

Episode 41

Eikev

The planet is getting hot. Very hot.

The cover for this week's issue of *The Economist* reads: No Safe Place. The Three-Degree Celsius Future.

As you may guess from the title, the article is about climate change. And it was, sadly, not an optimistic article. It basically said that climate change is preparing to ravage us. We used to think that climate change would "only" affect areas of the globe which faced extreme temperatures already, or which were by coastlines. But now, according to *The Economist*, there is "no safe place in the world from which we can observe climate change" any longer.

What was particularly bleak about this article was that it said that, even if we do make international agreements to fight climate change, it still won't be enough at this point. Even if countries honor their emissions agreements, it is still likely that "large parts of the tropics will become too hot for outdoor work ... Coral reefs and the livelihoods that depend on them will vanish and the Amazon rainforest will become a ghost of itself ... Severe harvest failures will be commonplace ... Ice sheets in Antarctica and Greenland will shrink past the point of no return.

The Economist advises that cutting carbon emissions is now no longer enough. We also have to learn how to make climate change more palatable, because defeating it is a lost cause. One way we could make climate change more tolerable for us is through what is called "solar geoengineering." Essentially, this strategy involves playing around with the clouds, manipulating them, so that they are more like mirrors. The clouds may then *reflect away* some of the sunlight and reduce greenhouse-gas warming. The problem with this strategy is that it may affect the rainfall levels of clouds. And it may also serve as a disincentive for countries to follow their commitments to reduce carbon emissions.

When I finished reading the apocalyptic article, my thoughts were dominated by the following conclusion: this is quite an embarrassing state of affairs for the human animal. We read sensational news stories all the time about celebrities who find themselves swimming in millions of dollars. And with this excess capital, they self-destruct in a sea of drugs, crime, and gluttony, and they bring down with them many of their close family and friends. The human race has essentially become this spoiled, debauched celebrity. Through our own lusting after profits and pleasure, we have put ourselves, and our surrounding worlds, on a kind of life support. We have descended so low that we now need to start manipulating clouds—yes, manipulating clouds—just to get by. It's all just kind of, well, pathetic. It's embarrassing.

Last week on *The Schrift*, I spoke about how we need to learn to embrace the moments when life becomes tormentingly unlucky. Tragedy, I said, is defined as when fate deals with us cruelly and there is no rational explanation as to why. Climate change is, in a way, the opposite of tragedy. It is an apocalyptic state of affairs which humans have no one—no one—to blame but themselves. If humans were put on trial for climate change, the jury would reach a verdict within minutes. Guilty. The explanation for why it's happening is clear-cut and simple: because we, as a species, screwed up—over and over again, for decades. Climate change is not a tragedy; it is a morality play.

But, returning to the trial analogy, *if* I were the defense attorney for the human race, here is what I would argue. As humans, we just can't help ourselves. We can't help ourselves from doing what we want. And climate change is essentially the result of humans doing what they want, all the time, as much as they can. And that is, unfortunately, rather natural. Try telling a

group of college kids that they *shouldn't* fly to Jamaica for spring break because it will be bad for the environment. Instead, they should stay local. Try telling an airline executive that he should quit and start a new business which will be better for Mother Earth. Try telling the owner of a steakhouse that she should convert it into a vegan café because of how factory farms are cruel, wasteful, inefficient intensifiers of global warming.

They're not going to listen. Why? Because it goes against doing what they want. And when we want to do something, we generally do it, if we can get away with it. And that is how we, as a society, have reached the point where *The Economist* needed to write such a cover article. Climate change is just the result of billions of humans doing what they *want* since the Industrial Revolution.

What exactly is *wanting*? What does it mean to do what we *want*? *Wanting* is a powerful force indeed. According to German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, *wanting* was the key to understanding human behavior. But Schopenhauer had another word for it. He didn't call it *wanting*; he called it *willing*. Willing. What is willing?

Willing is one of the most important concepts in Western philosophy. It has been passionately written about by no less than Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Spinoza, Kant, Nietzsche, and, of course, Arthur Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer theorized that the will is the *restless striving* within all of us. Restless striving. The will is what makes us go out and seize the day. It is what compels us toward sex, food, pleasure, wealth. It is a deep-seated craving within us for life.

In 1818, Schopenhauer, at the relatively young age of thirty, would publish his masterpiece, *The World as Will and Representation*. In this book, Schopenhauer would build off the ideas of his predecessor, Immanuel Kant. In Episode 25, I discussed Immanuel Kant's theory of epistemology—that is, his theory of how humans process the world. Kant argued that humans can never know the world as it really is, but only our impressions of the outside world, filtered through our cognitive biases. Kant said, in short, that we can never know *the thing-in-itself*.

Schopenhauer's theory was that the will was the *thing-in-itself*. The will was that which made the world go round. The will is an irrational, blind aimless force, continually striving to satisfy its cravings and then hunt down more cravings to satisfy.

Let's remember when Schopenhauer wrote his book, *The World as Will and Representation*. 1818. About forty years before Darwin would publish, in 1859, *The Origin of Species*. You will notice how much Schopenhauer's theory resembles Darwin's, albeit in the sphere of philosophy and not biology. Darwin showed how all living beings are in a perennial battle with each other for resources. Darwin described animals, plants, and humans as basically just devouring each other and then having sex so as to create more beings who could devour each other and have more sex. Yet, forty years before Darwin, Schopenhauer had already nailed down this phenomenon—this was just *willing*. Unimpeded willing.

Schopenhauer was known as the great pessimist. As you can witness in his philosophy of willing, he had a rather dim conception of human nature and the future of civilization. Schopenhauer's answer to the problem of persistent willing was aesthetic contemplation. Humans move from craving to satisfaction, from craving to satisfaction, in a kind of endless and vicious circle. For Schopenhauer, art allows us to momentarily escape our slavery to the will. He provides the example of a still life painting of a bowl of fruit. Normally, when we see a bowl of fruit, we experience the craving to eat the fruit. Then, we are satisfied, until another craving comes along, enslaving us again. But when we look at a painting of a fruit bowl, we don't want to *eat* the fruit. Instead, we merely wish to marvel at the fruit and appreciate it. For these fleeting moments, we are released from willing. But, Schopenhauer would cynically point out, this can

only be a temporary solution. After awhile, we grow bored of the painting, and we return again to the will.

Let's think about the word "will" for a moment. In German, the connection between willing and wanting is clear. The word for to want in German is "wollen" and to say "I want," one says, "Ich will." Ich will. Sounds a heck of a lot like the word for "will" in German, which is "Wille." In English, the word "want" doesn't sound a whole lot like "will." But if we look closely, the connection remains—and is just as strong.

First, we have phrases and expressions like "free will" or "against my will" or "when there is a will there is a way." Free will basically just means "free want"—to be free to do what one desires. Against my will is like saying against my *want*. And finally, when there is a will there is a way is like saying, when I want something, I'll find a way to do it.

Okay, those were fairly straightforward. But *will* is a much richer and powerful word in English than just as a replacement for *want*. In English, will also is associated with determination, resolution, even decision-making. In English, to will isn't just to want. It's to really, *really* want. It's to want something so badly that you are going to throw your other priorities to the side and do whatever it takes to get it.

In English, this phenomenon can be witnessed by the use of "will" in the future tense, as in, "tomorrow, I *will* go to the beach" or "we will get married this summer." In English, "will" is how we describe future situations. Or is it? I've noticed, when I speak to people from other countries, that they often use "will" to describe *any* and *every* situation in the future. This is how they were taught "will" in school. It is the future tense. But actually, that's not true at all. Native English speakers will use "going to" often to describe future situations. *I'm going to the beach tomorrow* is just as correct as *I will go to the beach tomorrow*. *We're getting married this summer* is just as correct as *We will get married this summer*. Non-native English speakers will often sound a bit incorrect when they use "will" for all future situations. *So, what are you doing tomorrow? Are you going to check out the museum? No. Tomorrow, I will go to the beach*. This is technically correct, but a native English speaker would never respond this way, unless he or she *really* wanted to shove it in the other person's face that he or she is going to the beach. *Tomorrow, I will go to the beach* sounds dramatic and confrontational, almost as though the speaker is declaring war or something. *No, Tomorrow, I'm going to the beach* is how the person should respond. This makes the answer sound casual and nonchalant, which is likely how the speaker wants to come across. If you ask an engaged couple, *hey, when are y'all getting married?* they will respond by saying *we're getting married this summer*. If they were to say, *we will get married this summer*, it sounds like they just had an argument beforehand about when to get married and finally decided on the summer. If the answer the question in this way, *we will get married this summer*, it sounds confrontational; they seem to be dragging the interlocutor into a couples' argument he wants no part of.

Will has a certain vibe in the future tense which is unmistakable to native English speakers. They use it without even being aware of it. When someone says "will" to describe the future, the situation is filled with a certain drama, intensity, and fieriness. You can almost picture someone slamming their fist down on the table when they say will. *No, I will not go to the beach tomorrow*. The sentence, *no, I'm not going to the beach tomorrow* just doesn't contain the same drama. If someone says to me, I'm going to finally listen to the Schriift next week, I wouldn't believe them. But if they said, I *will* finally listen to the Schriift next week, then maybe I would. The use of "will" would suggest a resolution and determination that "going to" does not.

In short, Schopenhauer said that *willing* is the most powerful force in the universe, it *is* the universe itself. It is the underlying drive of life itself. And the English language—and, the German, too, of course—reflects this. In English, when we really want something, when we will stop at nothing to get it, when our very reason-for-being seems to depend on attaining it, we unconsciously use the word *will*. He *will* do everything in the world to get it. Not: he *is going to* do everything in the world to get it.

Schopenhauer's *will* is with us, every day, every hour. It is cooking inside of us like lava inside a volcano, its toxic, effervescent vapors billowing of our mouths whenever we speak about that which we must do, must have, must conquer in the future.

Throughout the Torah, we are commanded, over and over again, not to worship false idols or foreign gods. This law even appears in the ten commandments. Actually, it arguably makes up the first three commandments of the ten. The first is "I am God, your God"; the second is "you are forbidden to worship strange, foreign gods"; and the third is "you are forbidden to make for yourself any image or likeness of God." This commandment, in fact, was so important, that the Mishnah states that the worship of foreign gods or idols should be resisted to the point of death. The only other two crimes to be resisted to death were adultery and murder.

And in this week's Parsha of Eikev, Moshe will once more forbid the Hebrews from worshipping other gods. In fact, Moshe will bring this up *five separate times* in the parsha of Eikev. Five times.

When we look at the ten commandments today, we feel as though we can check the first three off the list automatically and only have to worry about the next seven. Despite all of our human flaws today, no one is really bowing down anymore to a statue of Zeus or sending prayers to the alleged Sun God. Today, paganism is more or less extinct. While not everyone believes in God, those who do are pretty clear that there is only one God and that this God is all-powerful and omniscient. In short, the world has become monotheistic.

But we haven't progressed as much as we like to think. We continue to fall into the trap of worshipping other beings and forces than God. The evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, for example, claims to be an atheist, but really he has just found a foreign god to worship—the god of science and evolution. Karl Marx and his communist followers mocked the idea of the Almighty, but they simply replaced this god with a new one—the god of communism. And for many right-wing jurists, like Clarence Thomas, the U.S. Constitution has become a kind of new Bible, a new god.

Now, the Torah does not list evolution, communism, and constitutions as examples of foreign gods. But it seems fair to say that the Torah *implies* that worshipping these would be just as forbidden as worshipping statues, icons, and pagan deities.

These are grandiose examples, but we also find ourselves worshipping foreign gods all the time; these gods are even incorporated into our daily lives and daily routines. Many people, for example, may worship the American Dream—the image of one day being married, raising children, and owning a house and two cars in the suburbs. Others may worship romantic love, the idea of one day finding another person who will complete you and with whom you will find everlasting bliss. Others may worship sex, the moment of union and ecstasy when you mate with another. Others may worship knowledge, book knowledge, like Goethe's *Faust*, who believed that the more information he acquired the closer he would come to being divine. Music, too, can become an idol. Thomas Mann would make this point in his twentieth-century epic novel *Doktor Faustus*, an adaptation of Goethe's tragedy. In Mann's novel, the protagonist, Adrian Leverkühn, sells his soul to the devil in order to compose extraordinary music.

Sports in modern culture, too, have become a kind of religion. In professional sports, athletes are revered and referred to sometimes as “gods.” Professional sports come with all kinds of rituals, superstitions, and rapturous hope. Think about the words we use to describe athletes and how religious they sound: legendary, wondrous, or GOAT (greatest of all time). We casually throw around this expression, greatest of all time, but when you think about what it literally means—the greatest being to ever exist—it is apparent how much sports have become idol worship.

These foreign gods and strange idols have all gone seemingly under the radar because they are in the realm of secularism. But just because you are secular doesn’t immunize you against foreign idol worship. But the handy term secularism may just be a kind of mask, an excuse, a cover-up, for that which is still, at its core, bowing down to idols.

The idol we should be most wary of and most cognizant of is the will. We should be hesitant to let our will—our wants and desires—decide our every move. This was, essentially, the crux of Schopenhauer’s philosophy. The will is what leads us astray, leads us into unhappiness and suffering.

I don’t fully agree with Schopenhauer here. And neither, by the way, did Nietzsche. Our wills can be beautiful and exhilarating and fulfilling forces. Schopenhauer’s advice to escape the will through aesthetic contemplation, renunciation, and indifference seems to me naïve and dangerous. Nietzsche would vigorously attack Schopenhauer’s advice, believing that it would turn humans into chronic meditators, passionless Buddhists, basically a species of zombies.

But if we combine Schopenhauer’s advice with the commandments of the Torah, we may come to a more sagacious answer. We should embrace our own will, but we should not worship our will. We should not allow our will to become our own personal god.

This might seem to be a cliché teaching. But I believe there is something much deeper going on here.

As I’ve discussed in previous episodes on the Schrift, most notably in episode 21, we have developed a false conception of God in the Torah. For a variety of reasons, we have come to see Him as a “Man in the Sky with a long white beard.” This God is an angry, moody, jealous old man. At times, he seems to be more like our disgruntled and tyrannical geriatric neighbor than the supreme and transcendent being greater than even the universe itself. So, when the Hebrews are admonished not to worship foreign gods, the motivation seems to be once more rooted in god’s seeming pettiness, jealousy, and insecurity. But, as I’ve discussed before, this is not what God really is. What God really is cannot even be explained or described using human thought or human language. The best way to describe God can be felt perhaps in his name itself, yud-hey-vav-hey, which contains the same letters as the Hebrew word for *Being*—lehiyot. Maimonides has described God’s name as expressing the eternity of existence.

The commandment not to worship foreign gods is not to protect God’s ego or even to make sure Jews don’t go off the rails. The reason for this commandment is to protect us against becoming *slaves* to things. When we worship things like sports, love, success, science, etc., it is almost as though we become abducted, enslaved, addicted, controlled. Worshiping things or beings outside of God—that is, outside of being itself—leads us into a cycle of craving and disappointment which Schopenhauer described in his philosophy of the will. Schopenhauer hit upon the idea that the will gives us the illusion of meaning when in fact it is just leading us around by the nose.

The Torah wants to implore us to retain a distance from our will, to not fall into a kind of intoxicating love affair with our will, with our own wants and desire. The only thing we should “worship” is Being and existence itself.

Mindfulness meditation can help us to cultivate this ability. Mindfulness meditation doesn’t require you to suppress your will or ignore your will—as Schopenhauer seems to have advised—but rather, to just become more aware of your will. One meditation which is particularly helpful is known as open awareness meditation. In this meditation, you sit and become aware not so much of yourself but of the world around you. Of the sounds, the space, the light. Because of our sneaky wills, we tend to become so wrapped up in our own thoughts and wants that we forget the world around us. When you engage in open awareness meditation, you cultivate the skill of momentarily “forgetting” yourself, momentarily letting the will be as it is. In short, what you do is to bring the will down from its throne; you recognize it just as one voice among millions in your interconnected space. You learn to see the will not as a god, but just as a voice.

It is important to remind ourselves that the only center of the universe is the universe itself. That is, we are just one part of a vast, unbelievably vast, system. When you worship God, you are not saying this old man in the sky is a pretty great guy. Rather, you are simply acknowledging that all that you can see, all that you have learned to love, and to become obsessed with, and to think of as so important, is temporal, carnal, mortal. You are basically saying that there is no GOAT. Michael Jordan is not the GOAT, Shakespeare was not the GOAT, even Moses was not the GOAT. The only GOAT is the universe itself, Being itself. The GOAT is existence, the GOAT is *lehiyot*. When you can cultivate this awareness, then you can feel as though you are truly honoring the first three commandments. Choosing to make God the “only” god is simply to take a step back from your own personal desires and dreams and obsessions and realize that it is a big world out there. Will you do it?