

Episode 15

Bo

We all know that, sometimes, there is some stuff in the Bible which wouldn't exactly be "politically correct" to say today. But this week's parsha of Bo will be particularly discordant to the modern ear. In this week's parsha, God takes the extraordinary decision of killing off every first-born being in Egypt in order to finally force the Pharaoh's hand. These first-born beings include not just the Egyptian aristocracy, but also the peasants, the middle-class, even the animals. Yes, even the cute, innocent, first-born animals must die so that the Hebrews can be let free. At worst, God's decision is a genocide. At best, it is an act of war. The Torah vividly and dramatically and horrifically tells us what will happen when God institutes this tenth plague of the murdering of the first-born. In Exodus 11:6, the Torah reads that "there shall be a loud cry in all the land of Egypt, such as has never been or will ever be heard again." That is one loud cry I certainly never want to hear.

Now, because I am Jewish, I have sort of become immune to seeing this tenth plague as apocalyptic. Actually, I, and I would imagine thousands of other Jews, see it as good, or at least as rose-colored. Every year on the holiday of Passover, we more or less celebrate this tenth plague. We certainly don't condemn it or speak badly about it. Hmm. Why not?

Well, first of all, this did happen a rather long time ago, and I would guess that probably Jews don't think it "really" happened this way. At some point, I think it's fair for us to suspend our empathy for people and animals who died thousands of years ago. As much as I try to feel bad for the millions of dinosaurs that were wiped off the Earth, it was so long ago that my brain just can't really summon up the empathy.

Second, the slaying of the first-born is, if anything, an even-proportioned comeuppance to the Pharaoh. He had spent decades instituting a similar policy against the Hebrews. He had decreed that every first-born male was to be thrown into the river. So God was now evening the score, so to speak.

But third, and most importantly, it was this tenth plague which guaranteed the Hebrews freedom. It may have been a genocidal apocalypse, but it was not in vain. It is what is allowing Jews to celebrate Passover in freedom.

Moreover, as acts of war should be, it was a decision of last resort. God tried peaceful negotiation with the Pharaoh. It didn't work. God tried ad-hoc measures and targeted attacks, like the other nine plagues. Those didn't work either. Nothing was working. So war and revolution became necessary. But this reasoning still doesn't explain why the animals and the innocent peasants also needed to die. Why didn't God just take out the Egyptian military or the ruling elites?

Unfortunately, the Torah may seem to remind us, war and revolution don't always allow for such conveniences.

Throughout my childhood and adolescence, I never even questioned the morality of the tenth plague. The first time I heard it challenged—or, rather, derided—was when I was a freshman in college. I remember I took one of those Intro to religion courses. On the first day of class, the professor explained—very politically correctly—that we would be discussing all kinds of religious ideas during the course of the semester and that all opinions were welcome. Then, at the end of his little speech, he said that one thing which he would never divulge was his religious beliefs. His own personal thoughts on religion would remain a mystery. Seemed fair enough. But at the beginning of the second class, he led off with a kind of diatribe against religion, and

proclaimed atheism as the only Truth. With each passing class, it became more and more apparent that he was perhaps one of the most strident atheists one may ever encounter in one's life. Each class was devoted to showing how religion was a scourge on society and atheism was the one and only true way.

Needless to say, we can only imagine what he thought about the tenth plague.

It is a travesty that Jews celebrate this genocidal massacre of millions of innocents, he once said, or something along those lines. A Jewish student tried to argue with him, that Jews don't celebrate, but rather *commemorate*, this tenth plague, but the professor wasn't having it.

I still am not sure why this professor reassured us that he would not disclose his own religious beliefs, and then immediately turned the class into a kind of conversion to atheism manifesto, but that's something I will probably never figure out.

But I was recently reminded of this professor's reaction to the tenth plague this past Shabbat. I was in Poland, and I was discussing the Schrift with a Polish friend of mine, who not only isn't Jewish, but who is rather disgusted by the religion in which she was brought up—Catholicism. To state the obvious, she had never been to a Passover seder. I was trying to generate some ideas for this week's episode, so I began discussing this week's parsha with her. When the tenth plague came up for discussion, she instinctively recoiled. Why did God have to kill all of those innocent people, she asked, in revulsion.

I was immediately reminded of my professor's deriding of the Passover when I had been a college freshman. I then had the realization: So, this is how people react to the tenth plague who haven't been going to the Passover seder every year. This is the kind of unbiased, fresh, twenty-first century reaction to the tenth plague. I tried for a moment to defend the tenth plague for her, to be a kind of apologist for God. But I soon realized how unconvincing my words sounded.

One person who would have had a readymade answer for this question was likely the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Hegel is one of the most important thinkers of German intellectual history, so much so that he even has his own word in English—*Hegelian*. Hegel lived from 1770 to 1831 and was based in Berlin. Hegel's influence on German philosophy and on Western philosophy in general really cannot be overstated. According to the twentieth-century French philosopher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty: "all the great philosophical ideas of the past century—the philosophies of Marx and Nietzsche, phenomenology, German existentialism, and psychoanalysis—had their beginnings in Hegel."

One of Hegel's most important contributions to philosophy was his idea of the Dialectic. In the word dialectic, we can hear the word "dialogue." A dialogue is a conversation between two sides which moves in a certain direction, which progresses toward a goal. This was the crux of Hegel's conception of the dialectic. Two forces which competed with one another and which then resulted in a new force through this "dialogue" between the initial two forces.

Hegel saw history as dialectical. In his landmark work, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel emphasized triads, that is, groups of threes. Typically, there would be *two* forces on the existing state of things. Reaction and counter-reaction, we might say. These two forces would collide and bring about a new reality, or what Hegel might call a new *Zeitgeist* or world spirit. Hegel believed that every historical force would be met with an opposing historical force. These two forces would, we might say, collide, and then a new historical reality would set in. Hegel saw this historical dialectic as moving forward in nature, as *progressing*, as *improving* human society. But, along the way, there was going to be some upheaval and violence and turmoil as the two historical forces continued to crash against each other.

If we think about when Hegel lived, we can understand why he might have seen history this way. He was born in 1770 in Germany. So when the French Revolution broke out, he would have been a young man of nineteen. When Napoleon took control of France and invaded Prussian Germany in 1805 or so, Hegel would have been thirty-five. Then, when Napoleon was defeated at the Battle of Leipzig by the royalist armies of Russia, Prussia, Austria, and Great Britain, Hegel would have been forty-three years old. You really could not ask for a lifespan which witnessed a kind of pendulum swing of powers more than Hegel's endured. First, the French peasants reacted against the French royalty, resulting in the Republic of France. Then, conservative and radical Revolutionary parties of France fought it out, resulting in Napoleon. Napoleon seemed to have taken the "best of both worlds" from these warring groups. He was a man of the people, but he was also a monarch. Napoleon was defeated at the Battle of Leipzig by royalist armies. Yet, Europe did not revert and would not ever revert back to how it had been before 1789. It became a monarchy again, but now with the enlightened and egalitarian Napoleonic Code which Napoleon had instituted all over Europe. For Hegel, then, history seemed to be progressing. With each of these upheavals, a new *Zeitgeist* was established which was *better* than what had existed before.

Hegel once said that "the owl of Minerva flies at dusk." The owl of Minerva is a symbol for wisdom and clarity. For Hegel, the meaning of historical events could not be known until the dust had settled, until people had time to reflect, until the "sun was setting." If you analyze events during the course of the upheaval, you will not see them with the wise, all-knowing eyes of Minerva, who only flies in the evening.

We can apply Hegelianism to the story of the Exodus. Force A was the tyranny of the Pharaoh. The counteracting-force, Force B, was the drive of the Hebrew slaves and God for freedom. These forces, we might say, collided in the tenth plague and the parting of the Red Sea. This collision led to the new historical synthesis of the Hebrews as a free people.

Hegel would say that we cannot analyze the tenth plague on its own terms. We should view it through the wisdom of hindsight. Well, it has now been four thousand years since the tenth plague. I think we are probably ready to assume the posture of Minerva and decide whether this murder of presumably thousands of innocent Egyptians was "worth it."

Hegel's philosophy is, needless to say, highly optimistic. It suggests that what we may perceive in the moment as tragedy will in the end prove to be nothing less than progress toward human perfection. But Hegel's philosophy is also highly disturbing. It seems to support the notion that "the ends justify the means," that historical bloodbaths can be simply overlooked because, in the end, it will be for the best. According to James Hawes, author of the very anti-Prussian bestselling book, *The Shortest History of Germany*, Hegel's philosophy of the dialectic was aimed with Prussia in mind. Prussia was the power which would move the *Zeitgeist* forward. According to Hawes, Hegel's listeners, many of whom were students at the University of Berlin, now Humboldt University, where I myself once studied, were enthralled by Hegel's words. Can you blame them? He was talking about the great historical destiny of Prussia, *in the heart of Prussia*. Hawes writes that "Hegel's influence on German thought in the nineteenth century, and on thinkers until today, has led to immeasurable evil in the world." Why Hawes thinks this should not surprise us. When you have a military power like Prussia, which thinks it is justified in treating the world as its own personal battlefield to bring about the utopian *Zeitgeist* of a future epoch, obviously some "immeasurable evil" is going to be witnessed.

I'm not going to weigh in on where I stand on Hegel's dialectical philosophy of history purely as a philosophical doctrine. Honestly, to me, it seems like a bunch of bulls% @t. I am no

alone here. The other great German philosopher of this time, Arthur Schopenhauer, gave lectures at the University of Berlin quite literally down the hall from Hegel. Schopenhauer's lectures were much less popular and were poorly attended. Here is what Schopenhauer once said about Hegel's theory of the historical dialectic: "This is mindless, ignorant, nonsensical smearing, absolute philosophical garbage."

But the truth is that I must admit that I haven't sat down and read the *Phenomenology of Spirit* cover-to-cover. And if Hegel is generally agreed to be one of the greatest philosophers of Western civilization, far be it from me to mock him.

What I can say is that Hegel does make some important points here. First, I think he is right that we can't just react emotionally and empathetically to every instance of suffering. Sometimes, war and violence *are* necessary actions. You may not see the benefits right away, but perhaps later, with the wisdom of an owl at dusk, you will see them. This is not a controversial argument. All reasonable people would agree on this. You may remember, from episode seven, a story I told about my high school history teacher, who was the first to tell me that, for most of human history, humans did not marry for love. I remember as well that he also made another rather grim if insightful point during that year. He said that he doesn't like to talk about foreign policy and war with his students, because he is actually kind of an expert on this subject. He wouldn't be able to discuss foreign policy without probably alienating some of his students. Yes, he was also an arch-conservative, but let's leave that aside for now. He made this comment about his foreign policy expertise when the War in Iraq under George W. Bush was raging in the Middle East. Some of my fellow students had recently engaged in a harmless protest in front of our high school which could probably be called "cute" and "naïve" if anything, a kind of playacting of the Vietnam protests of the 1960s. Here is what my high school history teacher told our class about these protests: "While it may be nice to hold up signs in front of school and talk about ending a war, it is not so simple as that. There is a lot more to war than just whining about how war is evil and innocent people will be killed."

Sadly, he was right.

Second, I think Hegel was onto something with this idea that a great collision and upheaval needs to occur before real change can take place. In the parsha, we saw how God's efforts at negotiation and targeted attacks just were not working. The only thing which would move the Pharaoh was, we might say, a declaration of war, a revolution. The great and horrible cry which resounded through Egypt on the night of the tenth plague was, indeed, horrible. But it was this cry which also represented the *overturning* and *overcoming* of four centuries of slavery. Anything less than this horrible cry, the Torah seems to indicate, would not have allowed the Hebrews to become free people. Interestingly, the Torah says that the loud cry was one which had never been heard before and which never would be heard again. Never would be heard again. In other words, the cry needed to be *this loud and this terrible* so that God's horrible onslaught would never need to be repeated.

Here, I would like to dwell for a moment on revolutions. When I was eighteen, and graduating high school, I received a very important book. It was given to me by my close family friend, Richard Orodnenker, who is also a professor of humanities at Temple University. The book was *From Dawn to Decadence*, by the great historian Jacques Barzun. This book was perfect for me to begin reading as I began what would become a lifelong foray into the humanities. I remember one particular passage from the first pages of this book which left me feeling electrified to dig deep into the West's cultural past. Barzun said, quite boldly, that the word "revolution" gets tossed around a lot nowadays. We use "revolution" to describe pretty

much anything that represents a “big change” in life. Barzun wanted to explain that there are revolutions, and then there are *revolutions*. He wished to narrow the definition of revolution, so that it would only be applied to those cataclysmic historical events which *really were* revolutions.

Barzun writes, on the first page, “We have got into the habit of calling too many things revolutions. Given a new device or practice that changes our homely habits, we exclaim: ‘revolutionary!’ But revolutions change more than personal habits or a widespread practice. They give culture a new face.” Revolutions give culture a new face. According to Barzun, there have only been four true revolutions in the last five hundred years. The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. The Absolute Monarchies which sprung up in the seventeenth century. The French Revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. And the Russian Revolution of the twentieth century. That’s it. Just those four. Now, Barzun acknowledges that there were other events we *call* revolutions. But that these were just *aftershocks* of these four revolutions. So presumably, the Industrial Revolution would have been an aftershock of the French Revolution. The communist revolution in Cuba or China would have been aftershocks of the Russian Revolution—and so forth.

For Barzun, revolutions are generally not single events. The Absolutism of the seventeenth century wielded about by kings like Louis XIV of France was obviously not just a single event, but a process. It didn’t happen overnight. For Barzun, this is okay. For Barzun, revolutions are processes, not events.

And no, the American Revolution was not a real revolution. For Barzun, a revolution occurs when there is a vast transfer of power and property from one group to another. All four of Barzun’s revolutions meet these criteria. The American Revolution, according to Barzun, was not a war to create new rights or to transfer property, but rather to keep existing rights and to hold onto property.

I am not going to opine on whether Barzun would consider the Exodus to be a true revolution. But what I think Barzun would say is that revolutions are not to be taken lightly. Revolutions are cataclysmic changes in which the old way of doing things is replaced and a new order is created. All four of Barzun’s revolutions, Protestant, Absolutism, French, and Russian, did not come about through negotiations or ad-hoc measures. Or put another way, the first nine plagues would not have been sufficient to spark these revolutions. Each of these revolutions needed their own version of the *tenth plague*.

But now, before you take out your tri-colored flag and storm the Bastille, let’s take a closer look at the parsha of *Bo*. All over this parsha, and throughout the rest of the Torah, there are clues as to the great cost of this revolution. There is perennial question of whether it was *worth it*. After escaping Egypt, the Hebrews do not land in Israel a few days later, but rather must aimlessly wander in the desert for forty years. As we will see in future *parshot*, again and again, the Hebrews bitterly complain about how their lives had been better in Egypt, how this Exodus was a *terrible* idea.

It is easy to start a revolution. Anyone can start a revolution. It’s a lot harder to *finish* it.

Here, we return to Hegel. Hegel theorized the idea of the triad in history. Two forces come crash together and produce a third force or a new status quo. Yet, once this status quo settles in, it crashes up against another counterforce, and then there is a new status quo. And on and on, *ad infinitum*. In this sense, the revolution is never really “over.” In 1972, the premier of China, Zhou Enlai, was asked what the legacy of the French Revolution was historically. Enlai wisely answered: “It’s too early to say.”

If we look closely at the parsha of *Bo*, we see that the Torah and Zhou Enlai think along the same lines.

I remember once I was at a Shabbat dinner in Israel several years ago. The grandfather of the religious family where I was having the meal was known to be a great scholar of the Torah. He asked me and all of the other grandkids a vexing question. He asked: where did the Hebrews get all of the gold and diamonds and jewels to build the Golden Calf in the desert? Why did they have all of these riches in the middle of the desert? Hmm, I thought to myself. Great question. I had no f*cking clue why the Hebrews had all of this treasure. I thought they were just poor nomads. Well, the meal got served, and I don't think the grandpa ever answered the question. I figured the answer was something terribly cryptic, buried somewhere deep in the Talmud.

Actually, as it turns out, the answer is all over this week's *parsha* of *Bo*. The Torah repeats over and over why the Hebrews leave Egypt with gold and silver and jewels. *Because the Egyptians gave it to them upon their departure*. Yes, it really is that simple. The Hebrews asked their Egyptian neighbors for their gold, and the Egyptians gave it to them to take into the desert. A few months later or so, the Hebrews would then use this very same gold to build a golden calf. With this infamous golden calf, the Hebrews basically ensured the wrath of God and that they would never enter the Promised Land.

We can view this dynamic in Hegelian terms. When the Hebrews left Egypt, they left with gold and silver. The revolution was off to a fantastic start. They were richer than they had ever been since igniting this revolution and this Exodus. Yet, it was these same riches which actually *damned* the Hebrews just a few months later. It is often said that revolutions devour their own children. Nowhere is this more true than with the Hebrews and with this treasure. Indeed, just a few months later, God would literally force the Hebrews to consume the golden calf they built, to literally be killed off by the gold which once harbored so much promise, which once was so auspicious.

If I may, I would like to broaden Barzun's conception of revolutions for a moment into our own personal transformations in life. Now, if the American or the Industrial revolutions were not "true" revolutions, then far be it from me to depict personal growth in revolutionary terms. Nevertheless, as a symbol, I believe the concept of revolutions can be helpful as we try to effect change within ourselves.

There is an international bestseller with the title *The Power of Now*, by meditation guru Eckhart Tolle. If ever there were a book whose title gave away its main idea, it would be this one. The entire book is devoted to the importance and beauty and wisdom of living in the "now," of living in the moment, of not worrying about the future or dwelling on the past. Sounds good, right? Sounds easy, too. But it is not so easy for us to live in the moment. I would even say that for us to transform ourselves such that we live in the now is nothing less than a revolution within ourselves. In fact, it is such a revolution that I don't even know if it's a good idea for us to accomplish, at least not right away.

Eckhart Tolle is also aware of the colossal undertaking of the mission to live in the moment. According to Tolle, thinking and worrying and fearing and contemplating are all utterly opposed to living in the now. Over and over again, Tolle compares thinking to an addiction. An addiction of which we are not even aware. And these are, of course, the worst kind of addictions. We derive comfort in *thinking*, we enjoy *thinking*, we feel safe in *thinking*. We are not going to give it up so easily. In episode nine, I talked about how the one time I really dwelt in the moment, it was actually rather boring, even empty. I said that the moment actually kind of sucks.

Who wants to live in the moment when you can live with your ego which fills your life with adventure, drama, scandal, romance, heartbreak, ecstasy, terror?

I made this statement half-ironically, as I do with many statements on *The Schrift*. Because I myself am not sure if I or if anyone is really *ready* for the revolution of living in the moment. If you think the tenth plague was earth-shattering, wait until you experience this change.

Eckhart Tolle is not a stupid man. He has the brilliant insight that we continually *make the choice* to deny ourselves the moment rather than to embrace it. We continue to *feed* our addiction to thinking. We are just not ready, for whatever reason, to really let go of our egos. In *The Power of Now*, Tolle repeatedly eggs his readers on. He says, over and over, *have you truly had enough?* He seems to want to almost incite us to undergo a revolution within ourselves, to finally say “enough!” to excessive thinking and to the ego.

The truth is that we all have addictions which we like to think of, perhaps, as hobbies, or as self-improvement activities, or as just “normal” behavior. Yet, deep down, we know they are unhealthy, we know they are addictions. But even though we know this, we continue on with them. We haven’t had enough yet. We negotiate with them, we apply plagues one through nine to them, but we always return to our dark master.

So now, dear listeners of *The Schrift*, I would like to egg you on a bit. What are you addicted to? What would you like to overcome? Finally, *have you really had enough* of whatever this is? Or would you like to continue to feed your dark master. Because somewhere in our psyche, the tenth plague is waiting for us, ready at our call to be released, ready for the revolution within ourselves. It is ready for the revolution, should we call on it. Why are you hesitant to ignite the tenth plague within yourself? It may, indeed, be merely a gradual change with you, an incremental change, like Barzun’s conception of revolutions. Perhaps you are not yet ready because, like Hegel wrote, you may not know what will come after this collision. The owl of Minerva is still asleep. Or perhaps, you’re just not ready yet. You may be like the Pharaoh, promising to make changes, and then going back on those promises. Toying with granting freedom to the Hebrews, but never really intending it in his heart. The Pharaoh needed the tenth plague to realize that he had endured enough. So now you must decide: have you really had *enough*? Have you really had enough? But before you pose this question to yourself, be warned. If you answer in the affirmative, if you answer “Yes,” please know that shortly thereafter, you’re going to scream.