

The parsha for this week is Noach. It is perhaps almost as epic as last week's parsha Bereishit. It has the famous story of Noah and the Ark. This story contains so many details which are now a part of western culture: the pairs of animals ascending into the giant wooden ship, the dove which returns with an olive leaf in his beak, the rainbow which shows humanity that never will God again destroy his people through a flood. The parsha of Noach also contains the story of the Tower of Babel and an explanation for why the world has such an array of foreign languages.

A story which is less well-known is what happened to Noah after the flood. After spending 150 days on this ark, Noah returns to land to find that, of course, humanity and the animal kingdom has been entirely wiped out. And what is the first thing that Noah does? He builds a vineyard. He makes wine, lots and lots of wine, in fact. And, ignoring the advice of the legendary rapper Biggie Smalls, who advised his listeners to „never get high on their own own supply“, Noah became a drunk. He became drunk on his own wine and descended into a kind of shadow of his former self. Noah's actions—his coping mechanisms, if you will—are understandable. After 150 days on that ship, with the sound and smells of thousands of wild animals all around you, as you forged through the apocalypse, one can only imagine that some trauma would have occurred.

I always found this particular story a bit curious. Now, perhaps I am biased, as my last name is Weinberg, which means „vineyard“ in German. I also happen to really like wine. I always thought: why was wine used as the catalyst for Noah's self-destruction? What's so bad about wine? In Judaism, wine is actually sacred. For Shabbat and major holidays, drinking wine is a commandment. Moreover, even in ancient Judaism, wine was used for rituals and for sacrifices to God.

A dear friend of mine, who actually is a rabbi, Yehoshua Lewis of Highland Park NJ, gave a wonderful explanation for this. He said that wine itself is a beautiful thing. But it must be imbibed with care and with awareness. He said that Noah's problem was not that he built a vineyard, but that he built a vineyard *first*. He made wine and getting drunk his priority. There is something psychologically powerful about what we choose to do *first*. Let's say that at some point in the day, you will watch Netflix, and, at another point, you will meditate. Somehow, if you meditate *before* you watch Netflix, you are sending a message to your innermost self that you find meditation more important. This is true even if you end up watching the same total amount of Netflix by the end of the day. So, let that be a little productivity and wellness tip to keep with you. Trust me, it really works.

Judaism does not have a monopoly on wine. Wine is a crucial aspect of many religions. For one, it was crucial for the Ancient Greeks. The Greek god of wine was Dionosyus. But Dionysus was more than just a god of wine. He was the god of pleasure, of ecstasy, of revelry. He was the God of letting go, and not in the sense of „letting go“ the way your yoga teacher may tell you to do. I mean *really* letting go of all inhibitions, social norms, and psychological constraints. Maybe even becoming a little bit mad.

Friedrich Nietzsche absolutely adored Dionysus. If we think a bit about Nietzsche's upbringing, we can understand why he would be so drawn to Dionysus. His father was a Protestant minister. He went to a boarding school in Saxony heavily influenced by the militant strictness of Prussian culture. It is said that he would keep his feet in ice cold water through the nights so he could stay

up and study. As a young man, he served in the Prussian army. Prussia, the northeast area of Germany, was, as mentioned, notoriously strict, laced-up, militant, and austere.

Here are some quotes from Nietzsche about Dionysus. From *In the Twilight of the Idols*: “I know no higher symbolism than this Greek symbolism of the Dionysian festivals. Here the most profound instinct of life, that directed toward the future of life, the eternity of life, is experienced religiously — and the way to life, procreation, as the holy way.” In his final work from 1890, *Ecce Homo*, where some scholars believe that at this point Nietzsche had already gone half-insane, Nietzsche wrote: “I am a disciple of the philosopher Dionysus. I should rather be a satyr than a saint.” And at the end of *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche concludes by writing one of his most cryptic passages: “Am I still being misunderstood? Dionysus against the crucified.”

Nevertheless, Nietzsche was also aware of the dangers of the Dionysian. His first book was entitled *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*. In this book, Nietzsche contended that the Dionysian must be balanced out, as it were. The Ancient, pre-Socratic Greeks, he felt, had perfectly attained this balance. The counteracting force to the Dionysian is the Apollonian. Whereas the Dionysian prized a kind of frenzied ecstasy, the Apollonian stood for reason, temperance, moderation.

Nietzsche felt that Greek tragedy, before Socrates, perfectly embodied this balance between the Dionysian and the Apollonian. Early Greek tragedy contained both *music* and dialogue. Post-Socrates Greek tragedy retained only dialogue. Nietzsche saw the Dionysian in music, which was counterbalanced by the logic of the apollonian in dialogue. According to Nietzsche, when Socrates appeared on the scene with his hyper-rationalism, the Dionysian element of Greek thought and culture was destroyed. It became too Apollonian. Nietzsche believed that his own era, the late nineteenth century, had a similar problem. It had become too rationalistic and too estranged from the Dionysian.

Yet, the Dionysian could go too far, too. In Thomas Mann’s novel *Death in Venice*, a bourgeois writer in his late fifties named Gustav Aschenbach takes a trip to Venice. Up until this point in his life, he was the kind of person who was entirely apollonian. He always paid his bills on time, took a walk at the same time each day, tipped his hat to passersby, read the newspaper in the evenings. When he goes to Venice, however, his Dionysian side is released. He encounters there a teenage polish boy named Tadzio who has come to vacation on the island with his family. In this highly disturbing story, Gustav Aschenbach falls in love with the teenage boy’s beauty and begins to stalk him all over the island. This esteemed writer and scholar, greatly respected among fellow intellectuals, an upstanding bourgeois as it were, fell in love with the beauty of a teenage boy. His love for the teenage boy drives him to madness; he begins to rave to himself, to hallucinate, to, as it were, lose all touch with reality, with reason, with the Apollonian. As the title of the book reveals, he dies in Venice. In short, one can say he was liberated by Dionysus, and then slain by Dionysus.

Noah, we might say, strayed too far from Apollo. He didn’t have the right balance. Now, here you might expect me to wish you a shabbat shalom and to say that I wish you to find the balance between the Apollonian and the Dionysian in your lives. But actually, in a way, even trying to find the right balance between Apollo and Dionysus is itself a kind of Apollonian idea. Why do

we immediately try to harmonize and balance everything out? Why do we feel so uncomfortable with chaos, with ecstasy? For those of you who have spent some time on the Earth in the twentieth and twenty-first century—that is, for all of you—do you think our society leans more to the Apollonian or the Dionysian? I think you already know the answer. The fact that we *expect* the message of this episode to simply be „find the right balance in your lives“, shows how hyper-rational and apollonian our age has become. In fact, we are only just getting started with this episode.

Let's go back for a moment to the beginning of this week's parsha. It has a rather sinister and pessimistic beginning indeed. God has created the human race. Then, God comes to the conclusion that humans are capable of great evil—they must, save Noah and his family, be destroyed by a flood. What is most astonishing about this parsha is about how quickly God comes to this conclusion. We are just getting started with the Torah and God already concludes how terrible people can be. This is, to say the least, hardly good for our self-esteem as humans to read. The Torah, in this sense, is a rather conservative book, and here I mean classical conservative. That is, it is far more wary of humans than confident in them. Even after the flood is over, God says that he has seen how „man's mind is evil from his youth“ and that he will therefore never destroy every living being again. In other words, humans are imprinted with a propensity toward evil. Therefore, it's not really fair to annihilate them for being evil. God, in effect, says „my bad.“

Now, here you might be thinking: Steve, what the hell, man? I came to your weekly podcast to be inspired and to have a positive feeling going into the weekend. Now you're telling me that I am evil at my core? Well—hold on for a second, that's not quite what I'm saying. First of all, in a way, I almost find this idea of human's continually behaving badly to be rather comforting. It lowers our expectations, as it were, both of others and of ourselves. How much aggravation do we suffer today when we meet people who turn out to be huge jerks? Indeed, our society is almost plagued by our continual feeling of shock and horror at how others behave. How many times a week do you say to yourself: how could he/she/they *behave* that way? Well, if you feel this way, you are in good company. Even the Almighty himself once said: “What the F\*ck is wrong with these people?”

This depiction of human nature can be found not just in the Torah, but also in anthropology and evolutionary biology. Let's look at Yuval Harari's international bestseller, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Mankind*. Harari explains how humans are, just like God opined, basically doomed to a lot of less-than-admirable behavior. Humans developed rather quickly these incredible brains capable of reasoning skills far exceeding any other animal. Yet, Harari reminds us that, for most of human history, we were actually in the “middle” as a species. We were not the king of the jungle—the lion was. So our emotions necessitated that we be a bit paranoid, insecure, jealous—in short, we were kind of pathetic—so that we could survive as rather middling creatures. Yet, over thousands of years, our brains allowed us to invent things and concepts which have made us the kings of the jungle. We are now obviously reigning over the entire planet without any challenger. But our emotions and maturity level have not caught up with our responsibility and our power. We still *feel* like those subordinates in paranoid hordes of hunter-gatherers. But we can *think* and *create* like gods. This is a dangerous situation for us. It is kind of like giving the keys of your Ferrari to your fifteen-year old kid.

The other day, I was walking in the park, and I saw a group of teenagers standing in a circle and drinking some kind of energy drink out of a can. When they finished, they all just simply threw the can directly onto the grass, even though there was likely a trash can within walking distance. My first thought was, like God, what is wrong with these people? I couldn't understand how someone could think this way. But then I remembered: they're teenagers. Somehow, in their perception of the world, they think this is right. Where I see beautiful nature, they see a perfectly good trash can. So the next time you encounter a situation like this, remember who you're dealing with: a homo sapien. If we put 100 dogs in a big room, we don't expect every dog to be a cuddly, easy-going dog. We accept that some dogs will be barkers, some will be hyper, some will be pee in the corner, some will pee outside like they're supposed to. Yet, we still love dogs and remain unphased when they misbehave. In a strange way, the same is true of humans. Take 100 humans and put them in a room. Guess what? They're not all going to be perfect and upstanding citizens of society. Some of them will not recycle. Some of them will be narcissists or charlatans. Some of them will just be dumb. One of them may even surprise you and pee on the floor.

I remember during the time in which I lived in Israel, I befriended a religious woman at the elementary school where I worked. She had a large family and was one of the kindest, sweetest, most generous, most optimistic people I'd ever met. And she often invited me to her family's home for Shabbat dinner. This was around 2015 and 2016, so the major news headline was how Isis, or Dasch, was sweeping through the Middle East. This group of terrorists, it would seem, almost wanted to be seen as evil by the rest of the world. Their brand was basically: we are pure evil. They literally had a flag that was mainly black. Who other than pirates carry a black flag? ISIS did. At one of these Shabbat dinners in Israel, the subject of ISIS came up. I expected my religious friend and colleague to rather stereotypically lament how terrible and evil ISIS was. She was such a kind woman, what else could I expect? Instead, she said, rather bluntly: "Why is the world so shocked by Dasch? I don't understand. They are just behaving the way certain groups of people have behaved throughout human history. It's only in recent times that this type of violence and terrorism has become so anomalous." Okay, she was Israeli and English was her second language, so she probably didn't use the word "anomalous," but that was her point.

I'm still not exactly sure why, but I found her comment more refreshing than I did despairing, much as I, like all sane people, hate ISIS. It was nice to, for a change, not feel so shocked and appalled by something and rather to grimly accept it. As I've tried to express in the previous two episodes, and as a theme to which I will return again and again, it is so often the case that what we believe to be true is actually its opposite. What if the Torah had been written differently, such that God said, after creating humanity, declared: what a wonderful species this is, these humans. They are great, really, just great. My work here is done. As a human, would that make you feel relieved and content, or maybe a bit unsettled and suspicious? Let us return, for a moment, to my example of going to Shabbat dinners in Israel. I grew up in America, and whenever you were invited to someone's home for dinner, you would be showered with friendliness, barraged with questions, shown all kinds of politeness and special attention. How have you *been*? Let me take your coat. Can I get you something? How is life? Do you love your new (fill in the blank)? Did you love your trip to (fill in the blank)? When I went to Shabbat dinner at someone's house in Israel, even someone whom I knew very well—the aforementioned family, for example—I was

perhaps lucky if they even glanced in my direction when I opened the door with a beaming smile. No one got up, no one rushed over to shake my hand, no one forced me to tell them how great my life was. At first, I was a little confused by this behavior. Had I done something wrong? Did they not like me? Had there just been a death in the family? But over time, I came to like it, and eventually, to relish it. It was nice to not have to put on any airs for a change, or to be forced into flaunting certain emotions. Here, again, we have an astonishing case of opposites. Americans are friendly because, at least, taking Americans in their best light, they want to make their guests feel comfortable and appreciated. Yet, I later realized how I actually found this friendliness not to be comforting, but to be alienating.

Okay, maybe I've gone a bit too far at making humans look bad. That's not my intention, really. I know too many kind and warm people, both from history and in my personal life, to believe that. Probably about half my listeners know my mom, and therefore also know how she is, perhaps, the nicest person to ever walk the face of the earth. So I am no stranger to human kindness. What was most significant, and perhaps even beautiful, about what my Israeli friend said, is that ISIS, a group which at one time in human history would have been just another group of marauding barbarians laying siege to innocent men, women, and children, has become aberrational behavior. It's not normal or expected for people to do this anymore. In short, we have made a lot of *moral* progress as a species. We have come a long way from the time when God looked at us with such dismay. Yet, we do still have certain tendencies, some of them are admirable, some of them are not so admirable, which originated from our good old days as hunter gathers. Unfortunately, the bad ones can sometimes come out, if we do not cultivate ourselves, educate ourselves, restrict ourselves. To this idea, we need to look no further than the Torah itself.

The Torah is, at its core, a book of laws. Not just the Ten Commandments, which serve as a kind of keystone of the Torah, but also hundreds of other laws, 613 to be exact. The word "Torah" means Law in Hebrew. Though the Torah doesn't state so explicitly, it's rather obvious that one purpose of the Torah is to keep us in line. This is implied in the story of Noah and the Ark, to say nothing of all the other horrific crimes against humanity which will occur in the book of Genesis. It seems designed to save us from ourselves—and to save us from others. The Torah knows the greatness, enlightenment, mastery, and generosity which humans are capable of achieving. But it also points out: it's not going to be easy to reach this point. This idea, that enlightenment requires cultivation and discipline is a concept which, I think, has been forgotten today.

Yet, there is another problem. Sometimes, we want to be *moral*, but we're not really sure which theory of morality to apply to our lives. Sometimes we, as humans, have ideas that initially seem so promising, but then have unintended consequences—opposite results. This is what happened during the French Revolution. The people *wanted* to create equality and harmony and rationality in society. But it ended up as a tyranny giving way to the worst of human emotions. Arguably, the same could be said for the rise and fall of communism. In the nineteenth century, the English philosopher John Stuart Mill tried to create an all-encompassing theory of morality. This theory would leave everyone better off and always in the position to do the right thing. His theory was known as utilitarianism: one should act so to create the greatest good for the greatest number. Sounds good, right? Optimization, utility, morality maximized. But it doesn't take long to realize how problematic and naïve Mill's theory is. Who decides what is the greatest good? Can we

always know the numbers? Do we kill one person to save ten? What if that one person is Ghandi and the other ten are a bunch of assholes? And this is only assuming we have benevolent interests when we apply utilitarianism. Utilitarianism, should it fall into the wrong hands, can so easily be exploited to actually morally justify terrible actions.

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant was acutely aware of this problem. He saw how frail utilitarianism was right away. So he sought to construct a new moral theory which would prevent people from trying to skirt around moral restrictions. In a way, his efforts were a bit like the Torah's. The Torah's 613 laws give people little wiggle room to let themselves off the hook with morality. And this isn't even taking into account the Talmud, an extension of the Torah, which would multiply these commandments by a factor of about a thousand.

Kant devised his famous "categorical imperative." This held that one act as though his action would be a universal maxim applicable everywhere. This moral law by Kant resembled the ten commandments: actions which were prohibited at all times and under any circumstances. So, to return to the Ghandi example: no, you can't kill Ghandi, even if it would save other people's lives, because murder is categorically wrong. Moreover, you couldn't kill one of the assholes in the group to save Ghandi either. Not only that, but there were a ton of other things you couldn't do. According to Kant, you can't lie, steal, etc., even if it would save lives and have some greater, "utilitarian" purpose.

Coded into Kant's morality is actually, I would argue, a kind of warmth, compassion, and humanity. You'll note that these qualities are absent from Mill's rather cold and mathematical utilitarianism. Kant basically wants to say: treat others as *ends* not as *means*. In short, treat everyone—and sadly, Kant applied this principle only to humans, and not to animals or nature—as beings unto themselves, deserving of respect and acknowledgement. This is why Kant believed you should never lie to someone; because it is to somehow *exploit* that person, using them for your own advantage. This is forbidden even if you could justify it by improving the "general good."

Looking around our society today, would you say we are more utilitarian in our morality, or more Kantian. Guess what: utilitarianism has won the day. Now, I'm not here to say which morality is better, but I certainly think that there are pluses and minuses to both. But in many ways our society has become so hyper-rationalistic that we apply utilitarianism to all questions of morality almost as a knee jerk reflex reaction. How often do our moral debates simply devolve into calculations comparing numbers of deaths? Dictator A killed one million people, but dictator B killed two million people. Therefore, dictator B is more evil. Look, maybe he is more evil. He probably is. But is this really a cultivated way to view morality? Are these types of analyses sharpening or dulling our outlook of existence? Who is bettered by these debates? Calculation may be a good way to decide what kind of laundry detergent to buy. But I take issue when the same method is used to decide major life questions. Moreover, let's come back to our ancient, hunter-gatherer pasts for a moment. I don't think that we are even capable of processing these enormous numbers. For most of human history, we were stuck hanging out with the same fifteen or twenty people our whole lives. In short, we are mentally better equipped to understand morality on the personal level. We may not be able to understand what one million people actually is; what we can understand is compassion, loyalty, kindness, honor.

The parsha of Noah concludes with the Tower of Babel. Here, the citizens of the planet got together and said, let's all be one nation, all speak the same language, so that we can make ourselves as powerful as possible and build a tower to heaven. This was, once again, an instance of human hyper-rationality and utilitarianism. In response to this "hubris," God decreed that this mass of people must be scattered. Here, God was almost like an antitrust ruling breaking up a monopoly. They would all speak different languages and come from different cultures, so that they could never amass together and build the notorious tower.

If you look at human history generally, you will notice that we have been on our way to reconstructing the Tower of Babel, figuratively speaking of course. There is a drive toward further rationalization as nations. Consider the case of Germany. Before Napoleon invaded the German lands in the early nineteenth century, Germany was made up of hundreds of tiny kingdoms. In these kingdoms, people spoke dialects of German which could not be understood by other "Germans." When Napoleon conquered the German lands, he brought the ideals of the French Revolution with him. He decreed that Germany should be made into a more rational territory. It was divided up into 39 states with neat-and-tidy boundaries and borders, so that it could be more easily administrated. About a half-century later, Otto von Bismarck decided: why let Germany be thirty-nine states when it can be *one*? Think of how much power will be consolidated if we can band together. This drive toward nationalism happened not just in Germany, but all over Europe. This great idea to let each group of people have its own country led to a kind of aggressive jingoism which resulted in the outbreak of the First World War.

Now, there's nothing inherently wrong with groups of people deciding to band together into larger societies. I personally am a huge fan of the European Union. I am merely questioning the ideology that informs the decision to make nations bigger and "better." How often do we just let ourselves fall into utilitarian ways of thinking without considering alternatives? Are we behaving like the people of Babel, just shouting "more" without knowing why we even want more? Do we even want to be more rational? How often are we so confident in human rationality, that we fail to see how our original plans could have unintended, opposite consequences?

I think now we are finally ready to return to poor Noah, lying drunk in his tent somewhere on his vast vineyard. Noah, we might say, strayed too far to the Dionysian. Other characters, like Gustav von Aschenbach, had repressed his Dionysian side for so long. By the time Aschenbach went to Venice, he was totally gluttoned with the Apollonian. His Dionysian eventually awoke like a kind of sleeping giant and drove the old man to madness and death. But with Noah, and with Aschenbach, we thought of the Apollonian and Dionysian in merely personal terms. Yet, Apollo and Dionysus are relevant in many other spheres as well—in politics, in economics, in morality. We should be aware that they both exist and that they should, at least according to Nietzsche and the pre-Socratic Greeks, be harmonized.

Now, once again, I feel the temptation to conclude by enjoining you to strike the right balance between the Apollonian and the Dionysian. Yet, this would, as already mentioned, be, in a way the most sensible, reasonable, rational, and Apollonian of messages. Perhaps I, even I, as a citizen of the West in the twenty-first century, can also not so easily escape the impulse to call on the pagan god Apollo when faced with a decision.