

Episode 18 Mishpatim

Many years ago, after I had finished college, I took a job at a big marketing company in Philadelphia. There were maybe five-hundred employees or so. The CEO had some office way up high in the building. We saw him a few times a year. I was working in the HR department of this company with several other co-workers. We all had the same boss. Without getting into details, let's just say that it was clear to everyone that *he* was the boss, and we were his employees. I noticed pretty early on that this particular boss liked to crack jokes. Some of these jokes were funny, some were not so funny, as jokes tend to be. It wasn't really my sense of humor. As I talked about in episode 16, humor and irony are often generational. And I would classify this boss's sense of humor as baby boomer or even greatest generation, certainly not millennial or generation X. Because he was my boss, I felt a bit of pressure to laugh at his jokes, even when I didn't find them funny. But the truth is that, I make this gesture for most people, as a way of being polite and allowing the other person save face.

As I spent more time in my department, I began to notice a disturbing pattern. All of the other employees, my co-workers, made the same jokes as my boss did. Moreover, my co-workers had a particular habit of making these types of corny jokes especially when my boss was in earshot or when they were talking to him directly. I recall one evening, going into my boss's office after hours. Two of my co-workers were in there as well, just kind of hanging out. What were they all doing together? Cracking jokes. And what kind of jokes? The kind of jokes my boss liked to tell. Well, here I drew the line. **I wasn't going to just change my whole style of humor to please my boss.** Sure, I laughed at his jokes. But I never went to the effort to actually mimic his humor. That would be a joke too far.

I didn't last very long at this job, as you might have guessed. But I think about my former co-workers. Day in, day out, for years, laughing at these jokes, making these same jokes in turn, mimicking this behavior. Well, after awhile, at least for some of the co-workers, I can only imagine that they would reach a point where they were no longer *mimicking* my boss. Rather, they were *becoming* my boss. They *were* my boss. He had imposed his sense of humor on them so thoroughly, for so many years, that they internalized it. Sure, they likely retained some degree of independence. But the truth is that, when we behave a certain way for long enough, and when we force ourselves to think a certain way for long enough, and when we hang out with certain people for long enough, an indelible imprint is left on our personality and our psyche. This is just the way the human animal works.

One time, at a Christmas party at the company, the CEO gave a speech. Within a few minutes it hit me: the CEO has the exact same sense of humor as my boss. He is telling the same types of jokes. And then I thought: what if he were the CEO of a bigger company, of a Fortune 500 company? Or what if he were a senator? Or a general? And what if, instead of cracking bland jokes, he liked to talk to his employees about other things. Maybe the CEO had a habit of telling his employees how great of a system capitalism is. Maybe the Senator had a special place in his heart for old-fashioned monarchies, and made this affection known to his employees. Maybe the general had belief that love was not the answer, rather, war was the answer—to everything. Day in and day out, the underlings of these bosses are, consciously or unconsciously, imitating their bosses, mirroring their beliefs, absorbing their ideologies. Now, granted, some of these underlings retain their independence. And maybe, they're even like me, who actually go deeper into themselves when they feel the pressure to mimic the behavior of a superior. But I

would imagine that most of these underlings dutifully and happily imitate. And moreover, we are creatures of osmosis. Even if we don't want to let ourselves be changed and affected by the company we keep, it happens without our even realizing it.

[Bum-bum!]

Now, nobody likes a suck-up. But usually we just think of suck-ups as irritating pests who, though exasperating, are ultimately relatively harmless. But suck-ups, in fact, are not harmless. Rather, they **are the great movers and shakers of society**, of civilization itself. Suck-ups and brownnosers and kiss-asses hold the keys to the kingdom. Because they are the ones who are allowing ideologies to spread through a society like a virus. The imitative behavior does not stop at the office. These workers go home, and they take with them these beliefs. When they go home, they are the boss. They are the boss of their families, of their book club, of their soccer team—whatever. And now there are new underlings who will copycat the style of their superior. Pretty soon, the whole society is infected.

In 1848, Karl Marx published his *Communist Manifesto*. This book was quite literally revolutionary. It became the doctrine for communist revolutions around the world, and perhaps remains so to this day. Who was Karl Marx? And what was his philosophy? Marx belongs to that same group of emancipated Jews I spoke about in last week's episode. He was born in Germany in 1818. His grandfather had been a rabbi in a line of rabbis going back to the year 1723. Marx's father, born in 1777, was born with the name of Herschel. He died with the name of Heinrich. Herschel or Heinrich married his Jewish wife in a synagogue. But, at the age of forty or so, he converted to Christianity, and not just to Christianity, but to the State religion of the Evangelical Church of Prussia. He then had all of his children baptized, including his little Karl. Karl grew up with a totally secular education and had more or less nothing to do with Judaism and Jewish culture. He married his Prussian bride, whom he greatly loved, in a church. And he—and she—later became strident atheists.

When Marx was eighteen, he moved to Berlin, and became fascinated by the teachings of Hegel, whom I talked about in episodes fifteen and sixteen. Marx was enamored with Hegel's idea of the dialectic. The dialectic, you will remember, was the idea that, in history, two opposite forces collide to bring about a new status quo. Marx agreed with Hegel that history moves dialectically. But, according to Marx, Hegel missed something crucial. The historical clashes are not between political forces, but rather through economic forces. Through economic *class struggle*. Marx thus wrote in *The Communist Manifesto*: "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles." For Marx, there was a kind of eternal war going on between the *owners* of the means of production, the *bourgeoisie*, and the working class, or the *proletariat*. By taking Hegel's theory of the dialectic and making this maneuver into economics and class struggle, Marx would famously say that he "stood Hegel on his head."

For purposes of this lecture, what is critical to note is that Marx drew a clear line between owners and workers. The owners represented the *superstructure* of a society, whereas the workers were the *base*. And this superstructure and this base were in a continual dialectic with each other. Marx, moreover, expected that, eventually, the working class, the *proletariat*, would rise up against the owning class, the *bourgeoisie*, in a revolution. The workers would take control of the means of production and become the new ruling class, defeating the *bourgeoisie*. Socialism would then be the new ruling order.

Yet, there was just one problem with Marx's theory. The revolutions he predicted did not occur. By the early twentieth century, in the era of the Rockefellers and the Carnegies, in fact, capitalism seemed more entrenched than ever. The Italian philosopher, Antonio Gramsci, had an

answer to this question. Gramsci lived from 1891 to 1937. Gramsci believed that the flaw in Marx's philosophy was that it said nothing about *culture*. The problem was that the owners, the capitalists, had *cultural hegemony*. Not only did the bourgeois capitalists control the means of production, they also controlled the values and beliefs of their society. Now, it is not as though the owners all got together and said, "let's impose capitalist beliefs and norms on our workers." Rather, because the owners were capitalists to begin with, these hyper-capitalistic beliefs simply *flowed down naturally* to the base of society. Let's use the steel magnate Andrew Carnegie as an example, whose university in Pittsburgh I proudly attended in my younger years. We can only surmise that Andrew Carnegie was a hyper-capitalist. He loved capitalism, and, man, he did *not* like socialism. Well, everyone he hired was going to be just as hyper-capitalist as he was. And the more they worked for Carnegie, the more capitalist they would become. Carnegie also had the podium at all times. If Carnegie gave a speech, *you* were going to hear about it, you were going to read about it in the newspaper.

Or let's give a more recent example. **When I lived and worked in the United States, I noticed how people liked to brag about how hard they worked.** I always found this a bit odd, because I always thought that working sucked—it was boring, prevented you from doing fun things, made your mind and body ache. Yet, as I went about my day as a twenty-something in the United States, I would always hear the same phrases from people. Do any of these phrases sound familiar to you? Work hard, play hard. You can sleep when you're dead. Working is good for the soul. I clocked sixty hours this week. I'm so busy. Work, work, work. As I was surrounded in this environment, I, too, occasionally felt the pressure to brag about how many hours per week I worked. Now, in retrospect, I can see this phenomenon for what it really was. This was nothing less than beautiful symphonic music to the ears of bosses, corporate executives, shareholders. Once upon a time, people complained about work. Work sucked, and everybody knew it. Now, in modern times, people had been manipulated to adulate work, kiss work's ass, make work their religion. But the most insidious and creepy thing about this phenomenon is that, in my opinion, it happened organically and naturally. The CEOs didn't get together and say, "let's trick everyone into thinking they should love work." Rather, the CEOs and the bosses simply gave off the vibe that work was something awesome, and laziness was something terrible. And their employees greedily absorbed this message to the point that they made it their own personal mantra.

Gramsci said that for true class consciousness to occur, for the workers to realize how much they were being screwed over by the owners, the cultural hegemony needed to flip. The capitalist culture and norms and ways-of-thinking needed to be *purged* before the workers would see the need to rise up against the *bourgeoisie*. The problem was that it is not so easy to take a step back and see and witness culture. If you're poor, you can see pretty easily that you're poor. But culture is much more subtle and sneaky. Culture has the manipulative effect of always seeming "normal" to us, when, in fact, it might not be "normal" at all. If you live in a capitalist culture, you become so acclimated to it that it is no longer a capitalist culture; it is just the way the world "naturally" is. Gramsci said that, in order for the reigning status quo to be overturned, the working class needed to see its culture not as *natural* and *inevitable*, but rather as *artificial* and *constructed*.

But, as you might guess, it is not so easy to get people to wake up to the way cultural hegemony is manipulating them. Imagine if I had stormed into my office one day and said, "stop imitating the jokes of our boss! You are only strengthening and contributing to the cultural hegemony of this office!" I don't think I would have gotten through to them.

There has been a lot of talk in recent years about conspiracy theories. How conspiracy theories are causing people to doubt everything, to question if they are being continually manipulated, to believe that there is some secret power behind society pulling the strings. I don't believe in these conspiracy theories. And quite frankly, we don't need them. With Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, who needs conspiracy theories? **Conspiracy seems to be built into the very fabric of social interaction.**

The parsha for this week is called *Mishpatim*. This Hebrew word means *rules* or *laws* in English. This parsha is nothing less than a long list of rules or laws about all kinds of matters—about moneylending, about accidents, about marriage, and so forth. The Hebrews, as we know, have just become free people after their miraculous Exodus from Egypt. They have just celebrated their freedom with Moses on the other side of the Red Sea, singing a glorious song to God, which I discussed in Episode 16. Thus far, the overall tenor of Exodus seems to be: free at last, free at last, thank God almighty, we are free at last. Or is it? In fact, in this parsha of *Mishpatim*, this parsha of laws, the very first law that the Torah kicks off with is about slave ownership. And not just slave ownership, but the ownership of *Hebrew* slaves. Do you realize how bizarre and head-scratching this move is that the Torah makes here? The very first law that the Torah gives is about how to own Hebrew slaves, right after the Hebrews have escaped from slavery in Egypt! What is going on here? Slaves are still permitted? And Hebrew slaves are allowed to be owned by other Hebrews?

But it only gets weirder. The law reads that, when you acquire a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, but in the seventh year, he shall be let free, without payment. If his master “gave” him a wife, and he had children with her, the wife and children stay with the master, and the slave goes free alone. *But*, the slave has a choice. If he declares that he loves his master, and his wife and his children, he can choose to *remain* a slave. At this point, the master will pierce a hole in the slave's ear, and he shall remain the master's slave for life.

So, just to recap: the Hebrews have just escaped the terribleness of slavery in Egypt. And yet, the first law the Torah gives us, after the Ten Commandments, is that, it's totally okay to have slaves, even Hebrew slaves. And finally, many of these slaves may actually *want* to be slaves for the rest of their lives.

What is going on here? I think the Torah is trying to tell us: *slavery* is a complicated concept. Slavery is not so simple as: you're either free, or you're a slave, with nothing in between. Actually, slavery may be more of a spectrum. And, moreover, when we think about slavery and freedom in absolute terms, we are doing ourselves a great injustice. Let me explain why.

In the United States, the black slaves of the South were freed by Abraham Lincoln on January 1, 1863. This event was known as the Emancipation Proclamation. On December 31, 1862, the black people were slaves. The next day, they were free. But, as we all know, they weren't *really* free at all. They were still living in the South in the same environment. They had no money and no education. They were “technically” free, but, in reality, they were still slaves. In this sense, the Emancipation Proclamation hardly deserves this name. It could maybe be called instead: step one of one-thousand on the way to Emancipation.

A century later, Martin Luther King Jr. would stand on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington and give his famous “I Have a Dream” speech. The purpose of this speech was more or less the same as the Emancipation Proclamation given one-hundred years before. It was to bring about *emancipation* for the black people of America. We celebrate Martin Luther King's speech as a great moment in American history, and, indeed, it was. But, if you think about it, it

was also a highly ironic and terribly tragic moment. The black people of America had been *free* for one-hundred years already. Yet, here was the great leader Martin Luther King calling again for their freedom. Weren't they already free?

The answer is, of course, that, no, they weren't *really* free at all. Even after one-hundred years. In the South, the white population instituted laws which prevented blacks from voting, from owning property, from getting education, from eating in white restaurants, from staying in white hotels, and so forth. Martin Luther King should never have *needed* to give that speech. In a perfect world, the blacks would have received full freedom in 1863. But it didn't happen that way.

The story continues. Even after Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement gave black Americans equal protection under the law and took a hammer to segregation in the South, black Americans still continued to be less free than whites. I'm not going to get into details, but the fact is that if you drive through a poor neighborhood in Philadelphia, or New York, or Chicago, what do you see? All black people. If you go to a prison, the majority of the population is black. Is this just a coincidence? No, of course not. The entire structure of American society had been working against blacks for hundreds of years. The measures taken to bring them to true equality with the rest of America have obviously not been sufficient. This necessitated the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement in America. This movement expresses the idea that, even more than fifty years after Martin Luther King, and one-hundred and fifty years after Lincoln, black people continue to be, in a certain sense, slaves.

But, of course, today, black people are not *really* slaves in the way that their ancestors were. Because there are "slaves," and then there are *slaves*. And, in turn, there is freedom, and then there is *freedom*.

I remember when I was in college, I had recently read a novel entitled *Out of this Furnace* by Thomas Bell. It is about the terrible working conditions which immigrant families had to endure at the turn of the twentieth century in America. The workers were, of course, "free," but they weren't really free. They had to work sixteen-hour shifts, their votes were suppressed, they lived in squalid conditions. I was very moved by Thomas Bell's novel. And I recall one day telling my friend that these workers essentially had it as bad as slaves. They were slaves, my twenty-year old self said. But when I said this to my friend, he recoiled. He said, "No, they were not slaves. Don't ever compare the two. There is a huge difference between being literally *owned* by another person, and between having to work in terrible conditions. He then said, it is fine to use 'slavery' as a metaphor for these workers, but they are not the same as slaves." I agreed with my friend's point. It was a good one. But I think something got lost in the argument. It is important that we view true slavery as incomparable with other forms of slavery. But, if we only see slavery in this absolute form instead of as a point on a spectrum, we put ourselves and our society at a terrible risk.

Why? First of all, if we don't compare various forms of "slavery" with each other and only reserve "slavery" for literal slavery, it prevents us from seeing how terrible real slavery was. By comparing ultimate slavery with lesser forms of slavery, we actually better grasp the terribleness of *true* slavery. I compared the slavery of factory workers to the slavery of actual slaves. Even though I made a false equivalence, in working through the comparison with my friend, I was able to better internalize how truly horrible *real* slavery was.

But the second reason why we should view slavery as a spectrum is even more compelling. When we address slavery in all-or-nothing terms, we give ourselves an excuse to turn aside when we see "less extreme" forms of slavery. If you think about it, in hindsight, the

Emancipation Proclamation was kind of an irresponsible and reckless name to give to the alleged freedom of black people in 1863. Because it allowed the rest of the country to shrug their shoulders and say, “Well, now they’re free. They’re just like us. We can just let things be now.” Arguably, the same thing happened with the Civil Rights Movement in the sixties. “Well, now there is no more segregation. They’re just like us. We can just let things be now.” Imagine if the Emancipation Proclamation had been called instead, Step A toward the freedom of the blacks in America. Perhaps that would have sent a better message to the rest of the country that the work to emancipation was only just *beginning*.

Now, it might sound like I am oversimplifying this argument, that I am being a reductionist. Obviously, Abraham Lincoln didn’t free the slaves in 1863 and then just walk away from the matter. He did everything he could to *reconstruct* the South so that black people could *really* be brought out of slavery.

While this is true, it tends to not be how the story gets told. Above, I said how in 1863, Lincoln freed the slaves, and in 1963, one-hundred years later, Martin Luther King gave his “I have a dream speech.” This is a very linear, simple, and convenient story. And this is how most people learn the story and tell themselves the story. But there is just one problem with this version: it conveniently glosses over one-hundred years. This one-hundred years was the Jim Crowe era in the American South. This is an idea I got from the American philosopher Susan Neiman. This era, Neiman observed, is a kind of black hole in American history. As a student, I learned about the Civil War, maybe I even learned about Reconstruction. And I learned a lot about the Civil Rights Movement. But, for me, the 1880s, 1890s, 1900s, 1910s, 1920s, and so forth, are just a kind of empty void in my education. Aside from making general statements about “Jim Crowe,” this entire century just kind of gets glossed over in American dialogue. As Neiman remarked to me, this era of Jim Crowe is one of the greatest coverups in American history. And, Neiman continued, there is an *agenda* behind this coverup.

So, why? Why is this how the story gets told? This is not a trivial question. Well, first I need to acknowledge that I myself am not exactly sure of the answer. How could I be, after all? But I do have some theories. The most immediate answer is that people, in general, like simplicity. It’s a lot easier to say, the blacks were slaves, then they were free, then it is to say, well, they were free, but there were these laws that made them not-so-free, and then there were certain economic factors, and so forth. The second and equally compelling answer was influenced by what I learned from, once again, Susan Neiman. The American ethos of freedom very much *likes* the story of slaves being liberated and becoming free people. The best story would, of course, be that there were never any slaves to begin with. But that story is impossible to tell in America. So, the next-best story is that, we once *had* slaves, but then we set them free.

Actually, these two answers—that humans like *simple* stories and that America wants a story that fits its overall ethos—are entirely interrelated. To understand why, let’s return to our friend Antonio Gramsci for a moment. Gramsci theorized that the superstructure of a society determines the society’s cultural hegemony. Or, in other words, the people who have the power in a society determine what *values* and *norms* and *beliefs* the *base* of society will adopt. To repeat, this is not because the bosses all get together and create a masterplan to brainwash people. Rather, the process happens naturally, because the powerful people have the microphone, as it were, and the base of society feels pressure to mimic them and mirror back to them their values.

Now, it is no secret that America is a capitalist country. Capitalism has been the American ethos since time immemorial, more or less. Imagine, for a moment, that you are a

CEO. Which story will be more pleasing to your ears? Story A goes: there once was a group of people who were slaves. But then they were set free. And now, because they are free, they are capable of achieving wealth and success simply by keeping their heads down and working hard. Story B goes: there once was a group of people who were slaves. But then they were set free. But even though they are free, they are not really “free” like you are, Mr. CEO. No matter how hard they work, they will never come even close to achieving anything like your wealth, because you are privileged in a way they are not. In fact, they really could use your help and your sympathy.

Today, of course, we presumably have more enlightened CEOs. But it takes a long time to change cultural hegemony. And the CEOs throughout the Jim Crow era, the Rockefellers, the Carnegies, the Morgans, the Mellons, and so forth, were ruthless capitalists. And they sure as hell didn’t want to hear stories about people being set free and yet not being able to achieve the American Dream. What might that have done to the morale of their workers? And so, just as my boss told the jokes he liked and in turn had them repeated back to him, these CEOs from the Titanic-era told the stories they liked and had employees who told them the stories they liked to hear. And the echoes of these stories continue to resound into the present day.

Gramsci’s theory of cultural hegemony and the superstructure of society may also explain why “freedom” and “liberty” are such sacred and inspiring words in America. Indeed, as someone who grew up in America, I can scarcely say the words “freedom” and “liberty” without having all kinds of warm and cozy thoughts. But this automatic reaction to “freedom” as being something unequivocally “good” should give us pause. Is “freedom” really *that* good, or am I just parroting the cultural hegemony of the superstructure? This is a point that Eric Foner would make in his book *The Story of American Freedom*. Throughout this book, Foner shows how “freedom” is a word which every politician since the beginning of the Republic has used to his own advantage. Freedom is just a catch-all word which lets people justify whatever they *want* to do. Sure, freedom is great in certain circumstances. But other times, freedom can be a kind of curse. Economic freedom and free markets, for example, are often those forces which lead to—you guessed it—*slavery*. Liberalism, deriving from the word *liberty*, was an economic ideology of the nineteenth-century which factory owners absolutely *worshiped*. Henry Ford and Cornelius Vanderbilt *loved* liberty—under their definition of liberty, of course.

And, in turn, *slavery* is terrible in most cases. Slavery is the antithesis of freedom, so, in a society that worships “freedom,” “slavery” will be the greatest nemesis of that cultural hegemony. But is slavery really that bad? Sometimes, it would seem, people enjoy being *slaves*. Here, I need to be careful. I do not mean people like being *real* slaves. Perhaps you saw Steven McQueen’s brilliant best-picture winning film, *Twelve Years a Slave*, which came out in 2013. This film was, actually, highly ironic. There was already an awareness and consensus among Americans that the life of a slave was hell on Earth. This is what I had already learned from school, from film, and from literature. And yet, McQueen realized that, actually, our society still had a romanticized and sugarcoated view of slavery. He set out to show, as best he could, how hellish slavery *really* was. And that is why the film won so many Oscars. So, to be clear, I’m not saying people want to be these kinds of slaves.

But some people do not want to go all the way to the side of “freedom” on the slavery-freedom spectrum. People like to have some aspects of slavishness in their lives. They don’t want to travel to a new country, they don’t want to change jobs. They like to be led by others, to be told what to do, to feel secure and taken care of. This was the case, for example, of the Hebrew slaves. They *hated* being free. They wanted to go back to Egypt and be slaves. But this is not the story we tell at the Passover Seder. Instead, we tell a story of how grateful and

wonderful it was that Moses and God freed the Hebrew slaves. Freedom, liberty, Exodus—these are the words we hear at the Seder. We hear much less about the Hebrews’ constant complaining in the desert and about the forty years of aimless wandering. Hmm, I wonder why we tell the story this way, most loudly at the American Passover table? Might it have something to do with a capitalist cultural hegemony?

This is the point, I think, the Torah is trying to make when it says that it’s totally fine for Hebrews to own fellow Hebrews as slaves. The Torah wants to say: Freedom is a spectrum. Stop using slavery and freedom to overgeneralize awfully complicated and nuanced concepts.

Interestingly, in Hebrew, there is no special word for “slave.” The word is “eved.” But this word “eved” can also mean servant or serf. Moreover, “eved” is nearly the exact same word as the word for “worker”—*oved*. Imagine if we said that the Hebrews escaped from being “servants” in Egypt. Suddenly, “slavery” doesn’t sound so bad. When you use the word “servant,” it sounds like the Hebrews were working as bowtie-wearing butlers named Jeeves rather than performing backbreaking labor to build the pyramids. My wish here is not to say that the Hebrews were not *bona fide* slaves in Egypt. But rather, I think it’s important to recognize that, sometimes, being a “servant” or even a “worker” shares many things in common with being a slave. And the overlap between these Hebrew words demonstrates how, in the Ancient World, slavery was a much more flexible concept than it is today. More importantly, the absence of a real word for “slave” in Hebrew forces us to think harder about what *slavery* is and how it is different and the same from other forms of servitude.

In 1921, the German-Jewish philosopher Martin Buber translated the Hebrew Bible into German. This podcast *The Schrift* is named after Buber’s translation, which he called *Die Schrift*. When Buber translates the opening to this parsha, he does not use the word “slave,” which in German would be “Sklave.” Rather, he refers to a Hebrew who is owned by other Hebrew as a “Dienstknecht” which translates as servant. Buber, then, wishes to distinguish between slaves and servants. By grappling with the ambiguity of the Hebrew word, Buber needed to come to terms with the fact that slavery and freedom exist on a spectrum and cannot be neatly defined.

I mentioned my friend from college, who chastised me for saying that turn-of-the-century steel workers were, for all intents and purposes, slaves. He was, of course, absolutely correct. One need only sit through ten minutes of the film *Twelve Years a Slave* to know that. But if we use slavery as a symbol and as a metaphor, it can allow us to see the ways in which we enslave ourselves to other people, to our jobs, to money, even to hobbies. If we stop treating freedom and slavery as “buzz words” and instead look at them closely, deeply, with nuance, we can learn much from them.

The Roman Stoic philosopher, Epictetus, wrote that you should not value areas of life beyond your control. One of these areas which he stressed most of all was caring about what other people think about you. In chapter fourteen of his Stoic handbook the *Enchiridion*, he wrote that, “if you wish to be free, do not strive for those things which others control, otherwise you become their slave.” Epictetus, then, takes the *metaphor* of slavery to teach us how much our way of thinking can be subservient.

In turn, we should also view freedom as an expansive, fluid concept, rather than just as the absence of chains from your hands. Freedom is something which is always available to us in some form. Let’s say, God forbid, that you are put in chains. Even if your body isn’t free, you still have freedom of thought. You can still decide how to judge your situation. You can decide what stories you tell yourself, what memories you conjure up, what hopes you have for the future.

In Immanuel Kant's essay, "What is Enlightenment?", published in 1784, he wrote in the very first sentence that "Enlightenment is a person's exit from self-imposed immaturity." Kant, then, saw Enlightenment and intellectual freedom as largely a choice. Kant believed that the reason people were not mentally "free" was because they were lazy. In this essay, Kant describes how people *choose* not to question, but rather simply *blindly obey* what they are told. Kant writes, "For enlightenment, all that is needed is freedom. And the freedom in question is the most innocuous form of all freedom: to make public use of one's reason in all matters. But I hear on all sides the cry: Don't argue! The officer says: Don't argue, do what you're told. The tax official says: Don't argue, just pay. The priest says: don't argue, just believe. All this means restrictions on freedom everywhere." Yet, Kant also knew that it takes time to cultivate freedom. It requires rewiring our entire way of thinking and seeing the world. It requires that we debate each other, that we question, that we remain skeptical. To be free, in other words, takes intellectual *effort*. And when we recklessly throw around loaded words like "slavery" and "freedom" and "liberty," we are making things too easy on ourselves. We are working *against* our Enlightenment. Kant writes: "Thus a public can only achieve enlightenment *slowly*. A revolution may well put an end to despotism or to oppression, but it will never produce a true reform in ways of thinking."

I wonder, then, what Kant would say about how unthinkingly our public uses the words slavery and freedom. How we have let these words take on lives of their own, without seeing the nuances and contingencies within them. How we have cut ourselves off from learning from these words by viewing them as absolutes, as all-or-nothing concepts.

Gramsci observed that the powerful in society, the superstructure, determine the culture and value of a society. The way out of this vicious cycle, where the base simply repeats back the value of the superstructure, is to rigorously question culture, rhetoric, language, society. If the base begins to question, the cultural hegemony can be changed. But if the base just mimics, then the existing culture will only be further solidified. Our conception of slavery and freedom has, unfortunately, been shaped and manipulated by our society's superstructure. Gramsci's great achievement was to show how sensitive cultural values are. How they are not stable truths, but rather social constructions subject to manipulation, consciously or unconsciously. Gramsci saw how values and norms they are not what they seem. He saw, too, how simple rhetoric from the powerful can infect an entire society with an ideology.

Gramsci was a follower of Karl Marx. And it was Karl Marx's ideas which had the greatest influence on Gramsci and his theory of cultural hegemony. Yet, it was this same Karl Marx who ended his Communist Manifesto with the dramatic lines, "Workers of all countries, unite!" What would Kant, Gramsci, Buber, or even the Torah say about these reckless words from Marx, shouting to all workers from all countries to "unite." Could his call for revolution be any more vague, any more general, any more incendiary? This is, indeed, a devastating irony. Marx sought to protect the masses from being manipulated by the superstructure. Yet, this very same Marx resorted to the most wild and oversimplified language to bring about so-called freedom to his so-called slaves.