

Episode 40 Vaetchanan

Why do bad things happen to allegedly good people? Why is life unfair? Why is fate cruel?

If you've never asked yourself these questions, consider yourself a lucky human.

The truth is that, frustratingly, we have all, at some time or another, asked ourselves these questions.

But asking them, musing over them, trying to come to terms with them, doesn't make it any easier, doesn't make us any more satisfied, doesn't bring us any peace.

And maybe that's the point.

Just this past Shabbat, I was having dinner at a rabbi's home, at my dear friend Levi Pinson's in West Berlin. And we got to talking about the parsha for this week, Vaetchanan.

As we spoke, I saw out of the corner of my eye a vast bookshelf, towering over the dining room, filled with the hundreds of tomes of Jewish literature and Jewish scripture.

When we meet rabbis, when we see their tremendous libraries, we assume that, when it comes to the Torah, they will always have ready for us a satisfying answer for our most vexing and urgent questions.

I didn't ask the rabbi any questions about this week's parsha. I hadn't even read it yet. But nevertheless, he began to share his feelings on it with me.

"It is so heartbreaking what happens to Moses in Vaetchanan," he said. "He pleads with God, he begs God, to let him into Israel. But God refuses Moshe's wish. It just seems so unfair and unjust that Moshe isn't allowed into Israel. Why couldn't he just go in and see it, feel it? After leading the Israelites in the desert for forty years, why couldn't God at least just give him this?"

For me, it was an astonishing moment for three reasons. First, rabbis usually always try to "spin" the Torah in some way—myself included, even though I'm not a rabbi—to make the unjust seem somehow just. Rabbis try to justify and rationalize the Torah, so that it gives answer and comfort to its readers. But this rabbi was not spinning the Torah at all. He was basically just admitting that what happened to Moshe was totally unfair, and there was no good reason for it. Second, in my experience, rabbis always side with Hashem—with God—in controversies in the Torah. Hashem is infallible and whatever he does is automatically justified. Yet, in this instance, the rabbi did not try to stand up for Hashem. He sympathized with Moshe and seemed greatly troubled by God's decision. But the third reason why I was so captivated by the rabbi's reaction is the most compelling. It was his demeanor. Usually, rabbis strike an air of confidence, manliness, and conviction. Yet, even though this rabbi was a tall, masculine, and self-assured person, in this moment he took on the air of a small child. A small, innocent child, asking in vain the most heart-wrenching questions: *why* did God have to be so unfair? Why are people not rewarded when they are good? *Why* was Moshe, of all people, so mistreated, by no one less than God Himself?

As usual, it is the questions of a child which are often the most profound.

So, we sat there, me and Rabbi Pinson. And inevitably, we tried to come up with explanations for God's decision to not let Moshe into Israel. We tried to *explain it away*. I even brought up Episode 0 of *The Schrift*, in which I offered my own rationalization for why Moshe had to die just before the gates of Israel. (The reason was that, by never reaching the Promised

Land, Moshe would be forever in a state of becoming, rather than arriving, which is what allows him to be eternal.)

But nothing I said to the rabbi could remove his perplexed, forlorn, innocent countenance. No amount of reasoning, or rationalization, or clever theories could allow him to make peace with the fact that Moshe, poor Moshe, after begging to God in all humility to be allowed to set foot in the Promised Land, was coldly denied. The *tragedy* of Moshe was unjustifiable.

But is that, perhaps, not a redundant expression? An *unjustifiable* tragedy. Isn't a tragedy, by definition, unjustifiable. Tragedy is, in fact, a very interesting word. And all of the childlike questions posed by the rabbi could perhaps be summarized into one: Why does tragedy exist?

Since the beginning of human history, we have had a difficult time accepting the occasional cruelty of fate, the arbitrariness of God, the problem of senseless injustice. We have had a difficult time, in short, accepting tragedy. Arguably, all theories of the afterlife, which go back thousands of years, are an attempt to *rationalize* the senselessness and cruelty of death. Even in the Roman Empire, the stoic philosopher Epictetus would conclude that the most difficult thing for the human animal to accept is that which is illogical, contrary to reason. We just have a hard time processing it. We want things to be logical, to make moral sense. And Moshe's fate is just hard for us to digest because it is so illogical. Why should the guy who led the Hebrews out of slavery, who communicated directly with God, who was the humblest man on the planet, who led the Hebrews for forty years in the desert, be denied entry? And moreover, why couldn't God, when Moshe prostrated himself before Him and begged to be let in, not just soften up a little and let him through the gates? It is just illogical, contrary to reason. And as Epictetus said, the human mind has a very difficult time accepting this.

But I would argue that, in more recent times, we, as humans, have gotten a lot worse at accepting tragedy. There is a sense in which our culture, particularly Western culture, particularly American culture, just doesn't expect bad things to happen, particularly if there is no good reason for it. Part of this stems, I think, from the rise of medical technology. In previous ages, tragedy was happening everywhere you looked. Most babies didn't survive more than a few years. There were no vaccinations, so if you got sick with all of those terrifying illnesses—smallpox, yellow fever, measles, and so forth—you just kind of, well, died. Before the invention of antibiotics, if you got an infection, that could be the end of you. In Bill Bryson's recent book *The Body*, he tells the story of a man named Albert Alexander. In 1941, scientists had just begun to test out antibiotics on humans. Alexander was pruning roses in his garden one day and scratched his face on a thorn. The scratch had become infected and spread. He lost an eye and was delirious and close to death. When the doctors gave him penicillin, the effect was miraculous. Within two days, he was almost back to normal. But unfortunately, supplies ran out. There wasn't enough penicillin. Alexander relapsed. The doctors tried to reinject Alexander with his own urine—which still had some penicillin—but eventually that ran out, too. Alexander died four days later. This was as recent as 1941.

Today, by contrast, there is simply an expectation that, if you get sick, there will be a treatment for it—and usually there is. And if there is no treatment, and you just have to suffer, or even die, that seems to us unacceptable.

But our tendency to rationalize suffering extends far beyond illness. Today, this tendency invades all areas of our lives. If your girlfriend or boyfriend breaks up with you, and you go to a friend for support, they will often try to ameliorate the situation somehow, to spin it into something positive. *There are plenty of fish in the sea. Now you have more time to meet the right*

person for you. If you don't get an award you applied for or don't get a job you wanted, we try to somehow make the suffering more palatable, more justifiable. We throw out some clichés like: “everything happens for a reason”; or “in the end it will be for the best”; or “every cloud has a silver lining.” Sometimes, people beat us to the punch as it were, forcing us to give a positive answer through a leading question. I live in Berlin. I like it here reasonably enough, but it's not like every day I walk outside and kiss the Berlin Bear on the nose. Like every city, Berlin has its pluses and minuses. But when I tell people—usually Americans—that I live in Berlin, they say to me: *Oh, you must love it, right?* Or, *oh, I've heard it's such a great city.* What if I don't love it? What if I don't think it's such a great city? Here, suffering is not being shooed away or rationalized. It's being preemptively hushed up. The very framing of the leading question—*oh, you must love it, right?*—prevents even the possibility of rationalizing suffering. Here, suffering isn't even allowed to get off the starting block.

Imagine if we did this to Moshe. It's bad enough if we say to him, well, it's actually a good thing that you died on Mount Moab and didn't get into the Promised Land. Because if you got into Israel, you wouldn't be always in a state of becoming, as Steve said in Episode 0 of *The Schrift*. You wouldn't be such a heroic and timeless figure. But what if we didn't even let Moshe get his initial complaint out? What if we said: so, how about Mount Moab? I heard there are beautiful views of Israel from up there. You must have loved it up there. Well, did you love it?

This inability to properly embrace suffering has perhaps reached its nadir in modern times, particularly in America, even more particularly in pre-September 11th America. But it is actually an ancient problem. Arguably, Christianity was founded on this principle and won so many converts through this principle. Christianity basically says: you may not see it right away, but suffering is actually a good thing. Why? Because you will be rewarded for suffering in the afterlife. The tragedies which happen to you may seem cruel and senseless, but they are not. In fact, all of these tragedies will make sense, will be recompensed, in the afterlife. The only real “tragedy” would be to not become Christian, because then you wouldn't have any way out of tragedy.

In fact, however, Christianity had a predecessor. Its predecessor was Platonism. I discussed Platonism before on *The Schrift* in Episode 4. Plato, and his teacher, Socrates, invented the philosophical idea that *this world* is not the real world. Rather, there is a higher world, a perfect world, in which everything is rational, everything makes sense, everything is True. The suffering we experience in this world is just an illusion. If we could access the higher world, then this suffering would cease.

It is easy to see how Platonism would create fertile ground for Christianity to proliferate. Both ideologies attempt to ameliorate suffering, to find a loophole out of the cruelty of fate, to provide a rationalization for human pain. This is why Nietzsche would write in *Beyond Good and Evil* that “Christianity is Platonism for the masses,” alluding to Karl Marx's famous quote that “religion is opiate for the masses.”

Socrates came on the scene in Athens in about 430 BCE. According to NYU professor of ancient Greek and Latin David Konstan, by 428 BCE, aged forty-two, Socrates had “already captured the interest of the Athenians as a philosopher.” It was at this time, in the late fifth century BCE, that Athens and, in turn, the world, was first introduced to the idea of Platonism, of proto-Christianity. It was at this time when people were first given a rationalization for their suffering, a way to make sense of tragedy, a way to instantly “feel better” about misfortune.

But what about before Socrates? What did Ancient Greeks used to think about tragedy, before Socrates and Plato came on the world stage?

This was the central question of Friedrich Nietzsche's book *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*. This was Nietzsche's first book, published in 1872, when Nietzsche was only twenty-seven years old.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche wanted to show how Greek tragedy underwent a colossal shift during the time of Socrates, during the fifth century B.C.E.

Nietzsche believed that Greek tragedy *died* during this era, that it ceased being tragedy at all, but just some kind of bastardized, horrific corruption of what had come before. And so, what had come before?

In episode two, I discussed the concepts of the Apollonian and the Dionysian. Apollo and Dionysus were both sons of Zeus. Apollo was the Greek God of the sun and, in turn, the god of order, rationality, logic, and prudence. Dionysus was the yin to Apollo's yang. Dionysus was the god of wine and dance, of irrationality and chaos, of emotions and instinct.

For Nietzsche, Greek Tragedy reached its pinnacle, its apex, when the Dionysian and the Apollonian worked in harmony with each other, when they were balanced. In pre-Socratic Greek tragedy, the hero represented the Apollonian. He was confronted with an unjust, chaotic, absurd, world, and the hero's mission was to somehow restore order and reason into the state of affairs. This interplay between the Apollonian and the Dionysian in Greek tragedy allowed audiences to experience the full range of human emotion.

The Apollonian elements of Greek tragedy were the reasoning skills, will to justice, and monologues of the characters. Yet, these Apollonian elements were checked by the Dionysian elements. The Dionysian elements of the tragedy was the music of the chorus. More on this point in a moment.

As we know, tragic plays do not end well. They end, by definition, with the cruelty of fate. Their message is always that horrible things are ordained to occur to us, and there is nothing we can do to thwart them. The question is, then, how do we process the tragic? How do we find comfort and solace after a tragic ending?

Nietzsche's answer was simple: through ecstasy, through embrace, through art, through, in short, the Dionysian. The tragic is that which, by definition, cannot be made rational, cannot be evened out. We should not try to "make sense of" or rationalize the tragic; instead, we should lean into it, we should accept the madness and senselessness of life.

The primary Dionysian element in Greek tragedy was music—the music of the chorus. Nietzsche observed that music is *above* human rationality. It is comprised of emotion and feeling, not of thought and logic. Music hits us deep in our soul and carries us above individual concerns. No matter what happens to the tragic hero, no matter how unjust his ending may be, music will always be there for us to transcend this tragedy. Most importantly, music is not there to *distract* us from the tragedy, but rather to allow us to dive deep into the tragedy in such a way that the tragedy actually elevates us rather than brings us down.

Dionysian, and music, allow us to experience a kind of revelry in which we partake in the universality of suffering, in which we find joy in chaos. But, Nietzsche cautions, we also need the Apollonian as a counter-balancing force. The Apollonian is there to keep people on track, to continue to care about their day-to-day lives, to not fall too deeply into the ecstatic dream of suffering. It is the interplay between the two which allow audiences to embrace suffering but also to move on.

This balance was attained with the great Greek tragedians, Aeschylus and Sophocles. Aeschylus wrote famous plays like *The Oresteia* and *The Suppliants*. Some of Sophocles' famous works include *Antigone* and *Oedipus Rex*. Both Aeschylus and Sophocles were

contemporaries of Socrates, but Socrates had not yet become famous enough to influence Greek tragedy. If you have ever seen or read the plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles, you can grasp how their works balance the Dionysian and the Apollonian. Their tragedies are measured and insightful, but also have choruses. Their tragedies depict the irrational cruelty of fate. But while the tragedies acknowledge this as cruelty and do not try to justify it, they do not get swallowed up in these chaotic and senseless endings.

Nietzsche argues that it was the playwright Euripides who would forever destroy Greek tragedy. Euripides, influenced by the philosophy of Socrates, allowed the pendulum to swing too far to the Apollonian. Euripides removed music and the choir from his plays. For all suffering that occurred in the play, Euripides tried to give a legitimate reason for this suffering. He tried to make all of life intelligible and understandable. What Euripides did, according to Nietzsche, was to drain audiences of the ability to *participate* in art, to participate in the revelry and drunkenness of art, by making audiences see the world too soberly and contemplatively.

Before Socrates, Greek audiences had harnessed the ability to stare into the abyss of human suffering and affirm it through the terror and ecstasy of the tragic drama. After Socrates, this capability would be lost.

Music should reflect the range of emotions of the human soul. When we hear music which authentically depicts the human condition, we are deeply stirred, as though we are accessing some kind of secret, hidden truth of what it means to be human. Nietzsche theorized that, for Greeks, it was music which allowed them to process the tragic.

Yet, I would like to take Nietzsche's argument one step further and ask: what kind of music? What kind of music best allows us to transcend the tragic? Is all music created equal? The short answer is "No." The long answer is also "No."

When we are faced with the tragic, there is something irritating and unhelpful when people try to "smooth" things out for us, to put a positive spin on the situation, to desperately look for the silver lining. Music which tries to do this is, in my opinion, equally irritating, equally artificial. Unfortunately, pop music today is saturated with these types of songs. These are songs which contain no tension, no complexity, no longing—in short, they fail to capture the full range of human emotion. This music will not stand the test of time, and will only be enjoyed by those people who have not allowed themselves, like the ancient Greeks, to plunge headfirst into the fundamental unfairness of life.

My favorite rock musician is John Lennon. And unfortunately, I have to use him here as my guinea pig. In 1980, just before being murdered, Lennon put out his last album, *Double Fantasy*. This album has a lot of hits on it—"Beautiful Boy," "Just Like Starting Over," and "Woman." It also has an eeriness to it, since Lennon would be murdered just following its release. Typically, it receives praise as Lennon's "comeback album" and as a "classic." In 1981, it would win a Grammy for Album of the Year. Yet, what few people remember is that this album was largely panned by critics immediately after it was released. It was only after Lennon was murdered that it became a celebrated album. There are two reasons for this. First, whenever an artist dies young, his art immediately takes on a sacredness, particularly the art he was working on at the time of his death. And second, people are just afraid to criticize the work of an artist who was just killed in cold blood.

But allow me to be the exception to the rule. *Double Fantasy* is not a good album. It's an irritating album. The songs are all "feel good." They force you to awkwardly smile. They celebrate pleasantness. They are neatly tied in a bow. So, while this is "music," it fails to accomplish music's most fundamental objective: to transform human emotion into abstract art.

The reason it fails to do this is that Lennon's songs on this album only contain one emotion, which can hardly be considered an emotion at all: feeling satisfied, luxuriating in contentedness, wistfully smiling at how angst-free life is. And while these are fine emotions to experience, they should not be transmuted into music. Music which contains these monotone emotions will only irritate us. And most of all, it will irritate Dionysus.

I'm going to play an excerpt from Lennon's song "Watching the Wheels." As you listen, notice the "squareness" of the music—how it is predictable, how it fails to surprise, how it evokes no ecstasy or madness.

The reason why Lennon's music had become so tame on this album is because his life had become tame. Lennon had himself become satisfied, even-keeled, benumbed and blunted. He was happily married to Yoko Ono. He had fallen into a daily routine. He even had taken a fondness for bread braking. Put another way, Lennon had stopped suffering. His life had—finally—stopped being tragic.

During his years with the Beatles, however, Lennon's life was steeped in tragedy. He was in a loveless marriage with his high school girlfriend, Cynthia, who he cheated on constantly and who he would eventually divorce. They had a son together, Julian, who John never saw and was estranged from. He was taking various drugs: marijuana, cocaine, LSD, even heroin. He was also hounded by the press, at one point receiving death threats for ironically claiming that "The Beatles are Bigger than Jesus."

But Lennon was mainly troubled because of his upbringing, and this pain carried through into Beatlemania. His father left his mom when he was a child. Because his mother was unstable, Lennon was raised by his aunt. When John was 17, his mother, Julia, was run over by a car and killed. A few years later, John's best friend, Stuart Sutcliffe, who briefly played bass for the Beatles, would also die unexpectedly.

For John, music, rock and roll music, was the way out of this suffering. Music was John's lifeline. Music allowed John to somehow transcend the tragedy engulfing his life. And if you listen carefully, you can hear the tragic in his songs, even if the songs are "happy" and "upbeat." His songs with the Beatles always convey a spectrum of human emotion; they always contain subtle surprises, twists and turns, as they endeavor to capture the experience of the human soul. It is these twists and turns, these shades of darkness, which are so important in music. Because they mirror the capriciousness of life, the unexpectedness and senselessness of joy and suffering. When music lacks these surprises, these occasional plunges into the gloomy, it fails to transfix us, and is soon forgotten.

Now, if I really wanted to make my point here, I would play you Lennon's song "Julia," which he wrote in 1968 about his late mother. This song takes listeners through all shades of emotion, oscillating between melancholy, uplifting, wistful, optimistic, and despairing moods. But I'm afraid that would be too easy. If you want to hear "Julia," you'll have to listen on your own.

Instead, I'd like to focus on what seems to be a "happy" and "upbeat" song from the Beatles' "moptop" era. This is "I Feel Fine," recorded and released in late 1964. On the surface, this song appears to be, just like the music on *Double Fantasy*, just a song about "feeling good" and "enjoying life." It is called, after all, "I Feel Fine." But in the chorus, there is a brief, fleeting moment, where the song plunges into melancholy and longing, slowly and tenderly lifting itself out of this sadness and returning to the carefree verse. The words to the chorus are "I'm so glad, that she's my little girl / She's so glad, she's telling all the world." Ironically, it is on this word "glad" that Lennon will hit a *minor* chord, surprising the listener, shaking the listener out of the

cheerfulness of the verse, reminding the listener that love is not just about happiness and celebration but also about inexplicable and unyielding sadness. It is this moment in the song, this minor chord, which makes it *music* in the Nietzschean, ancient Greek sense. And it is the absence of these moments on *Double Fantasy*—and in millions of other shitty pop songs—that cause them to run so afoul of Dionysus and his ability to metamorphose tragedy.

If we can accept suffering and lean into unfairness, we can heal ourselves far better than scrounging around for the Apollonian silver lining. If you're suffering—which all of us, of course, are—sometimes it's better to *acknowledge* your pain, to simply say, "I'm experiencing disappointment, or sadness, or anger," and it's hard. Meditation teaches that there are no good or bad feelings, there is no right or wrong way to feel. Counter-intuitively, once we accept our feelings and don't try to pretend like they're not there, they are easier to live with. Sometimes, they even go away.

So, returning to God's decision this week not to let Moshe into Israel, despite Moshe's heart-wrenching pleas. Perhaps the response of my rabbi friend was the correct one: this is just sad, this is tragic, and there's nothing we can say or do to make it better. And that's okay.

But still one question remains to be answered. Why doesn't God let Moshe into Israel? Why does the Torah make the world out to be so maddeningly unfair? Here, in a rare instance, we can answer this question by asking another question. Why must Antigone be executed for doing the "right thing" and giving her brother Polyneices a proper burial? Why does Oedipus, despite all precautions to the contrary, still end up murdering his father and marrying his mother and subsequently gouging out his eyes? Why doesn't Juliet wake up in time to tell Romeo that the poison she has took would only last for twenty-four hours?

The Torah wants us to believe in its wisdom, to trust that it knows how life is often, at its core, maddeningly inexplicable, unjustifiably cruel, tormentingly unlucky. This ending to Moshe's life is like the Dionysian swerves of ancient Greek theater, it is like John Lennon's spontaneous dip into minor in "I Feel Fine." Moshe's fate is a confirmation to us all that the Torah "gets it"—the Torah understands and empathizes with the tragic inevitabilities of existence. And by leaving Moshe's fate inexplicable, the Torah encourages us to learn to transcend this tragedy through music, through the Dionysian, through embracing our suffering.