

## Episode 45

### Ki Tavo

The film *Borat* is a mockumentary comedy film starring the British-Jewish actor, Sacha Baron Cohen. The protagonist of the film is Borat, a man from Kazakhstan who comes to America to make a movie. Borat's job is basically to interact with Americans and capture their reactions on film. Sasha Baron Cohen does an incredible job pretending to be this clueless Kazakhstani journalist. Because he is in the guise of a foreigner, Sasha Baron Cohen, as Borat, can elicit all kinds of revealing information from Americans.

In one of the most legendary scenes, Borat goes to a rodeo in one of America's "red states." He is dressed like a cowboy and his button-down shirt is in the style of an American flag. He is getting ready to sing the Kazakh National Anthem, and beforehand he gives a speech to the crowd. The movie is filmed in 2006, and so here Borat references America's War in Iraq.

[play clip]

What this scene shows is how people, when they are in a crowd, are often ready to cheer statements which they may not actually believe. Borat says, for example, "We support your war of terror." The crowd cheers, although actually they are being insulted. By referring to it as a war *of* terror rather than a war *on* terror, Borat, a.k.a. Sasha Baron Cohen, is flipping the script and calling the Americans the terrorists. A few moments later, Borat says: "May George Bush drink the blood of every man, woman, and child of Iraq." Again, the crowd passionately cheers. It is doubtful, however, that if you sat down these Americans and asked them if they really wanted George Bush to drink the blood of Iraqi children, they would respond in the affirmative. Maybe a few of them would, but most would not, or would at least be confused by the very question. Yet, in this scene, Sasha Baron Cohen shows how, when one is in a crowd of one's fellow countrymen, one becomes ready to cheer on all sorts of statements which one does not really believe.

While this is merely a funny scene in a mockumentary, it has frightening implications. Baron Cohen shows that, when you combine nationalism or jingoism with crowd-thinking or crowd mentality, civilized people can quickly turn into barbarians.

Whether we should feel proud to be a part of a particular nation or ethnic group is a complicated question. I have seen Americans chant the well-known cry, "U-S-A" with tears in their eyes. I have also seen Americans chant this with ironic, mocking grins.

In fact, you can usually tell how nationalistic and jingoistic a country will be by how many times nationalism has come back to bite them in the ass. For this reason, nationalism has become particularly *passé* in Western European countries. Why should this be? It is because nationalism and jingoism and crowd-thinking led Central and Western Europe through Dante's seven circles of hell during the early twentieth-century. Today, Europeans tend to turn their nose up when they see other countries or even their own people behaving like jingoistic hooligans. But this is only because they have seen this movie before. They themselves were these jingoistic hooligans a little over one-hundred years ago. The creation of the European Union has established a harmony and goodwill between Central and Western European countries which has been a true blessing on the world stage.

But, of course, it was not always this way. In the beginning of the twentieth-century, France and Germany were as bitter and mistrustful of enemies as America is today with Iran. Today, perhaps a German will admit that the cheese is better in France, and a Frenchman will say that the Germans have better cars. But, at least so far as I can gather, neither would ever say

that France is a superior country to Germany or that a French person is a superior being to a German. Yet, when World War I or the Great War broke out in 1914, these beliefs in nationalistic superiority would have been pervasive.

This way of thinking could not just be found in propaganda posters or in war songs. It was often embedded in the psyche of the citizens of these countries. In 1947, Thomas Mann would publish his novel *Doktor Faustus*, written during the Second World War. The epic novel takes readers through the first half of twentieth century German history by following the lives of the composer Adrian Leverkühn and his best friend, the narrator, Serenus Zeitblom. When they are in high school, they get into a group debate with other Germans about nationalistic differences and the superiority of Germans. What is particularly revealing about this debate is that it occurs before even the First World War and in an innocuous, harmless setting, in which nothing is at stake.

The young men are theology students in the German city of Halle. While wandering through the Thüringer Forest, they get into a philosophical discussion on subjects such as capitalism, creativity, and the mission of the German youth. In their discussion, they use all kinds of fancy intellectual jargon. One student, named Deutschlin, is particularly nationalistic, believing in the promise of the next generation of Germans. Deutschlin believes that youth—particularly German youth—have the power to change the status quo. He says: “To be young means to be primordial, to have remained close to the wellspring of life, means being able to rise up and shake off the fetters of an outmoded civilization, to dare what others lack the vital courage to do.”

Deutschlin continues to go on and on like this. Eventually, another student, named von Teutleben, chimes in and says: “What I’d like to know is whether the youth of other nations lie in the straw like this and torment themselves with problems and contradictions.”

Deutschlin responds by saying: “Hardly. For them everything is intellectually much easier and dozier.”

Another student answers: “The Russian revolutionary youth is an exception. There you’ll find vigorous intellectual discussions and a hell of a lot of dialectical tension.”

Deutschlin responds: “The Russians have depth, but no form. The western European countries have form, but no depth. Only we Germans have both together.”

What you’ll notice about this conversation is how effortlessly and naturally Deutschlin makes distinctions between people of different countries, while proclaiming his own country to be the best.

In Europe today, this is now, for the most part a lost world. Europeans realized, after the apocalypse of not just one world war but two, that nationalism was a fool’s game. It was an exercise in idiocy. We are all just Europeans, they concluded. The differences between us, if there are any, are so miniscule that they’re not even worth discussing—let alone going to war over.

But you can see how, in countries which didn’t go through two world wars because of nationalism, they think much the way Europe did one-hundred plus years ago.

Now, here you might be thinking: hold on. I’ve met a proud Italian, a proud Englishman, a proud Spaniard. These countries still retain some nationalistic pride, but it is far less obnoxious, imperialistic, or obsessive than it was, say, in 1900. But the least nationalistic country in Europe if not the world is, unsurprisingly, Germany. The reasons for this should be obvious. Whereas most countries lost one world war due to nationalism, Germany lost two. And whereas Germany may have been unfairly blamed for the First World War, no one had any doubts about

Germany's boundless guilt for the second. And this time, Germany also had the genocide of millions of people on its bloody hands.

In Germany today, nationalism is not only quiet—it is taboo. The idea of flying a German flag in front of their homes is unthinkable to most Germans. Germany is the best country in the world is a sentence which does not cross many lips here. Much has changed since Deutschlin's impromptu speech to his friends in the Thüringer forest. But it is not just that Germans put on appearances that they aren't nationalistic and then, behind closed doors, pull out the black-gold-and red flag and sing hymns composed by Martin Luther. They genuinely do not understand nationalism; they think it's a bit senseless. "Why should one be proud for one's country?" they think. They reason: "You didn't do anything to become a citizen of whatever country you're a citizen of. You were just born that way. It's not something to take pride in because it has nothing do with you or your own personal accomplishments."

It's a mature outlook, to be sure. But let's remember that it's an outlook Germany had to learn the hard way.

In the parsha this week, Ki Tavo, Moshe continues his final speech to the Israelites. Yet, this time, the Israelites themselves get to speak a bit. And when I say "a bit," I really mean it. Their only response is to cry "Amen" to everything Moses says. The scene is reminiscent of a general leading his troops into war, which, in fact, is what Moses is doing. We have all witnessed these scenes in movies, where the general cries out some phrase to which the only response is "yes" or "amen" or "ja!" So far, so good. Moses is just getting his troops motivated before leading them into the promised land.

But the words Moses uses to get his people riled up are a bit strange. He does not say things like: "Are we God's chosen people?" or "Are we going to go kick some ass?" or "Are we ready to meet the destiny of our people?" No. Instead, he lists off idiosyncratic laws. "Cursed is he who misdirects a blind person on his way." Amen! "Cursed is he who accepts a bribe in the case of the murder of an innocent person." Amen! "Cursed is he who lies down with his mother-in-law!" Amen! "Cursed is he who does not follow these teachings." Amen!

Okay, the last one was pretty inspirational, but the others are rather unmotivating.

But just as Moshe has his people agreeing with everything he says, totally under his control, ready to follow him to the end of the earth, he changes his tone. At this point, most generals and leaders would happily send their people into battle, when they are feeling drunk with nationalist passion, invincible through the hysteria of the crowd.

But rather than send his troops into battle, feeling like they are indestructible, Moshe decides to take them down a notch. Actually, many notches. Moshe will then embark on one of the most dispiriting, gloomy, demoralizing speeches. The speech is awfully similar to the one Moses gives in the Parsha of *Behukotai*, which I discussed in Episode 29. Moses spends a bit of time telling the Hebrews all of the good things which will happen to them if they follow God's laws. But then, Moses explains the terrible things which will befall them if they disobey God's laws. The potential blessings Moses lists are outweighed by the potential curses by a ratio of about three to one. In this second speech, now at the end of the Torah, the ratio of curses to blessings is now about five to one.

Let me give you some excerpts from this speech so you have an idea of what Moses is saying to his people.

If you do not obey God and faithfully follow all of his commandments ... cursed shall you be in the city and cursed shall you be in the country; God will strike you with the Egyptian inflammation, with hemorrhoids, boil-scars, and itch, from which you shall never recover; The

life you face shall be precarious; you shall be in terror, night and day, with no assurance of survival; God will let loose against you calamity, panic, and frustration, in all the enterprises you undertake.

Just a few minutes before, the Israelites were boisterously yelling “Amen!” They were proud young Hebrews, ready for battle. But now, Moses has silenced the crowd. The Hebrews are now shivering with terror rather than feeling proud and inspired.

Why does Moses do this? Why does Moses insist on sapping the spirit out of his people just before sending them into battle? Especially when they had just been so fervent and passionate? Put simply, no general, no football coach, no motivational speaker, would ever address his people this way.

Interestingly, just after concluding this speech, Moses will begin his next speech to the Hebrews by saying: “You saw all that God did before your very eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to his whole country: the amazing signs and wonders which he did to them. But it was not until today that God gave you *a mind to understand, eyes to see, ears to hear.*”

Let’s recap for a moment. First, Moses stirs up the crowd, but does so with some rather strange rallying cries: cursed is he who lies with his sister, cursed is he who lies with an animal, cursed is he who misdirects a blind person on his way, and so forth. Then, at the height of excitement, Moses turns the speech against the Hebrews, shaking them and demoralizing them. Finally, after telling the Hebrews that they must do exactly what I say or else they will be forever cursed, Moses tells them that today they have been given *a mind to understand, eyes to see, and ears to hear.*

What Moses is trying to communicate to them is, I think: wake up. Wake up. Do you see how I was able to take you on a rollercoaster of emotions just by the way in which I spoke to you? Are you only affirming what I say because you are caught up in the emotions of the crowd and because you belong to this specific nation?

Moses, in short, wants the Hebrews to think—to think for themselves. Because he, on the verge of death, will no longer be able to “think” for them. This does not mean that they should lose their nationalist pride in being Hebrews or that they shouldn’t follow the commandments. Quite the contrary. Moses wishes to say: be proud in your nation thoughtfully, skeptically, questioningly. Follow the commandments but not because I am forcing you to but because you have used your mind to understand them.

I recently saw the 2012 film *Hannah Arendt*. Hannah Arendt is considered to be one of the most important philosophical thinkers of the twentieth-century. She was born in East Prussia in 1906. She finished high school in Berlin. For university, she studied with the legendary philosophers Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers. With Heidegger, she would have a brief love affair while studying at his university in Freiburg.

When the Nazis came to power in 1933, Arendt, being Jewish, was briefly put in a concentration camp. When she was released, she fled Germany and eventually landed in the United States where she would write her most important philosophical treatises.

The 2012 film recounts Arendt’s experience covering the Adolf Eichmann trial in Jerusalem in 1961. Eichmann was the Nazi in charge of operating the trains which carried millions of Jews to their deaths in the gas chambers. Mossad was able to hunt him down in Argentina and bring him to court in Jerusalem. At his trial, Eichmann made the classic Nazi defense that he was just following orders. Eichmann was pronounced guilty and hanged Israel’s only-ever execution.

Arendt was retained by *The New Yorker* to write a series of articles on her coverage of the trial. What emerged from these articles was her sensational book *The Banality of Evil*. As Arendt watched Eichmann in court, she was amazed by how ordinary he was. He was just, according to Arendt, “a bureaucrat.” He didn’t *look* like the monstrous mass-murderer that he was. Arendt concluded that what made Eichmann such a terrifying figure was that he was capable of committing such horrific, abominable deeds without even thinking about it or questioning it.

Arendt wrote: “For when I speak of the banality of evil, I do so only on the strictly factual level, pointing to a phenomenon which stared one in the face at the trial. Eichmann was not Iago and not Macbeth, and nothing would have been farther from his mind than to determine with Richard III ‘to prove a villain.’ Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all... He merely, to put the matter colloquially, never realized what he was doing.”

As you might imagine, Arendt’s articles in *The New Yorker* unleashed an outrage among the Jewish community, both in America and in Israel. Arendt received thousands of letters of hate mail. She received death threats. Many of her closest Jewish friends disowned her.

First, it was obvious to them all that Eichmann was not just a bureaucrat. He *was* evil. He took joy in murdering as many Jews as he could. He knew exactly what he was doing and relished it. They viewed Arendt as *excusing* Eichmann when she should have been condemning him.

Second, they viewed Arendt’s articles as treasonous. How could she turn the Holocaust into a philosophical discussion? Why did she not write an article expressing her love of the Jewish people and her hatred of all those who try to harm them, exterminate them? One Jewish woman wrote to Arendt, for example, that she “hoped the ghosts of our six million martyrs would haunt your bed at night.”

Arendt was a contrarian. She loved to be skeptical, to question all norms. In short, as a philosopher, she liked to think—and to make others think. After seeing this film, I came to a couple of conclusions as to why Arendt wrote *The Banality of Evil*. She was looking beyond Eichmann himself. She didn’t care about figuring out to what extent Eichmann was a psychopath. She didn’t want to just write another of thousands of books and articles talking about how evil and terrible the Nazis were.

What Arendt realized is that condemnation is only worth something if thought goes into it first. If you condemn merely because you feel pressure to do so or because everyone else is doing it as a kind of knee-jerk reaction, then your words become meaningless. Anyone can snarl, decry, insult, denounce. And because anyone can do it, it rather quickly loses its potency. One thing that can’t be faked, however, is an argument which grapples with nuances, contradictions, and subtle provocations.

Arendt saw more *value* in depicting Eichmann as an automatized bureaucrat than as a malicious villain. Why? Because Arendt realized that, if we depict Eichmann as a malicious villain, we can *outsource* this evil. We can say: he is an anomaly; he is a deviant; we will never see the likes of him again for another few hundred years. How much more valuable would it be to think that Eichmanns are everywhere in society, that, if we are not careful, we might find ourselves sharing a drink with an Eichmann or even married to one. That, if we are not careful, a piece of Eichmann may emerge within ourselves.

Arendt accused Eichmann of not thinking. And it is not hard to see the provocative implications of this argument. She was not so subtly hinting to her fellow Jews that they

themselves must *think*. And what she witnessed at the Eichmann trial was a disappointing lack of thought among her fellow Jews. Eichmann was a monster. But this accusation is only worth something if it comes through independent thought—not automatized knee-jerk reactions. Otherwise, the accusation turns back on the accuser. Arendt wanted to say: if we look at Eichmann and can't even entertain the thought that he might be anything other than a repulsive, soulless barbarian, then what does that say about ourselves? What do we call those people who are only capable of thinking one thing, who cannot handle counterarguments, who form judgments without first thinking them through—we call them robots, we call them soulless, we call them barbarians. And Arendt wanted to make sure that the Jews—or anyone—ever came close to thinking—or not-thinking—this way. This is why she had to depict Eichmann as a motiveless bureaucrat, even though he really was a monster.

Far too often, nations believe they are “the best” unconditionally. There is theoretically nothing wrong with having pride in your nation, but this pride is only worth something if you approach it with doubt and skepticism rather than blind, unthinking jingoism. The Jews are often taught that they are the “chosen people.” That God chose the Jews above all other nations. But actually, it is a lot more complicated than that. If you read the Torah this week, it states that we are God's treasured people—not chosen. It then says that, *if—if*—we follow God's commandments, He will raise us above the other nations. This “if” clause sets up a dynamic in which the Jews could go from being God's favorite to his least favorite nation in a matter of seconds—because the extent to which we follow the commandments is, of course, always in flux. This “if” clause forces us to do what Moses encourages: to be constantly questioning our actions, to be constantly wondering *if* we are the best nation—and not to just conclude we are the best as if it were a foregone decision.

Yoga is one of the few physical activities—perhaps we can call it a sport—which involves no competition. There are no yoga contests, no yoga Olympics, no yoga awards. You can't ever be the best yogi; you can never “win” at yoga. Yoga, instead, involves a constant questioning of ourselves and a continually developing relationship with ourselves. When you practice yoga, it is just you and your mat—the only person you compete with is, in fact, yourself. And the only way you can become satisfied is by seeing improvement in yourself—not by comparing yourself with others.

This is the attitude we should have when we view ourselves as part of nations. That we love our nation, not because it is the best or it is the chosen nation, but because it is ours—it is the best nation for us. When we view ourselves as part of a nation, we should see ourselves on the yoga mat—wondering how we can improve posture, trying to challenge ourselves within our own limitations, viewing ourselves not as chosen, but as treasured.