

As you go throughout your day, how often do you find yourself in the following position? Right knee bent at ninety degrees, left leg extended straight behind you, arms outstretched and parallel to the floor, gaze directed over your right fingertips? This is the yoga position of Warrior II or the second *Virabhadrasana*. Or what about this one? Lying flat on your back, feet directed upward to the ceiling, knees bent, hands clinging onto your feet, as your body rolls back and forth on the floor? This is the yoga position of “happy baby” or *Ananda balasana*. There is a feedback loop from our bodies to our mind. If we strike a certain pose, and hold that pose, our mind will slowly begin to become convinced that this is who we are. When you adopt the pose of Warrior II, for those moments, you remember, maybe even unconsciously, what it feels like to be a warrior—graceful, confident, ready for combat. Moreover, when you get down into happy baby, you remember, even if only for an instant, what it’s like to be a little baby in your crib, staring up at the ceiling without a care in the world, simply happy to be alive.

Yoga did not create these positions. Rather, our bodies have always been capable of them. Yoga just gave them names.

Unfortunately, while our bodies are capable of thousands of configurations, we tend to adopt only about a handful of them during the course of our days. Sitting down, lying down, standing up, reaching up for something, reaching down for something. These positions, if they had names, would not be transcendental and glorious, like Warrior II, or Cobra, or Tree. They would be: getting a snack pose, responding to another e-mail pose, sitting in the car pose, or smiling flirtatiously at iPhone pose. When we were hunter-gatherers or farmers or even peasants, we likely adopted many more poses during the course of our days. Today, modern technology allows us to get through the day with only a minimum of body positions. As already mentioned, there is a feedback loop between our bodies and our minds. The modern world pressures us to strike certain poses. But these “modern” poses do not make us feel strong, vibrant, or peaceful. Rather, they make us feel tired, unimportant, and average. Obviously, we have many other influences in our lives as to how we view ourselves. The feedback loop is only one component. Posture is by no means the deciding factor. Nevertheless, it is there. It is always there. This is why yoga and meditation are so important. They bring us out of our routines. They expand our bodies and our minds. They allow us to reconnect with the thousands of selves we have which we may have long forgotten.

The portion of Genesis we read this week is Lech Lecha. In this section, this parsha, we read of Abraham’s journey from Mesopotamia to the Land of Israel. Abraham was already in the second half of his life when God called to him. God basically said to Abraham: leave behind your entire life and go to Israel. There, I will make you the founder of a great nation. Abraham, of course, agrees to go. He goes on to become the *father* of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. You will notice that the name Abraham has the word “Av” in it, which means “father” in Hebrew.

What’s most striking about this story is that Abraham simply gets up and goes, without protest, without questions.

The famous call which God makes to Abraham is “lech lecha.” “Lech” means “go” in Hebrew. “Lecha,” however, means to you or for you. So the phrase itself could be translated as “go to you”, “go for you”, “get yourself going”, or even “go for yourself!” This is a phrase which is a

bit odd. No one speaks this way or uses this type of phrase in modern Hebrew. The same could be said of English. How often have you heard someone say: “go to you.” After saying “lech lecha,” God then says a few more key words to Abraham. He says: go from your country, go from your town, go from your father’s house, to the land which I will show you.

The meaning of this phrase *lech lecha* had been puzzled over by rabbis over the centuries. What the hell does “lech lecha” mean, they would ask? What does go to you mean? Obviously, God is telling Abraham to go to Israel. He tells him to leave his country, his town, and his house, to go to the land which I will show you. So why does it also say go to you?

The great medieval commentator Rashi argued that lech lecha meant “go for yourself,” that is, go for the adventure that awaits you and for the incredible opportunity before you. Rashi, we might say, translated the phrase rather literally. Other medieval commentators thought it meant go to Israel so you can finally be yourself. Or even, „go by yourself.” Yet, no one really remained fully satisfied with any of these explanations. The journey seemed to be physical. God said, leave your country, your town, your house, and go! So why lech lecha? Why not just lech? Go?

It took hundreds of years, but eventually one rabbi realized that the answer was staring them in the face all along. This rabbi was the Malbim. He was born in Ukraine in 1809. He studied in Warsaw, and he ended up becoming the chief rabbi of Bucharest. He died in 1879. Let’s look again at this phrase, go from your country, your town, and your house to the land I will show you. There is something a bit odd about this phrase. Country, town, then house. Let’s say you took a trip from your home in Berlin to Bali by plane. Someone asks you: how did you get from Berlin to Bali. Take me through it step-by-step. Would you say, well, first I left Germany, then I left Berlin, and then I left my apartment? No. Of course, you would say the reverse. First I left my apartment, then I left Berlin, then I left Germany, and arrived in Bali.

In Abraham’s case, lech lecha was a command to journey into himself, as it were. To uncover his true self. He needed to peel off the layers of his identity, as though peeling an onion. First he needed to remove his identity as a citizen of a particular country, then as an inhabitant of a particular town. Finally, he needed to even peel off the layer of his “father’s house,” that is, of his upbringing and entire way of seeing the world. The “lech” means go. The “lecha” would be translated as “into your true self.”

If I may, before moving on, I would like to read the Hebrew of this passage. Each word ends with a “cha,” creating a kind of symmetry and poetry and balance to the command to Abraham. This verse is intoxicating and seductive. When you hear the three phrases, from your country (m’artecha), your hometown (m’moladitecha), your father’s house (m’beit avicha), you can almost picture these layers being removed from Abraham, almost as though he is being undressed, one garment at a time, until he stands naked.

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1. And the Lord said to Abram, "Go forth from your land and from your birthplace and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you.

א וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-אַבְרָם לְדַלֵּךְ מֵאֶרֶץ  
וּמִמּוֹלַדְתֶּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֶל-הָאֲרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֲרָאָךְ:

The question of the self is an ancient philosophical question in the West, going back to the Greeks. There are various theories on what the self is. Do we have a true self, underneath all of the layers? Do we have a core which we receive at birth? or are we born as blank states in which our education determines who we are?

In the last two episodes, I talked about Nietzsche. Nietzsche's view of life was rather binary. You are either a slave or a master. You are either denying life or affirming life. Animal or god, pre-Socrates or post-Socrates, evil or good, immoral or moral. However, for all of the value in Nietzsche's way of thinking, it may be that it was a bit too rigid and even oversimplified.

Hermann Hesse was a Swiss-German writer from the first half of the twentieth century. What distinguished Hesse from his contemporaries was his interest in Eastern philosophy and Buddhism. His famous novel *Siddhartha*, for example, tells the story of the spiritual journey of a young Brahmin named Siddhartha, on a quest for Enlightenment. I would like to focus on another of Hesse's novels titled *Der Steppenwolf*, published in 1927.

The protagonist of *Der Steppenwolf* is Harry Haller. Right away, we see that Hesse identifies with the protagonist. Hermann Hesse, Harry Haller—need I say more? Haller is similar in important ways to the most famous character in German literature—Goethe's Faust. Haller is, like Faust, middle-aged, extremely well-read, highly intellectual, and wholly dissatisfied with his life and with existence itself. He feels alienated and isolated from his society. His environment is *bourgeois*. The people he meets are polite, domesticated, and restrained. Haller becomes convinced that within him is a *wolf*, a *Steppenwolf*, that is waiting to be released. He feels that society forces him to conform to be a kind of civilized bourgeois, and he must suppress all of his true instincts and his true desires. He becomes convinced that society is making him unhealthy by forcing him to repress his true, raw, animalistic self.

There is a famous line in *Faust* where Dr. Faust cries in frustration: "Two souls lie inside of me, which only wish to separate from each other."

"Zwei Seelen wohnen, ach! in meiner Brust, die eine will sich von der andern trennen."

One of these souls, Faust says, is directed toward the Earth and all of the carnal desires of life. The other soul is directed toward heaven, that is, toward the godlike pursuit of Truth and philosophy and purity.

At the beginning of *Steppenwolf*, Haller believes that there are two warring forces within him, one which wishes to be an animal (a wolf), the other which wishes to be a noble and enlightened human. Yet, the narrator points out how *limited* and *false* this way of viewing oneself is. The narrator writes:

"When Haller cries that there are two souls living inside him, he forgets the hundreds of other souls which live inside him as well ... A human is like an onion, made up of hundreds of layers, all woven together into one fabric."

As the novel develops, Haller embarks upon a path of self-discovery. He learns that he is not made up of two warring souls. Rather, he has thousands of selves, interconnected with the selves of others, into a kind of eternal Oneness, each self mirroring the selves of others. At the end, Harry Haller says that at last he “understood everything, [that he] came to know all of the hundreds of thousands of selves within him.”

It is tempting, even seductive, to fall into a pattern of thinking in which we must find our true selves. We use phrases like “I am finding myself.” Or “the real me.” Or “be yourself.” Yet, I see this type of thinking as a bit limiting. It is understandable why we think this way. So many of our societal structures hold out to us this idea of at last reaching salvation, the Promised Land, true love, a happy ending, bliss. Think about capitalism, for example. The message of capitalism is, it seems, if you just work hard enough and smart enough, eventually you will achieve the wealth to be happy and satisfied. Or think about communism: things will be hard at first, but eventually, when everyone is equal economically, society will become a Utopia. Or think about the Enlightenment. If we exercise human reason carefully enough, eventually we will arrive at the ultimate Truth of life. Or think about Freud. His psychoanalysis seemed to be obsessively trying to discover a person’s true self, to get to the thing in itself, the true answer, underneath all the layers. (And here, we need not wonder why Freud, at the end of his life, lamented that the one thing he could never quite figure out was how women think and what women want.) We also have thousands of fairy tales and romantic comedies, in which the characters live “happily ever after.” And obviously we have religions which promise an afterlife, in which one’s true self will emerge in a blissful state. These are all, in a way, the same structures of thought. The fancy word for this, by the way, is teleology.

This way of thinking, however, cuts us off, blinds us, to the infinite forms of salvation we can find within our daily existence. In the first episode, I talked about how, when Moses dies just before entering the Land of Israel, we tend to view this as a kind of tragedy, as cruel fate, as an “almost there” type of failure. Yet, paradoxically, by not arriving, the death of Moses demonstrates the beauty and paradoxical salvation of *non-arrival*.

Viewing our psyche as having multiple selves taps into the idea of *becoming* rather than *arriving* or *accomplishing* or *finishing*. If we can find salvation in *becoming*, we do not need to wait for a future utopia. Moreover, if we can understand the thousands of selves within us, we do not need to *wait* in frustration for our true self to emerge.

Now, here you might be thinking: but, I do *believe* in achieving prosperity through capitalism, or achieving a sense of wholeness through romance, or of achieving Truth through reason, or of reaching an afterlife. Now you are telling me that I can’t believe in those ideas which are so important to me? Guess what? You just did it again. You constructed your reality in binary terms. Either I believe in the idea of a final “self” or a final “Truth,” or I believe in infinite selves and infinite truths. Either I believe in A or B. Yet, why can’t it be both? Why do we limit ourselves to always thinking it has to be one or the other? Why do we always reduce our thinking to the binary? You can be a teleologist and a yogi—why not?

Let’s return to Abraham for a moment. Now, here you might be noticing a kind of contradiction. Abraham is instructed to lech lecha, to go to himself, and to “peel off,” as it were, his country,

his hometown, and his father's house. In other words, the story of lech lecha seems to promote this idea that there is a true self underneath all the layers. This would seem to directly contradict the theme in *Steppenwolf* and in Buddhism. Yet, if we read through the rest of the story, we find that the Torah seems to go out of its way, as it were, to show that there is no true Abraham. When Abraham and Sarah arrive in Israel, they discover that there is a famine. In order to get food, they must relocate to Egypt. Before they get to Egypt, however, Abraham does something quite strange and shocking. He tells Sarah, his wife, to lie to the Pharaoh. Abraham says to Sarah: tell the Pharaoh that you're my sister. Otherwise, he will try to kill me after he sees how beautiful you are. What the \*\$&#? This is the noble, heroic, incorruptible Abraham, the first monotheist, the ultimate father figure? He's asking his wife to tell lies and to possibly have sexual relations with the Pharaoh so that he can save his own ass. Fortunately, the Pharaoh quickly finds out that Sarah is actually Abraham's *wife* and not his *sister*. The Pharaoh proves to be the more noble of the two men in this situation. He says to Abraham, basically: dude, what is wrong with you? Why would you lie to me and say that she was your sister? Are you nuts? Now God has put a curse on me because I have taken your wife into my household. Take your *wife* and get the hell out of here!" Abraham must then sheepishly depart from Egypt, just having been really *dressed down* by the Pharaoh. Or, put another way, Abraham got served.

There is something else very strange which occurs throughout the *parsha*. Sarah, Abraham's wife, is often referred to by a masculine Hebrew pronoun. Even though Sarah is a woman, the Hebrew uses the word "hoo" to refer to her repeatedly. Hoo is the pronoun for men, and hee is the pronoun for women. Sarah is described with the male pronoun rather than the female pronoun.

The Torah, then, seems to be suggesting that there is no *real* Abraham underneath the layers. There is also no *real* Sarah. Their identities and their selves are always in a state of flux.

Now, here you might be thinking: if there is no true self, what is even the point of trying to get to our core? Why even engage in self-discovery? To answer this question, let's go back to God's call to Abraham. Before Abraham was summoned, he had already lived a full life. He was seventy-five years old. Do we think that God chose Abraham randomly? Did God just point at random into a shuk in Saudi Arabia and whoever was buying onions at that particular time became the founder of modern humanity? No. Obviously, the "pre lech lecha" Abraham was special, too. The self and identity which Abraham had formed up to that point is what made him God's chosen one to start a new nation and to be the first monotheist. All of those layers, then, which God told Abraham to remove, were not to be forgotten or discarded—rather, they were to be incorporated. Abraham's task was not to find his one true self, but to find his thousands of true selves. He was to see each layer as a part of who he was, but also to discover deeper layers which he was not yet aware of.

Let us return to yoga for a moment. In *Steppenwolf*, Hesse tells us that "Yoga is a way of discovering, the chaos of selves which live within us." When I get into, for example, the yoga pose of half moon, where I stand on one leg, my arms form a straight line toward the ceiling, and my other leg is outstretched, I often think: it would simply be ridiculous for my body to ever adopt this position at any other point in the day, except when I am doing yoga. I am never, for example, cooking dinner and suddenly find myself in half moon pose. It simply doesn't happen.

Yet, there is no reason to think that standing over the kitchen counter and cutting up vegetables is any more or less of who I am than standing on one leg at a ninety-degree angle in the middle of my living room. In opening up our bodies, yoga reveals to us these thousands of selves within us.

Yet, yoga is far from the only way to reveal this to us. There are many ways in which we can get out of the pattern of thinking that plagued Faust, and Nietzsche, and Harry Halle—the simplistic idea that the animal and the human are fighting an eternal war within us. I personally like to keep the weekly Jewish holiday of Shabbat, where from Friday evening to Saturday evening, I turn off my phone, I don't cook, I don't write, I don't work. For this period of twenty-five hours, because of these restrictions, the world I live in becomes a different world. I become a different person, in a way. When you meditate, you become aware of your thoughts, and how these “thoughts” are just one aspect of your identity; they are not the “real you.” When you learn a new language, and speak a different language, you open up a new window to yourself. You rediscover children's books, you have conversations about your favorite foods rather than about politics, you laugh over the silliest things, rather than over hyper-ironic, cynical humor. Spend an evening where you only use candles to light up your home. Spend a day where you purposely ignore all of the daily news.

These are all minor changes you can make in your daily lives which may actually awaken you to yourself as much as traveling to a new country would.

It is important for us to wake up to our own worlds. I have titled this podcast *The Schrift*. This is the title which Martin Buber gave to his translation of the Torah from Hebrew into German. Buber that people had become so *used* to the language of the Torah in *German* and in *Hebrew* that they no longer thought about what the words really meant. He wanted to *awaken* people to what had already been there.

Personal salvation does not come when we discover our “one true self.” Rather, the very process of self-discovery *is* the wholeness and totality we seek. Moreover, understanding who you are does not come from removing layers, but by adding new layers and by going mindfully into the layers you already have. Finally, self-exploration is not a process of removing yourself from your world so that a new one can be created. Rather, it is about more fully engaging with the world which is already yours. Do you know what time the sun will set today? Which local foods are in season where you live? Where can you find them? Do you know whether your window faces east or west, north or south? Do you know what phase of the moon we are in this evening? Take a few moments to answer these questions. You will be amazed at how many selves you awaken when you become more aware of the existence you already are embodying.