

## Episode 42

### Reeh

I stand in the shower. The hot water pours over my body. I have already washed off all of the soap suds. My hair has long since been rinsed of shampoo and conditioner. I am just standing in the shower, enjoying the hot water cascading down onto my back. I know I should get out of the shower. I am already late to my writing desk to write the Schrift for this week. But for some reason, I can't get out. I tell myself, just grab the faucet handle, turn it into the left, and end your shower. Just do it. But despite my will to leave the shower, I just can't. Something holds me back. I begin daydreaming, shower-dreaming.

I think about Isaac Newton. The story goes that Newton, twenty-three years old, was working his way through some of his theories of physics. So he went outside on his family farm and sat under an apple tree. An apple fell on his head, and he had his "Eureka!" moment. This moment allowed him to discover his theory of universal gravitation.

I then think about John Lennon. In 1965, Lennon was feeling enormous pressure to write another hit pop song. He sat on his bed for hours trying to compose. But even John Lennon experiences writer's block, and nothing came to him. Exasperated, Lennon lay down on his bed, guitar by his side. In that moment, Lennon reported, the entire number one song of "Nowhere Man" came to him. To quote Lennon, "I'd spent five hours that morning trying to write a song that was meaningful and good and I finally gave up and lay down. Then 'Nowhere Man' came, words and music. The whole damn thing."

And then my thoughts turn to Archimedes, the Greek mathematician. Archimedes was hired by King Hiero II of Syracuse to determine whether the king's crown was made of pure gold, or whether the goldsmith was mixing the gold with silver. Archimedes couldn't figure out how to help the king get to the answer. But then, while taking a bath, it occurred to Archimedes that gold was more dense than silver. All he needed to do was submerge the crown in water and he would be able to tell if it was pure gold. According to legend, Archimedes jumped out of the bath at this instance and ran down the streets of Syracuse naked, shouting "Eureka!"

Speaking of taking a bath, I am still in the shower. I should have gotten out five minutes ago. Why can't I just turn the faucet to the left? Just turn it off, I say. What is taking you so long? But my hands don't move.

Then, for a moment, I stop thinking. And, without intending to, I reach over and turn off the water. I hop out of the shower, dry myself off, and begin to dress. I suddenly realize that: I did it. I got out of the shower. How did that finally happen?

One minute, I was standing underneath the streams. It was unthinkable, it was unfathomable, to turn off the shower and begin my day. And then the next, I was turning off the water with determination and confidence, as though it were the most natural thing in the world. The idea of standing in the shower for another instance had suddenly become intolerable.

In all of these illustrious examples, action came, paradoxically, through the experience of non-action. Ironically, it is so often the case that when we cease trying to accomplish a task, we make the most progress. This is particularly true when it comes to thinking itself. It is a truism of artistic creation that artists have their most creative inventive ideas when their minds are blank. But this phenomenon occurs also just in everyday life. In sports, for example, particularly in golf, athletes achieve peak performance when they are in a flow state, when they are not thinking about their bodies but rather allowing their bodies to think for them. Anyone who has ever worked on a crossword puzzle knows how, sometimes, the answers to the puzzle will come to

them at the moment they step away from the puzzle, let it be, and stop thinking about it. This cessation of thinking need not even occur for very long in order to work. If your brain is just given the narrowest time frame to rest, to cease, that might be enough of a window for a decision or an idea or just a basic action to occur.. For that split second in the shower when you stop daydreaming, your hand unconsciously rushes to turn off the water. When you're not sure what to say to the person you're having coffee with, the split second in which your brain stops debating will be the same split second in which a question spurts out through your lips.

It actually took a long time for modern intellectual thought to figure out this most childlike of concepts. The reason modern philosophy took decades to see the wisdom and effectiveness of non-thinking and non-doing is because of the long shadow cast by the European Enlightenment. The attitude of the Enlightenment was basically just: think, think, think, and then think some more. Use your faculty of human reason to solve the world's problems—and your own. To be fair, the intellectuals of the Enlightenment had good intentions and perhaps reasonable grounds to emphasize active thinking. There were all kinds of crazy, superstitious beliefs in the Middle Ages which needed to go. One of these was the idea, say, that some women were witches and you could verify whether they were practicing witchcraft or not by throwing them off a cliff and seeing if they would fly. In this case, reason and thinking were necessary to demonstrate the stupidity of this belief. But like any good idea, it can go too far. And after awhile, the Enlightenment became way too much of a good thing.

The idea that in order to think properly, we need to not think, in order to take action, we need to become idle, in order to achieve progress, we need to do nothing, is an idea that simply wouldn't have been accepted during the Enlightenment. It is too paradoxical, to contrary to reason. But this type of paradoxical thinking would have been well-respected doctrine in the ancient world and in eastern and Buddhist philosophies. Western philosophy was, then, rather late to the party in this respect, but they did, too, eventually figure it out.

One philosopher to hit upon this idea was the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, born in 1889 and living all the way up to 1976. In his philosophy, Heidegger sought nothing less than to overturn the principles of thought in Western philosophy in order to create an entirely new understanding of the world. Heidegger relied heavily on eastern and Buddhist philosophy in his thought.

In the 1950s, Heidegger would develop his concept of "Gelassenheit." In 1955, he would give a public lecture on Gelassenheit and publish an essay on it in 1959. Gelassenheit. What is Gelassenheit? There is no perfect English translation of this word, but it often gets translated as "releasement." You can hear in the word "lass" the English word "let" or "lease" or "re-lease." Gelassenheit is the act of *letting*. For Heidegger, achieving *Gelassenheit* requires us to cultivate the art of, well, what exactly? The concepts are so counter-intuitive that it would do them an injustice to neatly summarize them into words.

Let's let Heidegger's text speak for itself. First, Heidegger writes that all thinking is willing and all willing is thinking. In last week's Schrift episode, I discussed willing—how willing is the most powerful drive inside us, which is dominated by our cravings for food, sex, survival, pleasure, power, and so forth. It is quite difficult to separate ourselves from our will, to break our cycle of willing. Now, Heidegger is taking the bold step of declaring that all thinking is willing and all willing is thinking. This is tantamount to saying that, whenever we think, we are basically just willing. Thinking is just as seductive and addictive as willing itself. What we must do is to will not-willing, or to think not-thinking. But this is obviously impossible. As soon we will to not will, we are already caught up in willing again. As soon as we think to not-think,

we are caught up in thinking again. To not-will without willing, to not-think without thinking: this requires a very delicate maneuver. The way to achieve this state is through *Gelassenheit*. *Gelassenheit* is the only way out of the cycle of willing and thinking. But again, what is *Gelassenheit*? Heidegger says that to achieve *Gelassenheit*, we must cease doing, and rather just “wait.” But we must not wait in anticipation of something. We need, in short, not to *await* but just *to wait*. Heidegger doesn’t even use wait as a verb. He says that we must dwell within the space of “waiting,” leaving open that which we are waiting for.

In 2015, Yale professor Paul North published a book on Franz Kafka which expresses a similar idea as Heidegger’s *Gelassenheit*. North titled his book *The Yield*. The title itself contains much of what we need to know about North’s theory on Kafka. What is yielding? It’s a word we use all the time, but we don’t really think about its subtle meanings. We often use yielding to discuss the farming and growing of food. We say that the earth yields crops or that the vine yields fruit. In chapter one of Genesis, verse eleven, the text reads: “And God said, let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, and the fruit tree yielding fruit after its kind.” What is with all of this talk of “yielding”?

Yielding is basically when progress is made, a product is created, through letting things be. We say that the earth yields crops and not *produces* crops because the earth is in a seemingly *inactive* state. It is in this very *inactivity* and *idleness* that productivity and advancement occur—or, in other words, through inactivity, yielding occurs.

The same idea of yielding occurs in other concepts as well. We often say that investments *yield* profits. Why don’t we say that investments earn or make profits? Because *yielding* describes it more accurately. With investments, you simply let them be, and they accumulate wealth all on their own.

We also use yielding in the context of driving a car. When we are trying to merge onto the highway, a sign reads “yield”—yield to traffic. The reason the sign says “yield” is because, by doing nothing, by simply letting your car be, you are allowing traffic to progress. Your non-movement is what allows the flow of cars to continue and what will ultimately allow you to join that flow.

This moment of yielding for traffic may be similar to Heidegger’s *Gelassenheit*. When you yield to traffic, you are not quite stopping, but you are also not quite going. You are dwelling in this in-between state; you are *waiting* but not quite *awaiting*.

North argues that Kafka’s literature, particularly his 1917 Zürau Aphorisms, advocate yielding as the best way to move forward. Kafka hit upon the paradoxical idea that in order to advance, we need to cease, we need to rest, we need to let things be. North offers an array of aphorisms from Kafka which represent this idea of yielding. Kafka writes, for example: “There is a goal, but no way; what we call ‘way’ is hesitation.” When we hesitate, even though it seems like perhaps we are doing nothing, we are actually still *willing* and *thinking*; it is a kind of boxed-in thinking, a thinking which moves in circles. When we *hesitate*, when we think in circles, we find ourselves staring at a goal with “no way.” North surmises that Kafka advocates no longer simply *hesitating* but rather *giving in—surrendering*. According to Paul North, Kafka advocates that we stop trying to become, stop pushing ourselves forward, stop pursuing, stop *knowing*—then, and only then, can *yielding* occur. Even hesitating is still a form of willing, and is not, therefore, yielding. To yield, we must find ourselves in a state of nowhere with nowhere, absolutely nowhere, to go.

In the parsha for this week, we are met often with the magical number of seven. We are told this week that, on the seventh day of the holiday of Passover there is to be a day of *rest* from

work. The holiday is to last for seven days, and the seventh day is a day of resting. Then, after this holiday of Passover, seven weeks are to be counted. Seven times seven. And the fiftieth day is to be another holiday—Shavuot, the festival of weeks. If a Hebrew is working as a servant, on the seventh year of his service the master has to give him the option to be released and go free. In the seventh year, all debts owed are to be released.

Though not discussed directly in this week's parsha, the seventh day of the week is also a day of rest. In addition, the holiday of Sukkot also has a rest day on the seventh day. Finally, every seven years, we are commanded to let our land rest—to not tend the land, harvest crops, grow food, and so forth. This is known as the sabbatical year, from which we get the modern term “sabbatical”—when a teacher or professor or some other professional takes a seventh year off. Even in Israel today, there is a law forbidding farmers to work on the land every seven years.

Let's think about this day of rest for a moment. The story of the creation of the world has become so much a part of our culture that we fail to see how ingenious and strange it is. Here, you have the all-powerful being of HaShem, the Ein Sof, deciding that, after six days of creation, on the seventh day he will rest. To us, this seems like a normal conclusion to the story. But for the first listeners or readers of the Torah, I suspect it would have sounded rather bizarre. God needs a vacation? God needs a day off? And for an entire day, no less?

We need to take a step back and appreciate what's going on here. In English, we often translate the seventh day as a “day of rest.” But that's really not the best translation. Resting connotes relaxing, maybe taking a nap, getting a massage. These are fine things to do on the seventh day, but they miss the target of what the seventh day is for. The word in Hebrew for the seventh day is *Shabbat*. Three Hebrew letters make up this word: *shin*, *bet*, and *taf*. These same three letters make up the root of the word to *sit*. *La-shevet*. They also make up the word for going on strike: *Shvita*. When we think about a strike, we picture people protesting and holding up signs to get better employment conditions. But at its core, striking is to totally stop working. Shabbat doesn't mean to rest. It means to sit. It means to strike. In short, it means to *cease*, to do *nothing*, to just *stop*.

God didn't need a break. Rather, God needed to cease, to stop, to sit. Not because he was tired, but because *ceasing* is just as important to productivity and generation as is *activity*. Sitting, *ceasing*, doing nothing is when all of the “work” underneath the surface is done—the work you cannot see or feel, the work of the unconscious. The seventh day, then, was just as much a day of creation as the other six days, but this was a creation we cannot see. This was the gelling and connecting and regenerating going on underneath the surface.

The seventh day, then, is a day of *yielding* in the sense theorized by Paul North. It is a day when “nothing” happens, but actually a whole lot happens. It happens exactly because nothing happens. That is yielding. The seventh day is a day of *Gelassenheit*. It is not a day of letting things be as they are, not because we don't want to change things, but because we recognize that by surrendering and letting be we are actually, paradoxically, moving ourselves forward. But it is only when we truly renounce the wish to move forward that we actually do. In his essay on *Gelassenheit*, Heidegger advocated *waiting*, *ceasing*, non-wanting and non-doing. But his directions on how to achieve *Gelassenheit* were rather vague. Shabbat makes the process much easier for us. Shabbat is like *Gelassenheit* training wheels or a *Gelassenheit* supplement. By taking a day in which you just sit and do nothing, achieving Heidegger's *Gelassenheit* becomes an awful lot easier.

The Torah recognized that we must incorporate yielding into our lives if we want to make progress, if we want to improve, if we want to move forward. This is why the Torah requires not

just that we allow ourselves on the seventh day of each week to *yield* but also to yield at other times as well. The Earth must yield—that is, must cease—not just one day out of seven but one year out of seven. Debts must yield every seven years; servant-master relationships must yield every seven years; and so forth.

Counter-intuitively, it is when we stop thinking that we have our most profound thoughts. When we stop working, we do our best work. When we do nothing, we are doing a whole heck of a lot.

It is hardly difficult to connect this concept to meditation. Meditation is nothing less than the practice of sitting completely still. Meditation is basically just *sitting*. If you just sit and don't move your body at all, you will notice that, after a few minutes, your thoughts become quieter, you feel more at peace, the world and existence itself start to make more sense. Just sitting is what, counter-intuitively, gives us new energy.

But you might ask: why the number seven? Why cease on the seventh day and not the eighth, or the tenth? In Episode 37, I talked about how the Hebrew calendar is connected with the rhythm of nature, with the seasons of the year. The Hebrew month is just one cycle of the moon. But the seven-day week, the seven-day holiday, the seven-year release is totally arbitrary. It has no basis in nature or the seasons. So why seven days?

I will answer this question with a short anecdote. The French Revolution was the apex of the European Enlightenment. This was when the principles of human reason were taken to the streets themselves. The French violently overturned their centuries-long system of government because they determined it was totally contrary to human reason. Put succinctly: why should this one dude be king while the rest of us starve? Not very reasonable. And, arguably, they were right, at least on the surface. But during the Revolution the French took the principles of Enlightenment to the extreme. They destroyed all churches which had statues of gods or angels because these were “superstitious.” They changed the names of all holidays, as these were based in religion, and made them instead festivals to the seasons, as seasons are religiously neutral.

But their boldest step was to change the week itself. The seven-day week seemed to them irrational. They made the week ten days long, where the tenth day and not the seventh was the day of rest, the day off.

It was a catastrophe. Waiting nine days rather than to six to have a day off just didn't work. The harmony and balance between working and resting was disrupted. People hated it. And within a few years, the old calendar was restored.

There is no “rational” answer as to why the seventh day is the day of rest and why the seventh year is the year of rest. And that's exactly the point. The number seven is a reminder to us that there is so much which is beyond our control, which is beyond our capacity to know. The number seven is a symbol—a symbol of yielding, of ceasing, of surrendering to the limits of our powers of reason. Just as we can't really grasp how our best thinking comes from not-thinking, our best acting comes from non-acting, we can't grasp why the Torah decided upon seven. And that's okay. That's the point.

In this week's parsha of Re-eh, we also get a long list of animals we are permitted to eat and those we are not. It turns out that there are a lot more animals we are forbidden to eat than just the pig, and a lot more animals we are allowed to eat than just chicken and beef. The Torah tells us, for example, that we can't eat the eagle, the vulture, the pelican, the stork, and, of course, the bat. That last one proved to be particularly prescient. We also can't eat camel, hare, and the daman—whatever that is. And countless other animals. What about what we can eat? The antelope, the ox, the ibex, and the mountain sheep.

I've often heard secular Jews rationalize eating whatever they want—particularly pig—because they *rationalize*—rationalize—that the food laws of the Torah are outdated. They say, back then, those forbidden animals were more likely to have bacteria and make people sick. So, they decided to just say that God forbade it so that people wouldn't get sick. But now we know how to sanitize dead animals so the laws are no longer necessary.

Really? So you were there in ancient times when someone ate a stork and got sick and everybody freaked out and made a law making it forbidden?

The reason why some animals are allowed and others are not is, essentially, a mystery—just like seven days is a mystery. Just like how Isaac Newton's brain hit upon the theory of gravitation while sitting underneath an apple tree is a mystery.

We would do well sometimes to unlearn the teachings of the European Enlightenment. We should take a step back from worshiping our brain's ability to reason. It is when we surrender to these mysteries, when we *yield* to these mysteries, that we may have some hope of understanding things.