

Episode 49 Veh Zot Ha-Beracha

Many years ago, when I was still an undergraduate student, I did what many American college students do—I studied abroad. I studied abroad for a semester in the South of France. I can recall that on the flight to France, in the last hour as the plane descended onto Marseille, I had my headphones in and I was listening to the band Explosions in the Sky. Explosions in the Sky was, at least in my opinion, one of the, for lack of a better word, hippest bands of that era. They were from the legendary music town of Austin, Texas, and they were the leaders of a relatively new movement in pop music known as “post-rock.” I picked up guitar when I was about fourteen, and I spent my teenage years getting to know the legendary classic rock bands of the sixties and seventies—Led Zeppelin, Bob Dylan, Pink Floyd, the Who, and, of course, the Beatles. I also got to know many of the “descendants” of these acts—nineties alternative bands like Oasis, Blur, Weezer, and Radiohead, and some of the mainstream indie groups from the early two-thousands—performers like the Strokes, Elliott Smith, Death Cab for Cutie, and the Shins.

As a sophomore in college, though, I became a DJ for my university’s radio station. My job was to track down indie bands which were largely unknown to the public. The more obscure the band was, the more accolades I would receive from my fellow college radio DJs if I played its album on the air. Every week, on my radio show, which I called *Cogito Ergo Fun*, I played dozens of relatively unknown bands and artists. This experience drastically expanded my list of “favorite bands” and I discovered a wealth of new music across an array of sub-genres of pop. Admittedly, most of the bands I found were rubbish which were perhaps only valuable because of how ridiculously obscure they were. But amid this pile of mediocrity, I occasionally found brilliance.

Anyway, I arrived in Aix-en-Provence with all of the other American study abroad kids. After all of the typical orientation stuff and the icebreakers and the getting lost in the medieval alleyways, I started to settle in. And during my medieval art history class, I found myself sitting next to Josh. I asked Josh where he was from, and he answered “Portland.” My ears pricked up. Portland was the capital of indie music at that time—even more so than Austin. Portland was to indie rock what, say, New York City is to musicals.

After class, I asked him about the indie scene in Portland, and we struck up a conversation about music. As it turned out, Josh knew all of the bands I rattled off. He even knew some of them personally, as in, he used to hang out with them in Portland. If I had seen the film *Casablanca*, which, by that age, I hadn’t yet, I would have said: “Josh, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.”

But, in fact, there was some tension between us. Because Josh seemed to have already graduated from the phase which I was currently in musically. Whereas I was ready to esteem a band if the music pleased me and if the band was undiscovered, Josh had already developed the eye of a sharp critic. The bands that I worshiped, bands like Oasis, Radiohead, and Elliott Smith, Josh found laughably terrible. He described Radiohead as “dated,” Oasis as “plagiarizers,” and Elliott Smith as “whiney.” Most of the music I recommended to him he immediately dismissed with a wave of the hand or a sardonic smile. I recall one time making him a mix-CD of some of my favorite indie tunes, certain that he would love each one. In fact, he reported to me a few days later the results. In the entire mix, the only song he liked was a track from Brian Eno, largely because it reminded him of a time where he was coming down from a high.

It was a bit frustrating, to say the least. So, what kind of music did Josh like? That was a bit harder to discern. He once told me that he liked music where instruments sounded like they were “supposed” to sound, or something like that. When I asked him what he meant by this, he gave me a counter-example. He said that the band the Postal Service represented for him the most nauseating, horrific music imaginable. The Postal Service was a band which used no instruments, just electronic drum beats, computerized samples, and synthesizers. I started to protest that I actually kind of liked the Postal Service, but, when I caught sight of Josh’s facial expression, I quickly disavowed the argument.

What did Josh mean by music where the instruments sound like actual instruments? I pressed him on this. He said that his favorite artist was Otis Redding because there the music actually sounded like music. I had no idea what he was talking about, nor did I know who Otis Redding was. I listened to a few of his songs on my own and just couldn’t get into it. Josh, however, made me a mix CD as well, and some of the singers and bands on there I soon came to greatly enjoy. These were musicians like Leonard Cohen, Bert Jansch, and John Fahey.

One day, Josh and I were on an excursion with our art history class in the town of Avignon. Avignon is most famous for serving as the official home of the pope in the thirteenth century. The pope, dissatisfied with Rome for a variety of reasons, decided to move the entire papacy to Avignon. Josh and I were not too fond of most of the other study abroad students, largely because we couldn’t talk about music with them. We went off on our own and found a quiet café to have a coffee.

I had a question for him. It was admittedly a kind of lame question, but I decided to ask it anyway. What the hell, I figured.

“Hey, Josh,” I asked. “What’s your favorite song?”

“My favorite song? What kind of question is that?” he answered.

Nevertheless, I persisted. I would get this out of him. I had no idea what he was going to say, but I nevertheless had rather high expectations. I was expecting something really obscure, enigmatic, and scandalous. I half-expected him to pull out some folk tune from the 1930s recorded on the back of a pick-up truck or maybe some solo sitar piece from Ravi Shankar’s grandfather or something.

Josh took a sip of coffee and looked me in the eye.

“I’m Waiting for the Man,” he answered.

“I’m Waiting for the Man?” I replied. “From the Velvet Underground?”

“Yeah,” Josh said. I may have detected a bit of shame in his eyes, but I can’t be sure.

“That’s it?” I asked. “That’s it? ‘I’m Waiting for the Man’?”

“Yep,” Josh said, this time entirely without shame.

I was a bit puzzled. The song “I’m Waiting for the Man” is the second track on the Velvet Underground’s 1967 debut album, *The Velvet Underground & Nico*. I had heard this song dozens if not hundreds of times. And I always liked it and enjoyed it. But I never found anything particularly special or noteworthy about it. It was just a good song.

I thought to myself for a moment and then I returned my attention to Josh.

“But,” I said, “‘I’m Waiting for the Man’ is just a normal song. There’s nothing that special about it.”

Josh smiled to himself and took a sip of coffee. “That’s the point,” he said. “It’s just a regular rock-and-roll song. But it’s also somehow more than that.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he said. “There’s just something about it that’s more than what it is.”

I sat back in my chair. Josh was unusually inarticulate at this moment. Normally he could give precise, exacting reasons why he liked or disliked a song. But in this case, even he seemed a bit unsure and baffled.

I walked away from the conversation unconvinced. “I’m Waiting for the Man” was a good song, but it shouldn’t be anyone’s *favorite* song, I reasoned. It was just too ordinary.

To Josh’s credit, “I’m Waiting for the Man” has gotten many accolades over the years. In various reviews, it has been described as “tough garage rock,” a “proto-punk classic,” and one of the “all-time classic rock songs.” It has been covered by dozens of other musicians. Finally, Rolling Stone named it number eighty-one on its list of “five hundred greatest songs of all time.” Although, Josh would probably see the last accolade as more of a degradation than an achievement.

What exactly did Josh mean when he said that “I’m Waiting for the Man” was both just a regular rock-and-roll song and also so much more? What exactly was Josh getting at?

To answer this question, we need to go back, all the way back to Episode 0 of this podcast, where everything both began—and now, ends. In Episode 0, I talked about a literary movement in Germany known as *Frühromantik* or Early Romanticism. The movement was based in the university town of Jena, tucked safely away in East Germany. It was active from 1799 to 1804 and was led by wild, idealistic, passionate twenty-somethings. The leader of the movement was Friedrich Schlegel who would later marry the daughter of Moses Mendelssohn, Dorothea, born Brendl, who was just as wild and revolutionary as her husband.

The early Romantics were, perhaps, almost like *theologians* for art. Whereas your typical theologian will encounter the divine and the infinite through God, the early romantics aimed to discover this same totality and unendingness in literature, specifically in poetry. The early Romantics engaged in all kinds of thought experiments to see how poetry might transcend its limitations and go beyond itself. Literature, and poetry, at first glance do not seem to be infinite. After all, literature and poetry are, at the end of the day, just mere words on a page—rather ordinary and lifeless. I dealt with this failure of art in last week’s lecture, episode 48, in which I showed how art is, at its core, a game of deception. In order to capture the True Idea, art must be *artificial* and sly.

Friedrich Schlegel and the early Romantics theorized that, nevertheless, the limitations of Art could be overcome. Art could become infinite through the fragment. Schlegel wrote that “A fragment, like a small work of art, has to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world and complete in itself, like a hedgehog.” The hedgehog is an animal which is always both complete and incomplete simultaneously. When a hedgehog feels threatened, it points its spines outward to protect herself. But when the hedgehog feels relaxed, she lays down her spines and becomes soft and cuddly. As I stated in episode 0, “a hedgehog is always in a state of flux, always a fragment of her whole self.” Schlegel also wrote, in the famous Fragment 116, that romantic poetry “should always be in a state of becoming and never be perfected.” Once again, Schlegel gives us a provocative paradox. The complete, the total, the perfect exists in that which is unfinished, that which ends abruptly, that which is hedgehog-like.

Art which is fragmentary is finished because it is never really finished. It is always *on the way* to being finished, and this state of being eternally “on the way” is what allows Schlegel’s idea of poetry to be infinite. In the first Schrift episode, I compared Schlegel’s theory to Moshe’s death just before the gates of Jericho. I said that, because Moshe never arrives in Israel, he somehow becomes more *timeless* than if he had made it through the gates. Moshe’s slightly too-early death allows us to visualize him as always being *on the way* to Israel, and Moshe’s

eternally being “on the way” makes him hedgehog-like in our minds—never fully there, always almost there, always there and not there, and thus, far more expansive and never-ending than if he had entered Jericho with Joshua rather than died on Mount Nivo in the plains of Moab.

Yet, there is a problem with Schlegel’s theory as we hitherto have understood it. Just because something is infinite, doesn’t mean that it is divine, transcendent, or even worth knowing about. I could write the symbol for infinity down on a piece of paper—is that little symbol therefore holy and divine? No, of course not. It’s just the number eight turned ninety degrees. I could say that time and space are infinite and unending. Few would dispute this claim, but does that mean we should bow down to space and time? Clearly not. I could tell you that the number of points between zero and one is infinite. I could tell you that, if you want, you can always find another number between zero and one which no one has stumbled upon yet such that the numbers between zero and one are always in a state of becoming. Is a computer which pumps out evermore digits between zero and one transcendental art or the journeys of the holy Moshe? Hardly.

What is missing thus far from Schlegel’s theory and what I *did not* discuss in the Schrift’s opening episode is *what happens* within the space of incompleteness. What occurs within the empty space of the fragment where a conclusion should be? What occurs is what Schlegel would term *Witz*.

Witz. What is *Witz*? This little word, *Witz*, is quite important. Before I can tell you what *Witz* means, let’s take a moment to think about this little word. In modern German, *Witz* means “joke.” In this sense, it is connected to the English word *wit* or *witty*, two words which are associated with humor. But as English-speakers know, *wit* is far more than just humor. *Witty* can also mean clever, intelligent, and sharp. In English, *witty* is also associated with the senses, as in, “he has his wits about him”—he’s perceptive and keen. *Witz* in German has the same resonance. *Witz* is etymologically connected with the word for knowledge, *Wissen*, and even the word for science, *Wissenschaft*. You hopefully hear the *Witz* in *Wissen*.

How did *Witz* come to mean joke over the centuries? My theory is that, when we hear a joke, and we laugh, a kind of “ah-ha!” moment occurs just after the punch line. After the punch line, our brain momentarily awakens from its confusion, and knowledge—*Wissen*—pours in. Arguably, in English, the connection between *wit* as humor and *wit* as sophistication exists for the same reason. Humor occurs when there is a kind of “opening up” in the mind to a flash of insight.

For the fragment to contain the infinite, it was not enough for it just to be incomplete. Rather, for Schlegel and the early Romantics, a little flash of *Witz* must occur when the poem suddenly breaks off. The fragment creates a kind of distended space in which the poem, for a moment, can go beyond itself, transcend itself. It is at this moment in which *Witz* falls in. The Romantics even went so far as to call this moment *Blitz-Witz*: lightning *Witz*. *Witz* is just a little word, but, for the early Romantics, it was powerful, it was nuclear. Here, I will quote from the French theorists Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, whose book *The Literary Absolute* is perhaps the most essential work for understanding the theories of Schlegel and company. They write: “*Witz* is knowledge that is other; it is knowledge that is other than the knowledge of analytic. It is knowledge that knows itself even as it knows what it knows ... *Witz* is an immediate, absolute knowing-seeing ... it gathers, concentrates, and brings to a climax the metaphysics of the Idea.”

Witz is as absolute as it is evanescent. It comes and goes within an instant. It is *Blitz-Witz*. Just like the way the punch-line of a joke has a near-instantaneous life before it becomes

ungraspable and lifeless once more, the *Witz* is equally ephemeral. It cannot be pinned down, held fast, marveled at. It is eternally in motion, just like the fragment. Schlegel said that, the moment you wish to *have* *Witz*, the *Witz* dies—it becomes *Witzelei*, a forced, artificial *Witz*. It is like trying to tell a joke when everyone already knows the punch line.

The Kabbalists of the thirteenth century knew nothing of Friedrich Schlegel and the German Romantics. How could they? They were, after all, writing about six hundred years earlier. Yet, the Kabbalists had a conception of the Torah which may as well, too, be called *Witz*.

In episode 48, I discussed how Kabbalah views the Torah not as *just* literature. The letters of the Torah, as they are currently arranged, tell stories and give us laws which are accessible to the human mind. But the letters can also be rearranged to reveal truths about the mysteries of the universe, many of which are not even comprehensible within our capacities. In short, based on last week's analysis, it is not the *content* of the Torah, but the *form* of the Torah, which is divine and otherworldly. But in Kabbalah, the *content* of the Torah, too, is just as penetrating. The Torah can be read horizontally, in which the tapestry of letters themselves is what comprises the Torah's divinity. But the Torah can also be read vertically, in which each story, each sentence, and each individual word and even letter unveils greater and greater meaning.

Kabbalah compares the reading of the Torah to a nut and its outer shell. The Book of the Zohar is the foundational work of the Kabbalah, written down by Moses de León in Spain in the thirteenth century. De León ascribed the work to Shimon bar Yochai, known as the Rashbi. The Rashbi is said to have spoken with the Prophet Elijah while hiding in a cave outside Jerusalem following the destruction of the Second Temple in the year seventy. The Zohar teaches that every word of the Torah is believed to have an outer meaning which can then be opened up to reveal deeper layers. The innermost core of the "nut" is known as the ultimate mystery—the *Sod*. Yet this deepest of meaning, this *Sod*, this mystery, is not always accessible. It does not always present itself to the reader.

The Book of the Zohar compares the Torah to a woman who is loved by a man. The woman has hid herself in a chamber of her palace. Out of affection for her lover, she allows him into this castle where his eyes dart all around. The man's eyes are searching the palace. For just a moment, the woman opens the door to her hidden chamber a crack. The man peers inside and glimpses his beloved's face for an instant, and then the door shuts. As the Book of the Zohar comments: "The Torah lets a word emerge from its shrine; it appears for a moment and then immediately conceals itself once more."

Now, I ask you, dear Schrift listeners: is this not the same thing which is going on in Schlegel's concept of the lightning *Witz*? Schlegel theorized that *Witz* occurs when absolute knowledge sparks up from the page of the fragment, as the fragment, like the hedgehog, interrupts itself and completes itself in the same instant. *Witz*, like the hidden mystery of the Torah, comes to us in a lightning flash before disappearing and concealing itself once more. For a moment, we glimpse the beloved through a crack in the door, and then she suddenly retreats.

In Episode 0, I said that Moshe, by not entering the land of Israel, exists in an eternal state of becoming, in which he is always *on the way* to Israel, in which he is always in restless motion. But *is* he always on the way to Israel. The immediate answer to this question is, in fact, "no." The Torah is *not* a fragment and it does have a beginning, middle, and end. Moshe *dies* just before reaching the gates of Jericho. His story ends. When I said, in episode 0, that Moshe was always becoming and overcoming himself, I was not being entirely forthright. This was, in fact, more of a clever ruse to get folks interested in my once-nascent podcast. Moses dies, his story ends—where is the becoming? Where is the eternal?

In this last parsha of the Torah, veh-zot ha-beracha, we witness the death of Moses. Moses ascends Nivo, and there he dies. Or does he? The Torah states that, when Moses dies, his eyes had not dimmed, and his vigor had not diminished. According to dozens of Torah scholars, including Rashi and Maimonides, when Moses dies, he did not decompose; his life fluids remained in him. And finally, the Torah informs us that, to this day, nobody knows where Moshe is buried.

In 1917, Franz Kafka wrote an aphorism which reads as follows: “After a person’s death, for a short span of time, even on earth, a special beneficial silence sets in with regard to the dead person; a terrestrial fever has ceased, a dying is no longer seen to be continuing, an error seems to have been remedied; even for the living there is an opportunity to breathe freely, for which reason, too, the windows are opened in the room where the death took place – until then everything turns out to have been, after all, only a semblance, and the sorrow and the lamentations begin.”

What Kafka seems to be getting at here, as I read it, is that, when someone dies, a moment of absurdity seems to grip the bystanders. He says that, when the windows are opened in the room where the death took place, everything turns out to have been, after all, only a semblance, and the sorrow and the lamentations begin. What I think Kafka wishes to convey is that, when someone dies, time itself becomes fragmentary. The flow of time, as we have been following it, is disturbed. The opportunity for a moment of *Lightning Witz* presents itself. Life, death, ordinariness, and the otherworldly, all collide together at once. Even if we have known this person for decades or even 120 years, a feeling and a question mark surface as to whether this person ever lived at all. Kafka would capture this sentiment in another story, his final story, called “Josefine the Singer, or the Mouse People.” The story ends with the seeming death of the singing mouse Josefine. The narrator comments: even when she lived, was she ever more than a memory?

As we read the closing lines of the Torah, we are met with the same questions Kafka has posed: was Moshe’s death only a semblance? Was Moshe ever more than a memory, even in his own lifetime?

The Torah evokes these questions and these feelings but it does not give us direct answers. Instead, the Torah allows Moshe’s death to occur in a strange intermediary space where standard notions of time seem to dissolve. Moshe dies, but his body does not decay and his eyes continue to shine. He is buried, but nobody knows where, as if the finality of the death should never be confirmed.

Now, of course one can read this passage and see it factually and straightforwardly. Moses dies. His eyes were bright and his strength was intact, but he still dies like everyone else. He just happened to be in good shape when he died. And no one knows where he was buried. So what? A lot of people die and we don’t know where they’re buried. There is no absolute truth contained in Moshe, no eternal becoming, no transcendence.

This is where we need *Witz*; this is where we need the door to the hidden room in the palace to open up a crack; this is where we must remove the shell of the nut. *Witz* is the missing ingredient to Episode 0. But I cannot make *Witz* happen on *The Schrift*—that would only be *Witzelei*, artificial *Witz*. Even if you read the Torah, there is no guarantee that *Witz* will occur. But the more you open the book and read the words, the better chance you will have of making eye contact with the lover hiding behind the chamber door.

The same logic applies to meditation. One can meditate and not feel any different, not feel anything noteworthy, not partake in any transcendence. One can view meditation only by

way of its *outer shell*, the act of sitting and breathing and waiting for it to be over. But when you meditate, you also open yourself up to the possibility of *Witz*. You allow yourself the possibility that the door to the secrets of the universe will creak open for a moment. You permit yourself to experience that meditation, this seemingly tedious and uneventful practice, is far more than it appears to be.

This is the idea that I think Josh had in mind when he said to me “I’m Waiting for the Man” is just a regular rock-and-roll song, but somehow so much more. Josh was saying that this song has *Witz*. But this *Witz* can only be accessed by those ready to see beyond the surface layers of the song and lucky enough to have the chamber door opened for them.

When Moses dies, the power is immediately handed over to his general Joshua, son of Nun. Why was Joshua entrusted with this most esteemed position? In the fourth-to-last line of the Torah, we seem to get an answer. The Torah tells us that Joshua was entrusted to takeover for Moses because Joshua was filled with the spirit of wisdom. And when another Joshua unknowingly communicated to me the concepts of German Romanticism and Kabbalah as we sat in that Avignon café, it seems as though he, if only for a moment, were filled with the same spirit.