

## Episode 7

### Vayetza

I recall one day sitting in history class in high school. My teacher was advanced in years and was on the verge of retirement. Somehow, everyone in the class knew that he had never married. He also had a strange hobby of traveling around the country and taking photographs of famous Americans' graves. One day in class, the subject of love and of marriage came up. He was talking about how, in the Antebellum South, parents would marry their children to ensure the exchange of vast quantities of farm and plantation land. Then I remember he paused for a moment before letting out a rather sardonic laugh. He said, "in those days, marriage was all about the exchange of property. It had little to do with love or romance."

I remember this moment quite well. It was the first time that I had ever heard that people get married for reasons other than love. More provocatively, it was the first time that I heard that, for most of human history, romantic love or even physical attraction had nothing to do with why people got married. At the time, of course, being a teenager, I basically just dismissed what he said. I believe I thought: "He's just some old man who's bitter that he never got married." It's possible that, to some extent, he was. Yet, the more I studied history, the more I figured out that he was actually right. Romantic love as a reason for union with another person appears sporadically throughout history, and usually people were duped in some way to believe in it. Indeed, the concept of romantic love was largely invented by Provençal poets from the Middle Ages. These poets, or these traveling bards, wrote epic poems about King Arthur and so forth, infused with notions of romantic love. Yet, these poets wrote largely to get a job at the court and to provide entertainment to women of the nobility. These were not poems of self-expression.

Why was it that I was so skeptical when my high school history teacher made this comment? It was because I had grown up in a culture dominated by the unassailable "truth" of romantic love as life's *raison-d'être*. By this point, I had already seen hundreds of romantic comedies in which romantic love is the key to happiness; I had heard thousands of pop songs about romantic love; and I had been exposed to thousands of fairy tales and Disney movies and Victorian novels in which love allows the characters to live happily ever after.

Now, I'm not saying that romantic love is only a cultural construct. Nor am I saying that it is not a goal worthy to be achieved or that it can provide people with happiness. I'm simply saying that, what I, as a teenager, viewed as a foregone conclusion, other cultures would have viewed skeptically or even mockingly. This is not a trivial realization. We have been so trained by our culture to see romantic love as unquestionably good, that we might fail to see when previous works of art and literature cast enormous skepticism over romantic love.

In this week's parsha, Vayetzah, we have a scene which would inspire thousands of future romantic comedies. This is the scene in which the young Jacob first sets his eyes on Rachel. It is, we might say, love at first sight. You can almost picture Jacob standing by the well, and Rachel entering the scene. The camera zooms in on Jacob's lovestruck face, and maybe he even drops his tools to the ground. Or if were a cartoon, his jaw would drop to the floor and his tongue would roll out of his mouth. Why does Jacob fall in love with Rachel? Here, the Torah is rather explicit: because of her beauty. The Torah tells us that Rachel had an incredible body and also a beautiful face. Then, the very next verse reads: "Jacob loved Rachel." The connection here could really not be more explicit. Rachel is extremely beautiful, therefore Jacob loved her. Moreover, Rachel also had an older sister named Leah. In the sentence before we read of Rachel's overpowering beauty, we read that "Leah had soft eyes." So the three sentences

together would read, “Leah had soft eyes, Rachel had an incredible body and was beautiful to look at, Jacob loved Rachel.” Now, I’ve been on enough dates to know that telling a girl she has “soft eyes” is not exactly a compliment. So Leah, we can assume, was much less attractive than her younger sister Rachel. Because of Leah’s inferiority in terms of beauty, Jacob does not fall in love with her, but only with Rachel.

Jacob promises Rachel and Leah’s father, Laban, that he will work seven years for Laban. At the end of those seven years, Laban promises Jacob that he will allow him to marry his daughter Rachel. Jacob works for seven years, and it is said that those seven years felt like only a few days because of his love for Rachel. The wedding night arrives. Jacob marries his bride. But then, the next morning, he wakes up to see that it is Leah, and not Rachel, who is lying in bed with him. It must have been very dark during Jacob and Leah’s wedding, because somehow he didn’t realize that he was marrying the wrong person. Laban explains to Jacob that, because Leah is the older of the two sisters, he tricked Jacob into marrying her and not Rachel. Jacob must then work another seven years before he can marry Rachel, which he happily does—so yes, he somehow manages to marry both sisters.

I remember hearing this story as a child and thinking: man, that guy really loves Rachel. And even as a child, I was touched by this story. Indeed, even today, it is rather heartwarming to hear. But I am not sure whether the original listeners of this story would have been so touched. I wonder if they would have seen Jacob’s love for Rachel as foolish, naïve, maybe even dangerous. Remember: our culture is saturated with the idea of romantic love as almost a kind of salvation. And “love at first sight,” that is, love based on beauty and appearance, is also worshiped by our culture. But Jacob’s world, that is, the world of the Ancient Near East, did not prize romantic love the way we do today. There was a different value system at work. Remember, too: Jacob was not just some average shepherd wandering around the desert. From the perspective of the Torah, he was more or less the most important person walking the face of the Earth right now; he was ordained to be the heir of the first monotheistic nation. So if, for example, Prince Charles was lambasted for marrying purely for love and for beauty, we can only imagine how much criticism Jacob might have received.

Now, to be sure, Jacob was marrying into the right family. But the Torah gives us clues that Jacob’s lovesick eyes are leading him away from his path rather than fulfilling it. What was more important than love in the time of Jacob? Fertility. How many Bible stories have we read in which a woman’s inability to have children is seen as the worst of all curses to befall her. The Torah and the Bible are obsessed with fertility—not with love. Fertility is what was important to the original readers of the Torah. Because without fertility, there would be no future generations, no one to help on the farm or in the army, and probably for tons of other reasons that we as moderns simply cannot understand. Indeed, how many Bible stories have we read in which a woman’s *ability* to have children makes her a kind of worshiped and godlike figure. Sarah’s ability to have Isaac at old age was hailed as a kind of miracle. Rebecca’s ability to have twins at her old age was also hailed as a miracle. There are even Jesus and his mother Mary, who we think of as kind of separate from earthly concerns like bearing children. The story of the birth of Jesus is centered around Mary’s miraculous powers of fertility. Let me put this another way. Our culture’s obsession is with romantic love; the ancient world’s version of “romantic love”—that is, the thing which they obsessed over, which they saw as salvation, which they saw as the most important thing in a marriage—was fertility.

Now, here you might think, well, that was thousands of years ago. Things have changed since then. They have changed, because now we have medical advancements which make it a lot

easier for couples to have children. Moreover, children are, in general, less important today, because people are working on computers rather than on huge farms where they would need a lot of helping hands. But in fact, even just a few hundred years ago, bearing children was seen as the most important feature of a marriage—not love. Let’s think, for a moment, about Henry VIII’s legendary divorce from his wife Catherine in order to marry Anne Boleyn. Hollywood portrays this story as though Henry had gotten tired of Catherine and had fallen in love with Anne. Head over heels in love, Henry broke with the Catholic Church so that he could divorce Catherine and marry Anne. But, in fact, Henry’s marriage to Anne had little to do with romance or love. It was all about fertility and passing the Tudor lineage to the next generation. He believed, for various reasons, that Anne would be able to give Henry a son, whereas Catherine, now into her forties, could no longer do. And, like Jacob, Henry VIII was not just some Englishman. He was, as Louis XIV would say, the State. His ability to produce offspring was a matter of state policy.

Lea, though she might have had “soft eyes,” was, in fact, by far the more fertile of the two sisters. The Torah emphasizes that, because Lea was not loved by Jacob, God compensated for this by making her extremely fertile. Accordingly, she ended up giving birth to six sons and one daughter. And again, these are not just ordinary “children.” These children would go on to be the heads of the future tribes of the Hebrew Nation. One of these sons, Judah, became the tribe leader for the people we today call Jews (the other tribes have been lost to history). Rachel, though more beautiful, was far less fertile. She was able to give birth to only two sons, Joseph and Benjamin. Despite the charming love story between Jacob and Rachel, the *important* story at work here is much more between Jacob and Lea. Jacob and Rachel’s love has come and gone, but the fertility of Lea is what propelled the Hebrew Nation to power and existence. One can almost imagine the original audience of the Torah hearing this story. They would not have been touched by Jacob’s love for Rachel. They would have thought that he was playing with fire. He should not be prioritizing romantic love and beauty over fertility and legacy. Moreover, this story would have made God seem all the more important and powerful. It was only through God’s intervention that Isaac, by the skin of his teeth, married the right person and was able to found the first monotheistic nation.

A few years ago, I visited the Israeli (slash) Palestinian city of Hebron. Despite having lived in Israel for a handful of years, I had never gone beyond the wall as it were into Palestine. Defying security risks, I took a tour of Hebron on the Palestinian side of the city. My tour guide was a very kind and thoughtful man who had grown up in Hebron. Nevertheless, his life was hard. Like many Palestinians, he was poor, wasn’t allowed to travel, and probably had a whole host of other problems of which I wasn’t aware. Halfway through the tour, we sat down for lunch together in a run-down café in Hebron. He was a young man. I asked him about his family. He told me that he came from a huge family, with maybe seven or eight brothers and sisters. Then he told me, with a smile, that one of his sisters had just had a baby. I probed further. How old was this sister? Twenty-five or so. How many kids did she have? This was her sixth. Hmm, I thought to myself. It’s probably not a good idea, I thought, for a woman who is only twenty-five to already have six kids, particularly if she is poor. But my tour guide didn’t see it that way. He was beaming with pride over his sister’s large family. So I probed further. I asked him: why did she decide to have so many kids? He seemed rather confused by this question, almost as though my question didn’t make sense, as though I had asked someone who is thirsty why he or she is drinking water. Obviously, they are drinking water because they are thirsty. He responded: we like to have big families in our culture. I wasn’t satisfied with this answer. So I asked him again: but, isn’t it a bad idea for your sister to have so many kids? Doesn’t that make life harder for

everyone involved? Yet, he repeated the same answer as before, with an innocent smile: in our culture, we like to have big families. That was the end of the conversation. When you're thirsty, you drink water. There's nothing else to say about it.

I still think it was a bad idea for his sister to have so many kids. My cultural values had never taught me to view having an excessively large family as important. If anything, it taught me the opposite: that you should only have children if you can economically *afford* them and if you are already established in your career such that you can properly raise them. And you really should stick to the range of having two to four kids. I still believe that this is the right approach to having children. But I recognized, that this was only *my* value system, it wasn't necessarily objectively true. Why did I recognize this? I am not trying to make a cliché cultural relativism argument, that all values are equally valid depending on what culture they're coming from. Some values are certainly better than others. But this was something different. In defense of my Palestinian tour guide, his attitude toward children and toward family was one which would have been *normal* for thousands of years across cultures. My attitude toward children had only existed for the past two generations or so. My attitude would have been the weird one for most of human history. I still don't agree with his attitude toward big families. But I am willing to acknowledge that, if a cultural norm existed for thousands of years, I should at least try to accept that there might be a good reason for it. I shouldn't just condemn it outright as "backward" and uncivilized before first trying to understand it.

Now, here one might think that we have the right to condemn archaic ways of life and unenlightened customs. We are living in the twenty-first century. It is our duty to teach the world how to be less barbaric and how to enter into the modern age. Generally, I agree with this sentiment. When I read about the Middle Ages, when there would be pointless wars, bloody jousting matches, and grotesque public executions, of course I think: damn, those people were totally f\*\*\*ed up. But I think we should humble ourselves a bit. Maybe we don't behead people anymore. But for much of the twentieth century, millions of people—and not just Germans, but plenty of Americans, too, including Henry Ford—believed in the superiority of one race to another. They also believed that you could determine someone's personality traits by feeling around the shape of their skull. Even today, we have factory farms where pigs—animals that have the same intelligence as dogs—are more or less tortured. Maybe someone from the Middle Ages would see what we do and think that *we* are more barbaric than his society.

Where am I going with this? I'm not really sure. But I think what I am trying to say is that, when we read about Jacob's love for Rachel, we are so ready to view it through our own cultural lens. We see the love story between Jacob and Rachel as the greatest good, when, in fact, another culture would have viewed Lea's fertility as the greatest good.

Now here the question arises: what is so bad about the love story between Jacob and Rachel? What can be bad about a love story? The problem is not that this is a love story, but that it is a love story based on romanticizing. Jacob does not fall in love with Rachel after getting to know her and establishing a bond with her. Rather, he falls in love with her because of her appearance. On this point, the Torah is quite explicit. Tellingly, when Jacob marries Lea, he thinks she is Rachel until the sun comes up the next morning. He has sex with Lea and thinks it is Rachel. How well, then, could he have really known Rachel? He only knew her by her appearance. He didn't know her smell, the sound of her voice, the sound of her laugh, the things she liked to talk about—otherwise, he would have figured out before they had sex or at least during that this was not Rachel, but Lea.

We should remember that romance didn't always mean something you try to create on Valentine's Day. The word Romance originates from Rome—that is, the Roman empire. While the Roman Empire may have fallen in 476, the people who lived there stayed where they were. And they continued to speak the Roman language—that is, the Latin language. But gradually, these languages took on their own vernacular character. These regions which are now Italy, France, Spain, Portugal, etc., spoke dialects of Roman/Latin, which eventually became languages in their own right—Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese. *Romance* languages. In medieval France, a genre of literature developed in which the notion of *romantic love* was developed. Love which existed for its own sake, and not for, say, transfer of property or establishment of wealth. The most famous of these stories is of course of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. These stories became known as romances because they were written in the romance language of French. In many languages today, a novel is called a Roman. This goes back to French courtly love poetry. Books were written about love in the romance language of French. Gradually, the separate concepts of romance and love merged into one.

But there was more going on in these tales of King Arthur than simply love. It was a special kind of love. In these courtly love epics, there was typically a knight who fell in love with a queen or a princess. Yet, the princess was unattainable. Usually, she was married to, of course, the prince or the king. The knight fell in love with her. He fought in battles and put his life at risk to get closer to her. But she always remained out of reach. He suffered for his love for her.

Here, we can begin to see the origins of the word *romanticize*. Unlike *romantic*, *romanticize* tends to have a negative connotation. To romanticize is to be out of touch with reality, it is to create stories around your life and your existence when these stories are really all just in your head. It is to sugarcoat the world, so to speak. The knight in French courtly love poems, we might say, was both a Romantic and a Romanticizer. He was romantic, in our sense of the word, in his belief in erotic love as the ultimate goal of existence. But he was also a Romanticizer in that his plans for love were wholly impractical—he would never attain the princess. Moreover, he also created a story, a future vision, for himself, which may have only been in his head.

Here, we can understand why the name of *roman* for a book is rather apt indeed. When we read a book, we escape from reality, we enter a world of fantasies and dreams and hopes. A *Roman* is where romance and romanticizing occur.

One of the most famous and illustrious periods of German literature was the period of German romanticism. This was a cultural and artistic movement in Germany from the late eighteenth through the early nineteenth century. Its most famous German writers were Goethe and Schiller, its most famous composers were Beethoven and Schubert. What was German romanticism? In Episode 0 of this podcast, I talked about the early German romanticism of a young cohort of German writers from the East German city of Jena. This was known as Jena romanticism. This romanticism was not really about love but about the idea of eternally questing after a goal but never really arriving. German literature would take this concept and apply it to many different spheres of life. A typical theme of German romanticism was a person's unending quest to connect with nature. For a German romantic, nature became almost like the princess in French courtly love epics poetry. A person could never truly connect and become one with nature, but the journey itself was worth it, even if it meant taking on emotions like melancholy, longing, and disappointment.

Romanticism is quite seductive. When we romanticize, we attach higher purpose to everything we do, we experience difficult but intoxicating emotions, we feel we are forever on

the cusp of salvation. But clever German writers, like Goethe for example, were quick to point out that Romanticism has its dark side, its unhealthy side. This theme was nowhere more apparent than in Goethe's famous novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Werther is a young student in Germany. The novel begins with Werther journeying into the countryside and admiring the beauty of nature. It is quite clear that he is a melancholy figure. Nearly everything he says is tinged with sadness and longing. Shortly into the novel, Werther encounters a young Aristocratic woman named Charlotte. Werther's reaction to his first sight of Charlotte is similar to Jacob's when he first sees Rachel. He is struck by Cupid's arrow. He falls in love with Charlotte's beauty and becomes obsessed with her. Yet, like the princess in French courtly love epics, Charlotte is already engaged to another, a businessman named Albert. Like the knight, Werther is only more drawn to Charlotte for her unattainability. But unlike the knight, Werther does not go on great adventures to prove his love to her. Instead, Werther becomes more and more pathetic, drowning in his despair of this unrequited love. He finds no joy in life any longer, and becomes suicidal. One evening, he composes a final love letter to Charlotte, and this shoots himself in the head with a pistol. Most significantly, he has a book—a *roman*—in his hand when he dies.

Goethe's message in this book, it would seem to me, is rather apparent: romanticizing is dangerous, it is unhealthy, it can lead to suicide. Yet his audience did not see the book as a cautionary tale, but rather as a story to be emulated. After its publication in 1774, it turned Goethe into an international literary star nearly overnight. Not only that, but it led to a cultural craze known as "Werther fever." Young men all over Europe began to dress like Werther. Posters and dishes with Werther's image were manufactured. Even a perfume was introduced by one company. Napoleon Bonaparte called it one of the greatest works of European literature ever to be written and brought it with him into his military campaign in Egypt. Most chillingly, it caused many despairing young men to themselves commit suicide in the same style as Werther. And often Goethe's book was found at the scene of the suicide. For this reason, the novel was banned in Leipzig in 1775, as well as in Italy and Denmark. Werther-like clothing was banned as well.

Goethe's novel, and the reaction to it, shows a rather remarkable tendency of humans. We are prone to romanticizing. Goethe wrote his novel of Werther to show how toxic and even deadly romanticizing can be. Yet, even though the novel ends with a depressed Werther shooting himself in the head because of his endless romanticizing, thousands of young men themselves *romanticized* Werther. Is this not the ultimate irony? To romanticize a character who himself stood for the foolishness of romanticizing. This shows us how intoxicating and seductive romanticizing can be. Indeed, as an older man, Goethe would denounce the Romantic movement as "everything that is sick."

Now, here one might think: okay, I will just be more practical about forming relationships so I don't end up like Werther. But the truth is, our culture is saturated with the Romantic, not just in the sphere of love, but in all spheres. I would even go so far as to say that we live in the most Romantic era in human history. And no, this is not a good thing. Today, Romanticism is coming at us from all sides. I recently saw a commercial for one of those Peloton exercise bikes. Each scene of the commercial showed someone in their home exercising on the Peloton bike. But the commercial was not so much about the bike as about the romantic image of the home in which the bike was located. I didn't see the commercial and think I wanted to buy the bike. I thought: I want to live in that home, to have that wife, to have those kids, to have that overall feeling of warmth and completeness. Okay, we know that commercials sell romanticized

images of happiness to us. But romanticism can be much more subtle, too. If you buy a bottle of beer, for example, there might be a label which shows a happy monk from the middle ages at some castle serving the beer. The beer might be advertised as having been brewed since the year 1200 or something like that. Immediately, we see this image of the monk, and we hear about the medieval origins of the beer, and our minds are flooded with romantic imagery—of castles, or the fireplace, of a grandfather ready to console us. This is all just romanticizing—glorified stories we tell ourselves, having little to do with reality, to make us feel more whole and more complete. Notice your tendency to romanticize, even at the most insignificant of levels. Be careful. Romanticizing can go from friend to enemy very quickly.

For most of my life, indeed, maybe until this week while writing this podcast, I read the parsha of Vayetza through the lens of my culture's intoxicating, ever-present, seductive Romanticism. I had always viewed Jacob's love for Rachel as one of the most beautiful, tender, and worthy of love stories. But actually, I now see that the Torah casts skepticism and suspicion upon this love story, upon Jacob's romantic eyes. Of course, some might say that romantic love remains the greatest good in life, that, with Jacob's marriage to Rachel, he achieved the pinnacle of his existence. But if you go to Hebron, you can visit the Tomb of the Patriarchs, where Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham are buried. There, Jacob lies side-by-side, not with Rachel, but with Lea. Rachel lies in a grave alone, in Bethlehem. We have the ability to choose which of these two relationships we see as more significant, the first based on love, the second based on practicality. But for those first Hebrews who decided where to bury Jacob, practicality and legacy was seen as far more important.