin.

Yet, here is where the comparisons stop. Unlike Raskolnikov, Judah never quite gets around to confessing. A few years pass by. And we see Judah again, living a happy life with his family. He learns that some homeless person has been convicted for the murder of Dolores. Most importantly, in the final scene of the film, Judah says that he kind of just slowly forgot about the whole thing. Life moved on. The guilt slowly dissipated. Meanwhile, Dolores lies in her grave, and Judah gets to continue enjoying life. No punishment, neither from God, nor from the court, nor even from Dostoevsky's idea of "built-in" guilt to violations of absolute morality.

Cynically, the message of Woody Allen's film seems to be, if you can get away with it, and you can deal with the short-term guilt, you should do it.

And you wonder why the whole world hates Woody Allen.

Can I apply this message to myself with the Shabbat dinner *Borscht*? I was able to break Shabbat, not get punished, have a great meal with my friends. Sure, I felt a bit guilty about it, but that passed.

In the parsha for this week, we get one of the most intimidating, frightening, harrowing messages from God. This is the message of what will happen to the Hebrews if they do not

follow the commandments. The speech begins calmly and optimistically. It relays all of the good things which will happen to the Hebrews if they *do* follow the laws. God says, “If you follow my laws and observe my *Mitzvot*, I will give your rains in their time, the Land will yield its produce, and the tree of the field will give forth its fruit ... I will turn towards you, and I will make you fruitful and increase you, and I will establish my bond with you.”

Many people are at least a bit familiar with Dante’s poem the *Inferno* written circa 1300. It has given us the famous lines, “midway upon life’s journey / I found myself lost within a forest dark” and “abandon all hope, ye who enter here.” The *Inferno* takes readers into the depths of hell, and Dante gives us the most terrifying, lurid, sensational descriptions of the fire, the ghouls, the tortures of the underworld.

Yet, Dante’s *Inferno* was only one part of a three-part epic poem known as the *Divine Comedy*. After taking us through hell, Dante brings us up into Purgatory—*Purgatorio*—and then finally into heaven—*Paradiso*. Yet, most people just read the *Inferno* part. The other two sections are by far less famous. Why? Because it makes for much more riveting literature to describe the negative rather than the positive. We are much more drawn to poetry which is terrifying and haunting than that which is uplifting. And here I mean “uplifting” quite literally. It is simply much easier and more compelling to read depictions of hell than depictions of heaven.

And the Torah plays the same game as Dante. This nice little passage about all the good things which will happen to the Israelites is, relatively speaking, rather short. But the subsequent passage on all the bad things which will happen if the Israelites *disobey* God’s commands is long, seemingly endlessly long, passionate, gripping.

What happens if the Israelites disobey? Here is what the Torah tells us: “I will order upon you shock, consumption, fever, and diseases that cause hopeless longing and depression. I will incite the plague in your midst, and you will be delivered into the enemy’s hands. You will eat the flesh of your sons, and the flesh of your daughters you will eat. And I will scatter you among the nations, and I will unsheathe the sword after you. Your land will be desolate, and your cities will be laid waste.”

It continues to go on like that for awhile.

How should we understand this speech, this diatribe? Obviously, one way would be to get really freaked out and make sure we do everything God says. Otherwise, we will feel his wrath. Yet, people don’t tend to take this warning seriously. People kind of know they can get away with stuff. I kind of knew that even if I continued to make the borscht after Shabbat, nothing bad would happen to me. The second would be to say, okay, as Jews, these laws have an internal logic. If we don’t follow them as a group, we will end up in exile in Babylon, or enslaved by the Romans, or put in Concentration Camps, or attending a wedding ceremony where a priest and a reform rabbi stand side-by-side and shrimp is served as an hor-d’oeuvres. While I believe this is true to an extent, there are far too many exceptions and injustices under this view to take it at face value. And the third way would be to just say, it’s just an empty threat, it means nothing, yes, I will take bacon on my cheeseburger, I will mow the lawn on Shabbat—nothing’s going to happen.

I would like to propose, however, a fourth way.

Woody Allen was not the only Jew to respond to Dostoevsky’s novel *Crime and Punishment*. Another was Franz Kafka, in his novel, *The Trial*. The main character, Josef K., wakes up one morning to find himself under arrest. Yet, unlike Raskolnikov, who committed a double murder, Josef K. hasn’t committed any crime. The officers who arrest him even say that the court which has arrested him is not a governmental court. Moreover, Josef K. is not to be

restricted in any way, and he can go on living his life as before. Yet, this is not enough for Josef K. He still feels somehow *guilty*, but he doesn't know why or for what reason. This seems to him senseless. Why should he be arrested if he didn't do anything "wrong"? Why does he have unidentified guilt?

K.'s strategy is to keep telling himself that he is innocent, absolutely innocent. But we as readers don't really believe the words. Even K. doesn't believe the words. He ends up feeling just as *guilty* as Raskolnikov, but the irony is that Raskolnikov was a murderer, and K. is just a well-behaved banker. When we read *Crime and Punishment*, we want Raskolnikov to confess his crime, to relieve himself of the burden caused by his guilt. Interestingly, when we read *The Trial*, we have the same reaction toward K. Stop saying you are innocent. Just admit it: you're guilty. But to the reader's frustration, K. always refuses.

What *The Trial* teaches us, I think, is that there is a certain power which comes from taking responsibility. We tend to think that if we profess ourselves to be blameless, then this will strengthen us. But refusing to point the finger at ourselves, in fact, weakens us. In every situation, one can always find an excuse for one's actions. One can always put the blame elsewhere. But when you always try to maintain your innocence, always try to exonerate yourself, as K. did, you relinquish your freedom. You become a kind of slave to your own mind. You feel the need to continually appease the part of your mind which doesn't want to feel guilty. To say, whatever happens, I am responsible, is not a burdensome statement; rather, it is a liberating one. Moreover, for the Jewish people, and for humanity as a whole, if we can say, whatever happens, *we* are responsible, is not burdensome, but liberating. Why? Because when you allow yourself to take complete responsibility for whatever happens, you no longer need to struggle with your mind as to who is to blame, who is guilty, why this happened. Moreover, this mentality also frees you up and inspires you to create change. To see every predicament as an opportunity to ask yourself: how can I make this better? How can I take responsibility for the situation and then bring about improvement?

This, I think, is the way we should read this passage from the Torah, the fourth way. The reason it is written so shockingly, with so much "fear-mongering", if you will, is because this language encourages us to look inward when things go wrong, or when things go right. The Torah wants to encourage us to engage in relentless soul-searching. To continually ask "why" fortune and fate are treating us the way they do. To ask what we can do to alter the course of this alleged "fortune." If there's no wheat growing on your field, don't blame others, don't blame God, don't blame the weather. Instead, take responsibility. Ask what can be done differently. If you or your people are scattered somewhere in the world, don't just accept that. Take responsibility and ask, why are we scattered? Why are we dispersed? Why am I somewhere I don't want to be?

And then ask yourself, is there a commandment or a law or a moral code or a mantra that I am breaking? How might following this mantra better allow me to improve, to free myself from the curse which has befallen me.

But *The Trial* is a novel which is a double-edged sword. It is not just about taking responsibility. Because if we are constantly pointing the finger at ourselves, heaping guilt upon ourselves, endlessly self-flagellating, that is also bad. That is just as bad, and is in a way, the same thing, as doggedly maintaining your innocence. On one hand, Josef K. was too obsessed with *never taking* responsibility. But on the other hand, he was equally obsessed with seeing guilt and wrongdoing in every one of his actions. Both cases lead to self-torment.

The way out of this paradox is, I think, to combine self-responsibility with self-compassion. The problem with Josef K. is that his inner monologue was like a debate between two lawyers before a man who is on trial. The prosecutor of his mind was saying: you are absolutely guilty. The defense attorney of his mind was saying: you are absolutely innocent. Instead, we need to talk to ourselves compassionately, as we would talk to a friend. If something goes wrong, don't blame yourself the way a lawyer would blame the other side. Instead, take responsibility but not in a violent, self-lacerating way, but in a kind and loving way. Acknowledge that you are doing a very difficult thing by being human and that, even if it's your responsibility, it's not your fault. Arguably, the reason Josef K. could never take responsibility is because he lacked this self-compassion. He knew that if he were to ever blame himself, he could not do so without condemning his entire being. And, if you go back to episode one of *The Schrift*, you know that any kind of judgment or condemnation or criticism of oneself is the equivalent of *shame*. And shame is an emotion that we, as humans, want to avoid at all costs.

The stoic philosopher Epictetus sums up the idea of this episode well in the following quote: "An immature person will blame everyone else for his or her problems. A sign of progress is when, instead of blaming others, you blame yourself. Yet, when you become truly wise, you will never have to blame others *or* yourself."