

Episode 11 Vayigash

[Storm music playing in the background; then a flash of lightning]

Ich will die Menschen den Sinn ihres Seins lehren: welcher ist der Übermensch,
der Blitz aus der dunklen Wolke Mensch.

I want to teach humanity the meaning of their existence: this meaning is the Übermensch,
the bolt of lightning out of the dark cloud of humanity.

[Thunderclap]

Ich lehre euch den Übermensch. Der Mensch ist Etwas, das überwunden werden soll.
Was habt ihr gethan, ihn zu überwinden?

I teach you all the Übermensch. Man is something, which must be overcome.
What have you done, to overcome him?

[Thunderclap]

Todt sind alle Götter: nun wollen wir, dass der Übermensch lebe.
Dead are all gods: now what we want, is for the Übermensch to live.

[Thunderclap]

Thus spoke Zarathustra

[Opening notes]

These lines are from Nietzsche's 1885 book, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. These lines may sound to our modern ears at once cryptic and inspirational. Yet, to Nietzsche's audience, they would have been controversial, offensive, and provocative. Each of these pithy sayings is a direct affront to Christianity. For two thousand years, Western culture had had only one savior: Jesus. With *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and the concept of the Übermensch, Nietzsche is doing no less than trying to find a replacement for Jesus. He is trying to fill, as it were, a job position which has been vacated. God is dead; Jesus has been fired.

Taking the vacant job position analogy a bit further, what qualifications is Nietzsche seeking in his Übermensch? One who will be the bolt of lightning in the dark cloud of humanity. One who will overcome all of the most slavish and pathetic instincts of the human animal. One, finally, who will rescue his fellow humans, just as gods would.

What defines an Übermensch? Who can we call an Übermensch? These are not trivial questions. In this week's parsha, Vayigash, we discover an Übermensch. The ideal applicant for this job, had already existed not only two thousand years before Nietzsche but another two thousand years before Jesus as well. The Übermensch is Joseph.

[Beethoven]

Leo Tolstoy begins his famous novel *Anna Karenina* with the lines, “All happy families are alike. All unhappy families are unhappy in their own way.” The figures of the Book of Genesis are so unquestionably worshiped that it can be difficult to see their flaws. When you hear the names Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Rachel, Lea, Rebecca, Sarah, usually words of complete praise and adulation are coming just around the corner. Rightfully so. I’m not disputing their greatness. I love all of them. Really, I do. But when you take a step back and evaluate their lives, you can only come to one conclusion: This is one f#\$ed up family. Like, if someone today saw this family and didn’t know they were the matriarchs and patriarchs of the first Monotheistic religion, this person would conclude: that is one f*\$ed up family. And as Tolstoy said, this unhappy family was unhappy in its own way.

The examples of dysfunction and trauma within this family are too numerous to be named. But I will give some highlights. Sarah asked her husband Abraham to sleep with her mistress because she couldn’t get pregnant. Abraham dutifully obliged. Abraham held a sharpened knife over his son Isaac, ready to stab him, until an angel intervened. Abraham and Isaac never spoke again the rest of their lives. Rebecca favored her son Jacob over her son Esau. She told Jacob to lie to his father to trick him into giving Jacob his legacy.

But the family Jacob raises is the most toxic of all. Let’s think about this family for a moment. Jacob has four wives. Two of them are sisters. One of those sisters, Leah, is extremely fertile. The other sister, Rachel, can hardly get pregnant. Jacob makes it obvious to everyone that he loves Rachel far more than any of his other wives.

Then we come to Jacob and his children. He makes it obvious that he loves Joseph more than any of his other sons. And the reason he loves Joseph more is because he loved his mother the most—Rachel.

But this is only the beginning. It’s not just that this family is so screwed up and toxic, but it’s that the rivalries, jealousies, and bad habits are being transferred from generation to generation. Jacob, for example, grew up in a family in which he was favored over his brother Esau. Yet, Jacob did not learn to overcome this toxic environment in how he raised his children. Instead, he made it even more obvious whom he loved the most and whom he favored. The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, we might say.

With each passing generation, the jealousy among brothers grows. It grows because of the rather terrifying instances of parenting we witness. In the first generation, Abraham’s sons Isaac and Ishmael didn’t get along, but Ishmael did his thing on his own. In the second generation, Esau and Jacob didn’t get along, and Esau vowed to kill Jacob. But the intention to kill never became a reality. And with some time apart, they learned to love each other again.

By the time we get to Joseph and his brothers, the jealousy and hatred felt by the scorned brothers to the favored brother reached critical levels. Jacob has created such a toxic family environment that Joseph’s ten half-brothers decide to murder Joseph or at least sell him into slavery.

When Jacob is thrown into that pit, the moment is highly symbolic. He is underground. This family, this screwed-up family, has reached its lowest point. It is on the verge of collapse, on the verge of extinction. Yet, the Book of Genesis ends with all of the brothers reuniting in Egypt. With Joseph as the second-most powerful man in Egypt. With the healthiness and strength of the family restored.

How does this happen? It happens because Joseph is an *übermensch*. He is the savior of his family.

When Joseph is in the pit, it is not looking good for him or for his family. But somehow, Joseph, through his own personal growth and strength, rises from being a prisoner in a dungeon to the Pharaoh's right-hand man. As we talked about in last week's episode, Joseph had some luck along the way, to be sure. But what we also witness is that Joseph *wills himself* to success and to triumph.

In German literature, the most famous type of novel is the *Bildungsroman*. In English, we would translate this as a coming-of-age novel. The word *Roman*, of course, means "novel," which I discussed in episode seven. *Bildung* is another interesting and highly significant word in German. In English, we have the word "build" as in "to build" something. In personal terms, we might use the phrase "to build oneself up." *Bildung* in German is related to "build" in English but it is far more psychological. *Bildung* in German means education. But not just "education"; more like, the education of oneself, the maturity process, learning the lessons of life. The word for "picture" or "model" in German is "Bild." *Bildung*, then, has an idealistic quality to it. Through this education, you will achieve your ideal state, your "picture perfect" state, your "model" self.

A *Bildungsroman*, then, is a coming-of-age novel. This genre originated in Germany in the late eighteenth century. Goethe's book, *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* from 1795, is typically considered the first *Bildungsroman*. This genre, however, would be adopted by novelists in countless other languages as well. Some of the most famous examples in English are *Catcher in the Rye*, *Jane Eyre*, and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by James Joyce. But that we still use the German term, *Bildungsroman*, for this genre shows how indebted literature is to the great German novelists, specifically Goethe and Christoph Martin Wieland, for giving birth to this genre.

But when we consider the story of Joseph, we see how the first *Bildungsroman* was written thousands of years before Goethe. Joseph is a story of the metamorphosis of a naïve child into a mature and savvy man of the world. When Joseph is thrown into the pit, he is young, idealistic, unaware of himself, and even provincial. In *Vayigash*, we see a Joseph who is transformed. He is now cosmopolitan—he has an Egyptian wife and he is bilingual. He is savvy and even cunning. Joseph perfectly orchestrates a trap for his brothers, such that he can test whether they, too, have really changed. Whereas as a teenager, Joseph said whatever he thought and had no awareness of how others would perceive him, now he chooses his words carefully.

But Joseph did not grow up because he necessarily *wanted to*. Rather, life forced him to mature. Had he remained the spoiled head-in-the-clouds Joseph of his youth, he would have died in the dungeon. He certainly would never have become the assistant to the Pharaoh. Joseph underwent a series of challenges which hardened him and prepared him for adulthood. He dealt with poverty and betrayal. He had to fend off his master's wife, who tried to seduce him. Finally, he had to figure out a way to ingratiate himself with the Pharaoh. Joseph is, indeed, not only a *Bildungsroman*, but also the penultimate rags-to-riches story, proof of the capitalistic ideal that, through one's hard work and cleverness, one can pull oneself up from his bootstraps into wealth and success.

But it isn't just Joseph who changes. It is also his half-brother Judah who matures. As a young man, it was Judah who said to his brothers: "Why should we just murder Joseph when instead we can sell him into slavery and get money for him?" Yet, in *Vayigash*, it is Judah's final gestures of contrition and guilt which convince Joseph that his brothers have truly learned and changed. When Judah sees that his youngest brother Benjamin is going to be taken prisoner,

Judah says to Joseph (not yet knowing that it's Joseph): Take me as prisoner instead. My father already lost one son from his wife Rachel. If he loses a second, he will not survive this.

A central teaching of meditation and of Buddhist philosophy is that everything in life is *always* changing. The universe is in a state of constant motion. There is a teaching that, when you meditate, each breath you take is unique. No breath is exactly the same. This is not only said to sound inspirational but is also biologically true. When you meditate, you become a different person each minute of that meditation. Your thoughts will change, your emotions will change, your breath will change, your muscles will change. But meditation is only a symbol for living itself. The thoughts you have, no matter how important or dramatic they seem, will not last forever. The emotions you have, no matter how powerful today, will eventually disappear.

Along these lines, the reason why the *Bildungsroman* is so popular and so moving to readers, is that it reflects the human experience. We see characters change and grow, just as we ourselves know that we have changed and have grown and have matured.

But here's the thing. While change is guaranteed, there is no way of knowing *how* we will change. While Joseph and Judah changed for the better and improved themselves, sometimes the opposite occurs. People become worse—they become more childish, more immature, more lazy, more cynical. Thirty minutes of meditation will change you for the better. Thirty minutes on Instagram will change you for the worse. It's largely up to us *how* we want to direct the flow of our lives. Just because Jane Eyre and Holden Caulfield and Joseph became more sophisticated as they aged doesn't mean that we necessarily will.

Here is where we come back to the idea of the *Übermensch*. The *Übermensch* is a combination of two words in German. The first word is “über” which can translate as “over” or “above” or even “beyond.” A *mensch* in German is not some cute bar-mitzvah boy who one time helped a blind old lady across the street. Rather, *mensch* simply means: human. In combining the words “über” and “mensch,” Nietzsche is making a bold statement about who the next savior of humanity will be. It will not be a god, as it was in Christianity, but rather it will be just some regular person. But this person will be *more* than himself, he will go *beyond* himself and his human limitations.

Nietzsche's conception of the *Übermensch* was a direct affront to Christianity. With the *Übermensch*, Nietzsche was taking out a glove and slapping Christianity in the face. Why was this such an attack on Christianity? The first, and most obvious, reason, is that Nietzsche was declaring that the previous savior was no longer sufficient for these times. God was dead, and we had killed him. Second, Nietzsche's use of the word “Mensch” is provocative. Christianity had always taught that the “Mensch”—the human—is a “sinner” and a fallen being that could only be rescued and saved through a heavenly being. Nietzsche is saying: No. There is nothing about the *human* which, when cultivated, cannot be just as theologically powerful as a god. And third, Nietzsche was attacking the idea that salvation could not come in this world, that it could only come in a future world. By saying that the savior would be a “Mensch,” Nietzsche was showing that it is up to *us* to find salvation—we cannot outsource this responsibility to a god.

Does this type of thinking sound familiar? It should. In a way, the entire project of Judaism is not to figure out a way to get to heaven, but rather to show how we can become *godlike*—not gods, *godlike*—in this world. When God created Adam and Eve, it is said that he created them in his image, that is, with the potential to be godlike. Yet, when faced with the opportunity to be *Übermenschen* or to be more like animals, Adam and Eve symbolically opted to, we might say, change for the worse—to *fall*. The Torah, as I mentioned in Episode 2, is

written so as to continually lift us up from our baser instincts. The Torah is a kind of continual call for us to be *Übermenschen* and not just *Menschen*.

All of this culminates in the story of Joseph. He is thrown into a pit. He is literally underground. He has fallen. And from there, he falls a second time, being put into a dungeon. Yet, the story of Joseph concludes with him as the second-highest man in Egypt. Here is where one sees the “Über” part of *Übermensch* at work. Again and again, Joseph *pulls himself* up, as it were. He *wills himself* to success. Almost magically, he goes *beyond* what one would think him capable of. In episode nine on the overcoming of nihilism, I talked about how it takes an almost herculean effort to *overcome* the forces of meaninglessness to enter into supreme meaning. This, Nietzsche would say, is the task of the *Übermensch*.

Yet, it is one thing to pull oneself out from the dungeon. Joseph did so in such a way that his power and abundance flowed out onto others. In episode four, I talked about how true compassion comes when one feels such an abundance of goodness that this naturally spills over onto those around him. In episode eight, I made a similar point about revenge. I said that true forgiveness is only possible when one has such an excess of positive feeling that one is almost eager to forgive his enemies. Not only does Joseph reinvent himself. He also forgives his brothers who had once tried to murder him. And, on top of that, he saves them from starvation. At the end of *Vayigash*, he invites his entire family down to Egypt, now consisting of seventy people, where he gives them the best land in the entire country.

There is another line in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* we need to mention. Nietzsche writes, “The *Übermensch* should be the meaning of the Earth.” Here, once more, Nietzsche is doing everything he can to *ground* the new savior in the earth, in the soil, in nature. This is another affront to Christianity. Jesus of Nazareth, as great as he may have been, has, in a way, little to teach us. He is a god, and we are humans. A common inspirational phrase for people is: “What would Jesus do?” But, in fact, we can’t *do* what Jesus did to transcend our lives. Jesus could perform miracles. Jesus could forgive everyone without difficulty. Jesus could give infinite love to everyone without thinking twice about it. We can’t do any of these things. He didn’t even really have parents. He had no children, and no love interests. In short, we cannot relate to him. He is a god, we are mere humans. Nietzsche, in repeatedly emphasizing the *earthliness* and *creatureliness* of the *Übermensch* wants to say: give us a savior we can relate to, whom we can learn something from!

Unlike Jesus, Joseph is a man of our world, with warts and all. He is not perfect. He has flaws. His strengths are not magical powers and boundless love and forgiveness, but rather patience, endurance, craftiness, optimism. Joseph’s idea of salvation is not bliss in heaven, but rather a sense of wellness and prosperity in this world. He is, like Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*, intimately connected with nature and the earth. His main task as an Egyptian politician was literally handing out grain and flour to the masses. His hands were always, at least symbolically, filled with soil. Maybe it’s time we start asking ourselves: What would Joseph do?

But we are not finished with *Vayigash*. Joseph brings his aged father Jacob down to Egypt, after not having seen him in decades. On the way down, to whom does Jacob speak? God. God. Remember God? We haven’t heard from him in awhile. Throughout the Joseph story, God never makes an appearance. He never speaks to Joseph. Sure, Joseph says that dreams come from God. But we covered that last week, where I said that God and randomness can be seen as interchangeable concepts. Why is God so *absent* from Joseph’s *Bildungsroman*, from his rags-to-riches story? It is almost as if the Torah wishes to say: look what you are capable of

accomplishing *on your own*. Or as Nietzsche would say: look at what you *must* accomplish *on your own*.

Yet, here you might think: wait a minute, doesn't Joseph give God credit, in the end, for all that he has achieved? Yes. He does. When Joseph finally reveals to his brothers his true identity, he adds some words of consolation. He says: God intended all of this to happen, so don't feel bad for, you know, trying to murder me and all. On one level, Joseph is being quite the gentleman here. One can only imagine the humiliation of trying to murder your brother out of jealousy, then having to beg him for food twenty years later after he has become the second-wealthiest man in Egypt. So Joseph is being gracious and thoughtful. But there is more going on here. In three verses *in a row*, Joseph tells his brothers that God should get the credit for all of this, that he, Joseph, had nothing to do with it. Basically Joseph says: it was not me, it was God. It was not me, it was God. It was not me, it was God. Don't give me any credit.

Sometimes silence can speak volumes. And sometimes, repeating a phrase can make it seem weaker, even ironic. And here, I believe the Torah is being a bit ironic, a bit tongue-in-cheek. It was really all because of God? Really? What would happen if you wore a new shirt to a party and someone complimented you on it. Then they complimented you again, and a third time. Probably, you would begin to wonder if this person really liked your scarf, or maybe was mocking you. Or imagine this example. Tom Hanks wins an Oscar for best picture. He goes on stage to give his speech. And he says, "I couldn't have done any of this without my wife." Then he says it a second time, and then a third time. Would you think Tom Hanks really wants to give his wife all of the credit, or that maybe he has some grudge against his wife, that maybe he thought she got in the way somehow.

When Joseph gives the credit to God, it is almost tacked-on to the story, a kind of awkward and inelegant addendum to all that Joseph has himself willed. It is almost as if the Torah wishes to say: look at how much you can accomplish *without* God's assistance. Look at what you, as a mere *human*, yet somehow *more than a human*, are capable of.