

Episode 46 Nitzavim

The day was December 23, 1849. A young man, aged twenty-eight, had just spent four months in the Peter and Paul Fortress in St. Petersburg. This prison housed the most dangerous convicts in Russia. The prisoner was told that morning that he had been sentenced to death by firing squad. The Russian troops brought him out to Semyonov Palace. The prisoner saw the soldiers carrying their guns. He saw the poles where he was tied up and shot at. He looked at his two companions, who were going to suffer the same fate. He heard the crowds roaring and the sound of a military drum. He prepared to die.

At the last moment, however, a creaky cart wheeled by a horse emerged onto the square. The cart was carrying a note from the Tsar. The lieutenant opened up the letter and then stared into the eyes of the soldiers. He folded the letter up and gave a mischievous smile.

“It’s your lucky day, boys,” he said. “The Tsar has decided that instead of executing you, you will instead be sentenced to eight years of hard labor in Siberia.”

How did the young prisoner feel in this instance? The moment has been depicted in a poem by the German-Jewish writer Stefan Zweig. Zweig writes: “The blood in his veins becomes red once more / elevates and begins, very quietly to sing. / Death hesitatingly crawls away from his frozen limbs, / And his eyes sense, though still blanketed in darkness, / That the greeting of eternal light has surrounded them.”

The prisoner was Fyodor Michaelowitsch Dostoevsky. He would later become one of the greatest Russian novelists of all time, known best for his novels *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*. But that would all come later—in the 1860s and 1870s—long after his eight years in Siberia.

This moment of near-execution marked a turning point in Dostoevsky’s worldview. Why had he been arrested and sentenced to death? Because he had been a revolutionary. He was an atheist; he was a socialist; he wanted to destroy the Russian monarchy and the Russian Orthodox Church. He wrote short stories for political journals which advocated overthrowing the political status quo and heralding a new age of equality for all.

In his eight years of imprisonment in Siberia, Dostoevsky’s worldview would completely reverse. He swore off all of his revolutionary and socialist views. He no longer wished to overthrow Russia but instead to affirm it, to become her greatest patriot. He became repulsed by his atheism and became a devout worshiper of the Russian Church.

The change was, we might say, a bit odd. Usually, when revolutionaries are thrown into prison, it only makes them more radical and more determined to bring down the social order. The Russian State had traumatized Dostoevsky by “almost” executing him and then it sent him into Siberia for eight years. Why would Dostoevsky choose to make this same actor now the object of his worship and devotion? Moreover, “God” had arguably not been so “good” to Dostoevsky either. Yet, Dostoevsky now became passionately religious. He decided to love God and believe in God even though God had sent him into Siberian exile.

When I first read Dostoevsky, I, like most young people, felt pretty cool. I didn’t know anything about Dostoevsky, of course. All I knew is that if I sat reading a giant Dostoevsky book in the middle of a café, I would be sure to impress onlookers. Dostoevsky, I thought, knowing absolutely nothing about him. He is surely the king of rebellion, nihilism, anarchy, atheism. He is cool, badass. But in a perverse twist of history, Dostoevsky actually represents the opposite of all these things. When I actually read his books, I realized that he sounded more like your

conservative grandfather than some hip young radical. To this day, I hear young people all the time saying how much they love Dostoevsky. Yet, these are often the same folks who laugh at the idea of God or who mock old-fashioned and stuffy conservatives. I think to myself: have they been reading the same Dostoevsky that I have?

Dostoevsky's later novels all tell more or less the same story. There is always a young protagonist who is the former Dostoevsky before his conversion. This protagonist is educated, elitist, atheist, socialist. He thinks Russia and God are both hilarious jokes. But Dostoevsky shows how these subversive, modern beliefs do not bring the protagonist happiness. Instead, they make him miserable, lonely, alienated. Along the way, they invariably meet and fall in love with a prostitute who reads to them a passage out of the Bible. Eventually, the protagonist realizes that if he were only to turn to Christianity, if he were only to learn to love the Russian soil and his fellow Russian peasant, he would achieve peace.

Again, not very cool-sounding.

But there's one thing about Dostoevsky that *does* situate him with all of the other cool philosophers and writers like Kierkegaard, Kafka, Camus, Sartre, and Hesse. Nietzsche once said about Dostoevsky that he "was the only psychologist from whom I ever learned something."

When Dostoevsky's protagonists decide to embrace religion and Mother Russia, they do so while simultaneously throwing up the middle finger to rationality, science, and elitism. They basically humbly admit: I'm not as clever as I think I am; sure, maybe religion doesn't make sense, but somehow it works; these modern ideas, while perhaps rational, can't explain the infinite complexity of human existence; perhaps I am more educated than that peasant over there stealing a potato, but I can learn a lot more about life from him than from my elitist professor.

A fancy way of saying this is that Dostoevsky—and his protagonists—take a leap of faith. They basically say to themselves: there is so much in life that I don't understand, that makes it seem like there could never possibly be a god or justice. I am aware of all of these doubts—and yet, I am going to believe *anyway*, even if I can't explain to myself or to others why.

An even fancier term for this mode of thought is Christian Existentialism. And Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard—who thought similarly—are seen as the first existentialists. This belief in *faith* and in the pointlessness of hyper-rationality is what connects Dostoevsky with later proud atheists like Camus, Sartre, and Nietzsche. Even though Nietzsche, Camus, and Sartre were adamant that there was no God, they still are, in a same way, saying the same thing as Dostoevsky. How is this possible? What connects them all is that they all operate under the premise that, in the modern world, God is dead, and we have killed him. And they all attempt to answer the question: how do we live in a world in which God is dead, why should we be moral, why should we not be nihilists? And their answer is always of the same vein: we must find a god which is based in our *feeling* and *faith* and not in rationality. Because if we view things purely through reason alone, life seems absurd and there is no point of having morality.

For Dostoevsky, this new god was Jesus and the Russian Orthodox Church. For Nietzsche, this new god was the *Übermensch*—the person who would create new values which society could live by. For Camus, the new god was the rebel, who would continue to push the rock up the hill every day even though he knew it would roll back down again. I'm not sure about Sartre—I'll have to get back to you on that one.

All of these thinkers learned to embrace the absurdity of existence and to find their own meaning within it rather than to pretend like the absurdity isn't there and that rationality can explain everything worth knowing.

In Franz Kafka's 1914 novel *The Trial*, a thirty-year old banker, named Josef K., wakes up to find himself "under arrest." Two men in suits are standing in his bedroom. They inform him that he has been arrested. A few weeks ago, in episode 43, I talked about how Josef K. and this novel *The Trial*. The novel sets up two systems of law—state law and then a higher, inaccessible law. When Josef K. is arrested, his first response is to say that he hasn't broken any laws. But it becomes clear that Josef K. has been arrested by *another* court—we might say, he has been arrested by this "higher" court of laws which go beyond mere state law. Maybe this is religious law, divine law, whatever—the important thing is that it is definitely *not* state law.

In episode 43, I talked about how, in 1871, Germany crafted a new legal code which sought to remove concepts of religion, God, and morality from law. The 1871 code was heralded in Germany and in Western countries as a masterwork of jurisprudence. It was so precise, so organized, so all-encompassing, that it became its own sort of *bible*.

And so, Josef K. believed he could see himself as *moral* by adhering to state law and forgetting about a more divine morality.

But there is, in fact, a lot more going on with Josef K. which Kafka clues us into. Who is Josef K.? He is not just some guy who follows state law. Kafka gives us many clues of his personality that we should take note of. He is thirty, he is a banker, he is a bachelor. He lives in a penthouse apartment, he wears expensive suits to work, he visits a prostitute once a week, he is stylish, he spends his evenings in swanky bars and clubs. If you've ever seen Orson Welles' film 1962 *The Trial*, then you can see Josef K. He is played by Anthony Perkins, and he nails the part. He wears a white-button down shirt in the first scene; his hair is neatly parted to the side; of course, he has no facial hair.

Today, we would call Josef K. a yuppie, perhaps a bourgeois. We have talked about what Josef K. *is*. But it's even more important to say what he *is not*. He is not a family man; he is not connected with any particular culture or nationality; he is not religious. In short, he's not really anything. He's just, kind of, there. Put another way, he is the product of a world in which God has died and nothing has come to replace him.

But, in fact, I shouldn't say *nothing* has come to replace God. Rather, it's just that what has come instead is meager, insufficient, unsatisfying, deadening. Josef K., in the post-God world, tries to find satisfaction in dressing well, going out in the evenings, decorating his apartment, succeeding at his job, following the laws of his state—no more, no less. This is his new religion. It is not fulfilling, it is not meaningful, it is not exciting—but it provides him with just enough pleasure and direction that it's something he can at least latch onto.

Meanwhile, Josef K. has been arrested. And even though the court which arrests him does not throw him in jail, or handcuff him, or do anything to restrict his life, K. still wishes to be declared innocent by the court.

The novel culminates in the famous scene, "In the Cathedral." K. has come to the cathedral to give a tour to an Italian colleague of the bank where he works. Kafka fills the scene with evidence that, in K.'s world, God is dead. Notably, the scene takes place in a *church* but Josef K. is not there to pray but rather to view it as a tourist sight. The church square is empty and the interior is dark. Josef K. walks inside the church. From a distance, he is spotted by a priest. The priest asks him if he is holding a bible in his hand. K. says that it is not a bible, but a tourist guide book. The priest tells K. to lay it down, and K. throws it to the floor.

As it turns out, the priest is not only a priest, but also works for the court which has arrested K. Remember: all K. wants is to be judged innocent, so that he can put his trial behind him and return to his former life. But the more he tries to argue his case, the more he seeks

assistance from others, the deeper entrenched he becomes in his trial. And it is no different with the priest. In this scene, K. and the priest have a long conversation about K.'s trial. K. asks the priest dozens of questions. Yet, for each question asked, the priest does not give an answer, but just gives another question. The more K. speaks with the priest about his trial, the further and further away he becomes from ever being declared “innocent”—whatever that should mean.

The scene in the cathedral culminates where K. suddenly realizes he needs to get back to work. The cathedral is not entirely dark; the lamp K. had been carrying has long since gone out. The priest tells K.: “Go. Go.” K. responds “but I cannot find my way in the dark alone. Isn't there anything you might still want from me?” The priest responds: “Why should I want anything from you. I belong to the court. And the court wants nothing from you. It receives you when you come, and releases you when you go.”

Many Kafka scholars see perhaps the entire novel summed up in this final exchange between Josef K. and the priest. Josef K. cannot handle the darkness. He is terrified to live in a world without God. But rather than embrace this freedom, he clings to poisonous pathways. He clings to thinking, to his bourgeois lifestyle, to rationality. And most importantly, these are all *choices* K. makes. He *chooses* to cling, rather than choosing to *let go*.

Who is Josef K.? He is an anti-Übermensch. He is an anti-Dostoevskyan Hero. The Übermensch and the Dostoevskyan Hero embrace the freedom of a post-god world. In the case of Nietzsche's Übermensch, this hero constructs new values in the void of a world in which God is dead. In the case of the Dostoevskyan Hero, this hero believes in God *anyway* in spite of the thousands of rational reasons *not* to believe. Both fling themselves into the darkness, whereas Josef K. cowers before it but cannot look away.

The parsha for this week, Nitzavim, is rather short—only about forty verses. Nevertheless, it contains some of the most powerful, significant, and packed lines in the entire Torah.

Throughout the Torah, specifically throughout the final book of Deuteronomy, Moshe has told the Hebrews that, essentially, they had better follow the laws, or else they will be punished. Moshe's tone throughout is that *you must do what I say. You must*. In last week's episode, I argued that Moshe wanted to push the Hebrews to think for themselves, to not allow themselves to be brainwashed into crowd-mentality thinking, before entering the Promised Land. This week, he will take this premise one step further.

After giving the Hebrews this long list of laws and commandments which they absolutely *must* follow, he says to them that, in fact, it is their choice. It is their choice. He says, in chapter thirty, verse nineteen and twenty: “I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life—so that you and your children may live—by, through your love of God, hearing his voice and holding on to him tightly.”

For pages and pages, Moshe spoke with absolute authority. Now, he sounds humble, more as though he is giving a desperate plea. Please do this. You don't have to do it; I know you might not do it—but please, just do it.

We cannot properly analyze these verses without looking at two other statements from Moshe. Let us go back about eight verses earlier, chapter thirty, verse eleven through fourteen. Moses says that: “These laws are not so puzzling for you, they are not too far away from you to understand. They are not in the heavens ... They are not beyond the sea ... It is all very close to you, in your heart and in your mouth, for you to observe them.”

We must now look at one more verse—chapter twenty-nine, verse twenty-eight. Moses says, to paraphrase, that there are certain acts which are *concealed* and *hidden* which only God

can know. Then there are other acts which are open for us to discover, and for us to apply these acts to ourselves and our children.

Let us recap for a moment—in reverse order. Moses tells the Hebrews that it is *their choice* if they want to follow these laws and that they should—but by no means *must*—choose to follow, choose life. Moses also says that the laws are here within your grasp to understand. And finally, Moses says that there are some things you can't know about the universe, but others are waiting for you to discover them.

These three verses fit together like, forgive the metaphor, Torah, German Literature, and Meditation. Moses is saying that there will *always* be doubts about why you are following these laws and why you are believing. Why? Because the most essential things about the universe will always be hidden to you. You can never know them. You must continually choose how you live and what way of life you conduct. But notably, Moses emphasizes that the laws are already here for us to discover. He does not say: just have faith! Just believe! Instead, he says, discover as much about the universe as you can on your own, and then, when you reach the boundaries of human knowledge, *choose* belief, choose to follow.

I think we are finally ready to return to Dostoevsky and his metamorphosis from rebellious socialist atheist to proud Russian Christian. It is relatively easy to understand how and why Dostoevsky found God and decided to become a devout Christian, even though he acknowledged that it was an absurd belief. He took the leap of faith—and this idea has now become almost a cliché in our society. Just have faith; you've got to have faith, and so forth. But what is less discussed and less understood is why Dostoevsky simultaneously became a proud Russian patriot and fully immersed himself in Russian traditions and peasant culture. How does having faith and connecting with your roots and traditions coalesce?

For Dostoevsky, Russian culture was his version of the *Mitzvot*—the laws of the Torah. It was something which he could *visualize* but also needed to choose. He believed that by implanting himself within his traditions, he would be better able to take his leap of faith. Choosing Russian folk culture over, say, anarchy, also required a kind of leap, a kind of faith in absurdity. Just as the Hebrews could not understand the reason for all of the traditions and laws, Dostoevsky likely had many doubts about the merits of Russian folk life. But this was, nevertheless, a culture—a culture which had been handed down to him over the centuries, which had ancient wisdom intertwined with it, and which was, most importantly, all Dostoevsky had.

In *The Trial*, we often focus on this scene in which Josef K. stands in the darkness and says to the priest, “I cannot find my way in the dark alone.” As readers, we think to ourselves: just take the leap of faith, K. Just jump into the void and let go. Let go, let go, we think. Indeed, in episode 12 of *The Schrift*, I said that Josef K. could not make this leap because he was not an Übermensch—he was too *weak* to do so. But when we analyze Josef K. in this manner, we leave out half the story. Kafka depicts Josef K. in a very specific and deliberate way. Josef K. is not a bot or a widget. He is a young man, a young banker, who has no traditions, customs, community to which to turn. He has replaced the ancient laws of his culture with flimsy new customs and life habits. Instead of going to a church to *pray*, he goes to take a tour. Instead of having children and raising a family, he goes out to nightclubs and cigar bars. Instead of celebrating holidays, he goes shopping.

This is why Moses discusses *choosing* to follow the day-to-day laws and believing in that which you cannot fathom in the same breath. Traditions, customs, and ordinances may seem a bit odd to us—maybe even absurd. But they are here with us; they are not across the sea or in the skies. If we *choose* to follow them, we will be better situated and better placed to make the more

important choice—the choice to believe in that which we truly cannot comprehend, that which is beyond human knowledge.

This also brings us to both a gift and a curse in how meditation and yoga are practiced today. Meditation and yoga have the same transcendental goals as Judaism and Dostoevsky's Christianity. As I discussed in episode 21, the word yoga means to “yoke” together—to join together body and soul, the physical and metaphysical world. What is beautiful about yoga and meditation is that they are not just *beliefs* but *practices*. You must physically *do* yoga and *do* meditation in order to experience that which you cannot see and cannot understand. But yoga and meditation also stem from rich traditions dating back millennia. In order to derive the full transcendental benefits of these practices, you should become familiar with the ancient customs and ancient culture surrounding them. To truly meditate, to truly yoke together body and soul, you need to go to the holy land—you need to travel to India.