

Episode 13 Shemot

In one of the most memorable scenes of *Game of Thrones*, Ned Stark approaches the iron throne holding a very important piece of paper. The previous king, Robert Baratheon, has just died. On this document, he declares Ned Stark to be the next king of Westeros. Ned guilelessly approaches the iron throne. There sits Cersei Lannister, the queen and now Robert Baratheon's widow. She is surrounded by hundreds of knights, holding their swords. Ned Stark hands her the piece of paper. Cersei takes a look at it and then simply rips it up. Ned Stark is promptly arrested by the knights and beheaded a few scenes later.

A similar moment occurs in American history. During the presidency of Andrew Jackson, a dispute occurred in Georgia about whether white people could take Native American land for themselves. The Supreme Court, under the opinion of Justice John Marshall, declared in favor of the Native Americans. Yet, Andrew Jackson then would declare: "John Marshall has made his decision; now let him enforce it!" To Andrew Jackson, the decision of the Supreme Court was just a piece of paper with no power.

Now, you might counter that Cersei Lannister and Andrew Jackson were just a couple of \$#@\$#. That Constitutions should be respected, that justice should be honored, that contracts and treaties and courts should be obeyed. You're right. They *should* be. But that doesn't always mean they *will* be. These are all wonderful ideals, ideals which I believe in. But just because they are ideals, doesn't mean they are always reliable. This was the mistake Ned Stark made. He was naïve. He believed that contracts and constitutions would be respected. This belief led him straight to the chopping block.

Moreover, the truth is that, when we look at anything closely enough, we tend to see that the foundations are often quite shaky and quite fragile. What made Robert Baratheon the rightful king? He just won some battle about thirty years before. Moreover, we look to the U.S. Constitution as unchallengeable. But this, too, at its core, is just a piece of paper. Sure, the founding fathers "agreed" on it, but who gave them the right to decide the future of the American territory. The answer is: *they gave themselves* the right. Authenticity and Truth is usually just in the eye of the beholder. Now, that we all treat the Constitution as authoritative and that we let it govern our lives is a wonderful, truly wonderful thing. If we didn't do this, we would be rather f***ed. But my point is that deep down, we all know, we all fear, that it is just paper. These are dangerous and subversive ideas, to be sure. But does that mean we should just ignore them and not talk about them?

In 1842, the Swiss-German writer Jeremias Gotthelf wrote the novella *The Black Spider* or, in German, *Die Schwarze Spinne*. This is considered by many to be the first piece of "weird fiction." Thomas Mann said that it at times touches on the Homeric and was wholly unique in world literature.

Bear with me for a short summary. The novella begins very picturesquely. In a Swiss village, a family is celebrating the baptism of a new child to the world. Everything is idyllic, pleasant, and calm. The sun is shining, the birds are chirping, there is even a quail singing a tune of nature. On the farm, the cows are drinking, the maids are cleaning, and fresh water is being carried in from the well. Inside the house, the grandmother is slicing a loaf of sourdough bread, the grandfather is preparing mulled wine with cinnamon and saffron, the midwives are roasting coffee beans, a fire is crackling in the fireplace. This description strangely goes on for several pages. You get the idea.

Then in come the church ministers to baptize the child. The child is placed in a beautiful white baptism cloth and carried to the nearby church. A crowd forms around the baby as the townspeople march together toward the lovely church. Next to the church is a tavern, where all of the guests go after the baptism to enjoy wine and to celebrate. This description of pleasantries, feasting, and politeness goes on for several more pages. Indeed, more than a quarter of the novella is made up of these opening niceties.

Eventually, the party makes its way back to the grandfather and grandmother's house. On the way back, a few of the cousins begin to admire the house from outside. Everyone agrees how beautiful the house is. Yet there is one thing rather ugly and disturbing aspect of the house which the guests notice. One of the posts supporting the house is entirely *black*. It is a terrible eyesore. It stands out conspicuously from the rest of the house.

Only the grandfather knows the story of the black post. The other family members and guests ask the grandfather to tell the story of the black post, but the grandfather at first refuses. He does not want to spoil the occasion. But after some persuading, the grandfather agrees to tell the tale of how the post came to be black.

The grandfather's tale which follows is rather strange. In the Middle Ages, the village was ruled by a knight. This knight was very cruel to the farmers on the land. One of the women of the town named Christine made a deal with the devil. The devil said that he would make the work for the farmers very easy. But in exchange, he would need Christine to bring him one unbaptized child. To seal the pact, the devil kisses Christine on the cheek.

As it turns out, Christine has a rather difficult time getting an unbaptized child to the devil. Gradually, her cheek begins to burn more and more. One day, thousands of spiders begin to pop out of her cheek and to terrorize the town. Christine tries and tries to get an unbaptized child to the devil, but with each attempt the priest baptizes the child just in time. During one of these baptisms, the priest spills holy water all over Christine herself. When this happens, Christine herself turns into a giant black spider.

Now Christine begins to terrorize the town, killing animals and people and bringing plague upon plague onto the town. Yet, one evening an old woman lies in wait for the black spider. The old woman lures Christine into a hole and nails the hole shut, placing a post on top of the hole. At this point, all of the plagues on the town stop.

A few centuries later, however, the town falls again into sinful ways. The townspeople become degenerate and decadent. One young man of the town decides to free the black spider. Once again, Christine, the black spider, emerges, and unleashes plague upon plague on the town. But this time, a man named Christian—yes, Christian—comes to the rescue. He is a savior-figure. He manages to lock the black spider back up into its hole and build a post on top of the hole to keep the black spider locked inside.

The grandfather now finishes up his story. He says that over the centuries, the house was built and rebuilt, but that the old post always stayed where it was. It stayed there, this black post. Everyone knew not to move the post, or the black spider could come out again and terrorize the town. Here the story ends. The baptism party goes on late into the evening, with all the guests drinking and eating and merrymaking together. Meanwhile, the black post remains there in the background, supporting the house, reminding all what terrors await them if the black post is ever opened up and Christine is once again let loose.

As you've probably guessed, this story is about a lot more than black spiders. The old black post seems to represent the "Old" Testament whereas the house represents the New Testament. Christianity has tried painstakingly to reconcile its new religion with the ancestral

ways of Judaism. But sometimes, fitting Christianity into Judaism can be a bit like trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. I will not go into all of the ways in which the relationship between Christianity and Judaism is painfully awkward. But this awkwardness has not stopped hundreds of generations of theologians from trying to harmonize the two religions. However, to do this properly required some maneuvering, if you will. Some inconvenient facts needed to be buried and locked up, much like Christine the black spider. From time to time those alternative opinions were released once again into the world, creating chaos. But eventually they were stuffed back into the hole again and boarded up. What resulted was the image given to us by Gotthelf. A beautiful and orderly home with this hideous black post right in the center. The new home unfortunately cannot remove the black post, or the entire house would collapse. Better to just leave the ugly post there, ignore it, and focus on the rest of the house.

But Gotthelf's story is not limited simply to the relationship between the New Testament and the Old Testament. In fact, this concept can be universally applied. It is often the case that behind every "truth" and every social structure, the claim of illegitimacy haunts and lurks. When we think about the founding of America, we like to picture the founding fathers with their quill pens and knickers philosophizing about the equal rights of man in Independence Hall in Philadelphia. What we don't like to think about so much were the brutal conquests of the Native Americans in order to pave the way for this new nation. Sure, we admit that this was a tragedy. But we don't question the legitimacy of the constitution and the right to call this country "ours." We don't want to open up the black post and let all of the inconvenient truths come out.

Judaism, unfortunately, also has its share of skeletons in the closet and of legitimacy problems. In this week's parsha, we start a new book of the Torah, the book of Exodus or in Hebrew, *shemot*. We have been fast forwarded some three hundred years into the future. The great achievements of Joseph in Egypt have long been forgotten. The Hebrews are now not wealthy and prosperous landowners, but rather slaves. They are the enemy of the Pharaoh. As I talked about in Episode 0 and Episode 9, Judaism has a circular concept of time and of truth. We are taught not to rest on our laurels for very long. Even if we achieve salvation or a feeling of arrival, this will not necessarily last forever. So while the book of Genesis ended with Joseph celebrating the birth of his great-great grandchildren, everyone from that era is now dead and gone. The Hebrews must start anew, from scratch, continually reinventing themselves to get to salvation once more.

The hero and protagonist for the next four books of the Torah, until the very end, will be Moses—*Moshe*. He will be the next savior of the Hebrew people to lead them out of Egypt and over the Jordan river into the Promised Land. In this week's parsha, *shemot*, we meet Moses as a little baby cruising down the Nile River in a basket. Why is baby Moses in a basket in a river? Let's walk it back a few steps and figure out how this strange situation came to pass.

The new evil Pharaoh noticed that the Hebrews were multiplying at an exponential rate. He feared that the Hebrews would multiply so fast that eventually they would become the majority of the population and would overtake the Egyptians and the Pharaoh. So the Pharaoh instituted a policy of genocide. He ordered all of the Egyptians to throw every newborn baby boy into the Nile, so that the Hebrews would no longer be able to reproduce.

In the case of Moses, when he was three months old, his mother decided that she could not hide him any longer. So instead, she put him into a basket and placed him in the Nile. The daughter to the Pharaoh saw this basket. Rather than killing Moses, as she had been commanded to do, the Torah tells us that she took pity on the beautiful baby boy, and she decided to let it live.

So far, this story sounds relatively normal. But if we go a bit more into the details, we see how confusing and bizarre this story of Moses' childhood really is.

The Torah tells us that Moses' parents were both from the house of Levi. This establishes Moses' legitimacy as a bona fide Hebrew from the most holy tribe of Levi. He is then discovered by the Pharaoh's daughter. Yet Moses' sister, Miriam, is watching the scene unfold from a distance. After the Pharaoh's daughter picks up Moses, Miriam runs over to her. Miriam asks the Pharaoh's daughter if she should get a Hebrew nurse to suckle the child and take care of the child. Pharaoh's daughter says, "okay, sure, that would be a great idea." Which Hebrew nurse does Miriam get for Moses? None other than the original mother of Moses. So, after Moses' mother puts her baby in the basket and sends him off, never to see him again, he comes right back to her that same day. And she raises him. The Torah then tells us that after the child grew up, she brought him to the Pharaoh's daughter, who made Moses her son. The Egyptian princess gives Moses the name "Moshe" because, she says, "I drew him out of the water," or in Hebrew, "*min hamayim meeshtihu.*"

There are too many questions. Why was Moses sent away by his mother, only to have him returned to her that same day and then be raised by her? Why not just say, Moses was raised by his mother? Why was Moses found by the daughter to the Pharaoh, of all people? What are the odds that of all the women in Egypt, it was the Pharaoh's daughter who found him? Why did the Pharaoh's daughter let Moses be raised by his real mother, and then adopt him after he was grown? Finally, why does he receive this strange name of *moshe*?

I am not the only one to be troubled and confused by this story. Sigmund Freud also found it puzzling. What was Freud's answer to this series of head-scratching moments? Freud theorized that Moses was not a Hebrew but was actually an Egyptian. Yes, Moses was an Egyptian. Freud laid out his highly provocative and sensationalist argument in 1939, the year of his death. He effectively wrote the work from his death bed. The work was entitled *Moses and Monotheism*, or in German, *Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion*. Freud knew how controversial such a work would be. In the introduction he wrote, "To deny the legitimacy of a man who is the greatest prophet of a nation is not something I undertake lightly, particularly as I myself am a member of this nation. Yet I believe that the clarification of this matter will ultimately be seen as a great gain to our insight and understanding of this nation."

Freud's theory—and I should emphasize, that it is just a theory—is that Moses grew up as a follower of a new monotheistic religion in Egypt at that time. There had been a Pharaoh named Echnaton who believed in monotheism. Moses was one of his followers. Yet, when Echnaton died, the next Pharaoh to replace him, Semenckare, returned the entire Egyptian kingdom back to paganism. Moses was so committed to monotheism that he joined forces with the monotheistic Hebrews and set off for the desert, where they could practice their religion freely. Moses' name is, in fact, an Egyptian name—*Moshe*. Even when I ask my Israeli friends about whether the name *Moshe* has Hebrew roots, they agree that it's a strange name which really can't be traced to any particular Hebrew *shoresh*.

The story of Moses, when in viewed in this light, seems to be Judaism's "black post," a fact which we need to cover up so that we can all live pleasantly without challenges to our view of the world. But should it be a black post? Must it be?

Let's return for a moment to Gotthelf's *The Black Spider*. You'll notice something odd about the names of the characters. The man who finally puts the spider back into its hole is named Christian. Christian. He saves the town from the evil spider, he is the "Christian" savior. But wait a minute. What is the name of the spider? The spider's name is Christine. Christine.

Why does the spider, the villain and the “anti-Christ” we might say, have the feminized name of the savior? Is Christine, the black spider, just as “Christian” as Christian? Gotthelf seems to want us to question here what is really good and what is really evil, what is really Christian and what is not. Maybe the black post does not contain the threats to Christianity locked up inside, but the answers it so desperately needs.

A similar dynamic occurs with Moses. The story of Moses’ childhood is awfully confusing. He is handed back and forth between the Egyptians and the Hebrews like some kind of hot potato. The Torah goes out of its way to mention the Hebrew origins of his name, even though his name seems to be rather Egyptian-sounding. In short, the entire story seems to be asking us—imploing us—to doubt a bit Moses’ origins, to question where he came from, to question whether he, as an Egyptian, may somehow be more *Hebrew* than the *Hebrews themselves*.

A quick anecdote. I remember, when I was a child, I had no idea what Christianity was. I just knew it was the religion which the vast majority of my country, America, practiced. Yet, in my many hours in Hebrew school, no teacher ever brought up this subject of Christianity. It was, in a way, buried. One day, during class, I used the phrase “Old Testament” to describe the Torah. I probably had heard “Old Testament” used in some TV show or movie. My Hebrew school teacher violently interrupted me and warned me to never say “Old Testament” but rather to call it the Torah. Here is what I thought when she did this: she’s hiding something. There’s something about Judaism which is unstable and illegitimate. Yes, I did think this only as an eleven or twelve-year-old. My teacher made Christianity into the forbidden fruit. I remember, when I was in college, I finally got my hands on the New Testament or, as my old teacher would have wanted me to say, the Christian Bible. When I opened it up, I almost was expecting it to have some incredible subversive truth inside. Why else had it been suppressed in my *milieu* throughout my entire childhood? Fortunately, after reading it, I realized that it was not going to change my world. I saw, rather quickly, that, in a way, The New Testament was just another one of those weird ancient books. Fortunately, my worldview wasn’t shaken. But in a way, sadly, I was ready for it to be.

One concept of meditation is the idea of accepting and acknowledging whatever is happening to you. If you are experiencing suffering, you should *go into* that suffering and become aware of it. Don’t cover-up your pain and try to pretend that it isn’t there. Research has shown, for example, that chronic pain issues can be alleviated through meditating *with* the pain. Breathe into the pain, discover the shape of the pain, even give the pain a color. Paradoxically, the mind becomes more at ease when it accepts the presence of the pain than trying to suppress it. This does not mean that you should try to increase the pain or obsess about the pain. But don’t treat it like the black spider, stuffing it into a hole and boarding it up.

This technique can apply for thousands of situations. If you have an awkward situation with someone, you can call it out, acknowledge it. If you have anxiety, allow the anxiety to be there, feel the sensations of the anxiety, breathe into them. If your neighbor is drilling and hammering next door, don’t grit your teeth and try not to hear the annoying sounds. Let the sounds be there, maybe even spend a moment gently paying attention to the sounds, even being grateful for the sounds. When we try to cover up and ignore that which is *obviously* right in our face, we may miss out on the gifts which this “inconvenience” has to offer us. Yes, there may be gifts in pain, gifts in annoying sounds, gifts in skepticism. As Buddhism teaches, whatever is happening, is already happening. Wherever you go, is where you are.

So let's say—God forbid—that Moses was Egyptian. Or that he might have been. Maybe he didn't have the blood of the tribe of Levi flowing through his veins. How do we handle this “illegitimacy”? Do we ignore it, or do we turn towards it? If we ignore it, our view of the world and of ourselves remain intact. Well, almost. We still have to cope with that black post holding up our house filled with spiders ready to be released at any minute. If we turn toward it, we open ourselves up to something new, maybe to more peace, to more enlightenment. You might find that the black post turns to white. There may be, indeed, something beautiful about the fact that Moses was Egyptian. That he *chose* monotheism and Judaism for himself, without being “forced to” do so through birth. That the original Hebrews chose an outsider, a foreigner, to be their spiritual leader. That the greatest insights require us to puzzle through contradictions and skepticisms, rather than being handed Truth on a silver platter.

The Torah, it would seem, almost wants us to be a bit uncomfortable with Moses' legitimacy, to ask who this guy is, and where he came from. The Torah could have easily just omitted this story about the Pharaoh's daughter. The Torah could have simply read that Moses was born to Levite parents, and they raised him, and that was it. The Torah could have even named him Mordechai. Instead, the Torah made things tricky, confusing, puzzling for us. The Torah gave us a black post, but then seems to ask us to excitedly pry it open, to see what's been buried inside.