The Schrift
Episode 4 – Vayera

Once upon a time, I worked in a law firm in Philadelphia. It was one of those huge office buildings in the middle of the city. The building was filled with lawyers, not just from my firm, but from other firms as well.

One day, I was walking through the lobby when I bumped into an acquaintance of mine. She was also a young attorney, and she worked in another firm in the building. We talked for a bit. Then she said something to me which I will never forget. She told me that she had run into another attorney from *my* firm in the elevator the other day. Let's call him Attorney K. Here is what transpired: "Oh, by the way, I ran into Attorney K. from your firm the other day. *Really* nice guy."

Though I didn't say anything at the time, I was a bit taken aback by her assessment of Attorney K. Really nice guy? Really? Because I had been working with Attorney K. for a couple of years now, and I knew that he was actually a huge twat. Moreover, my friend said she had only spoken to Attorney K. on the elevator. I thought to myself: how can she expect to judge someone's moral character after a short elevator ride? In this thirty second elevator ride, what had Attorney K. told my friend? Hi, nice to meet you. Yes, I know Steve. Yes, I work with him in XYZ Firm. By the way, did I mention that on the weekends I work in a soup kitchen and donate half of my salary to orphans in Haiti? Oh, what do you know! Here's my floor. So nice to meet you. Have a great day."

I can only guess that Attorney K. didn't start listing his moral accomplishments in the course of a thirty-second elevator ride the first time he met someone. In short, my friend and Attorney K. engaged in small talk. Yet, at the end of the conversation, she was convinced that Attorney K. was "a really nice guy."

When I lived in a yuppie, bourgeois lifestyle in the States, I heard this phrase a lot: "great guy." "Really nice guy." "He's a good guy." And yes, many of these people I knew, or at least suspected, were actually twats.

There are two aspects of this phenomenon which bothered me. First, why was a person's moral character being so quickly evaluated? Second, what social norms and social values led to the conclusion that this particular person was "nice"?

Now, I told my brother Mike this story about Attorney K. the other night, and he said, Steve, this is a terrible example for what you are trying to convey. She just said "really nice guy" because she didn't know what else to say. She was just being friendly. But I disagree. I believe there is a kind of moral judgment going on behind the statement: "he's a nice guy." Otherwise, people wouldn't say "nice." They would say, "he's a *friendly* guy." Or at least "he *seems* like a nice guy." Moreover, they wouldn't say "really nice guy" with such confidence. It was clear, that when my friend made this comment about Attorney K., the idea that Attorney K. could actually be a "twat," would never have crossed her mind.

How do we assess if a person is "good" or "nice"? Are "good" and "nice" the same thing? What do we value in our society such that we conclude someone is good or bad, moral or immoral?

In the parsha for this week, Vayera, we are presented with two men: Abraham and Lot. They provide a nice study in contrasts. Of course, we all know Abraham. He was the majestic, brave, dignified, righteous man from Mesopotamia, who God chooses to become the first Monotheist, to found a new nation in the Land of Israel. Less well-known is Lot. Who was Lot?

Lot was Abraham's nephew, who, for various reasons, came with Abraham on his journey to Israel. Lot is, in many ways, the kind of prototypical, not so-loveable sidekick to Abraham. He's sort of depicted as Abraham's annoying and pathetic nephew who's always getting into trouble. Abraham always needs to bail Lot out. He's family, after all, so Abraham has this obligation to him.

Whereas Abraham was inspirational and heroic, Lot, it seems to me, is a kind of "average Joe"—an "average Lot." When Abraham and Lot first arrive in the Land of Israel, they decide that they will divide up the land between the two of them. Abraham says to Lot: you can choose which part of the land you want, I am happy with either side. The Torah reads that: "Lot looked around and saw how well watered the whole plain of Jordan was, all of it, all the way to Zoar, like the Garden of God, like the land of Egypt. So Lot chose for himself the whole plain of Jordan." What is the Torah trying to tell us here? Lot chose the "cushy" part of the land for himself. He chose luxury, ease, comfort.

Lot settled in the now-infamous town of Sodom and Gomorrah. A few scenes later, God sees what is going on in Sodom and Gomorrah. It has become a city of decadence, of crime, of sin and iniquity. God decides he will destroy the city.

Before we find out what happens to Lot, let's take a step back for a moment and look at the question of moral values. Here is a question which we do not answer enough: *where* do our values come from? Moreover, what are our *moral* values? This is not a trivial question. It also does not have an obvious answer.

I had a rather comfortable and cushy upbringing in the United States. If I look back on the moral value I was taught in school, in my family, and in culture, it was basically "be a good person." What did it mean to be a "good person"? I was never told this explicitly. But, as I recall, it meant something along the lines of: be kind, be compassionate, be nice, be tolerant. Yet, what if I had been a child not in nineties America, but instead in nineties Bosnia, or in medieval England? There, I would guess that being a "good person" may have had a different meaning. It might have meant, be a strong person, be a brave person, be a family-oriented person. Yet, the word "good" would have been the same. But its meaning would have been vastly different.

Nietzsche believed that the values of modern society were, in many ways, absolutely opposite from what they should have been. Let's go back, for a moment, deep into human history. According to Nietzsche, in the time before Socrates, about 2,500 years ago and longer, being "good" did not mean being "moral." Moreover, being "evil" did not mean being immoral. Good meant noble, strong, powerful—not nice, cooperative, go-with-the-flow. In his 1888 work, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche argues that the word good/gut is connected with the German word for God/Gott. The good people were the godlike people, that is, the people who were elevated masters and warriors. Evil, by contrast, did not mean "immoral" but rather everything which the master was not—common, unimpressive, simple. The word "schlecht" in German is connected with the German word for "simple"—"schlicht."

Who was the ultimate "good person" of the ancient world before Socrates? Odysseus of Homer's epics. Now, Odysseus was not a barbarian or an ogre. He was sensitive, just, compassionate, and above all else, a family man. Yet, what he was most admired for was his bravery, his strength, his generosity, and his determination. He was, indeed, a *hero*. And this is why he was considered "good."

In his book *The Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche famously—or infamously—wrote that "Socrates was ugly." Socrates was ugly. According to Nietzsche, Socrates couldn't accept his ugliness, his feeling of inferiority before the beauty and nobility of his fellow Athenians. So what

did Socrates do? He *altered* the value system of Ancient Greece. Socrates, and his student Plato, were the first philosophers to say that this life, this world, is not the *real* world. There is another world, a world of Truth, which is reality, which can only be accessed through Reason. Socrates turned his weakness—being ugly—into something positive. It does not matter if I am ugly, because this world doesn't matter. Moreover, all of the greatness of Ancient Athens is only a façade. The beauty and gracefulness of the Ancient Greeks is no longer relevant because they do not understand Truth and Reason.

Several centuries later, during the Roman Empire, there was, as we know, a class of commoners (the plebeians) and a class of nobles (the patricians). Nietzsche believed that in this period, even more than during Socrates' time, a reversal of all values took place. Until then, it had always been accepted that it was good to be strong, wealthy, self-assured, and superior. Yet, what happened was that a group of plebeians began to be *resentful* of their wealthy masters. They began to hate their masters. They began to ask: why are they the masters, and not us? But they did not simply complain about their station in life. Rather, they did something very clever. They argued that the values of the masters were not "good" at all—rather, they were "evil." Pride became evil, humility became good. Wealth became evil, and poverty became good. Hierarchy became evil, and equality became good. Feeling oneself superior became evil, and feeling pity for others became good. The movement which heralded this reversal of all existing values was, according to Nietzsche, early Christianity.

Yet, as I mentioned earlier, our idea of what is "good" is always shifting based on our circumstances. If you think about it, the value system of early Christianity hardly stayed that way for very long. Think, for example, of the popes of the Italian Renaissance (and of many other periods). These popes were mafiosos. Their values were the exact opposite as those against which the early Christians rebelled. Or, put another way, their values were exactly the same as the Roman masters, the Roman patricians. These popes were ostentatiously wealthy, powerful, elitist. Julius II, the pope who commissioned Michelangelo to paint the Sistine Chapel, was proudly known as the "Warrior Pope." Indeed, how many kings waged war—so-called "holy war"—in the name of Christianity. Henry VIII, for example, scrupulously kept all of Catholic dogma (before he left the Catholic church, that is). Yet, this same Henry VIII's favorite activity was going to war with France. Indeed, say what you want about Henry VIII, but he was anything but humble, meek, poor, or common. So, despite the herculean efforts of Christianity to reverse all values, it still needed to compete with humans' inherent attraction to the values of the Roman masters or the Ancient Athenians. What resulted in figures like Pope Julius II or Henry VIII was a kind of cognitive dissonance and hypocrisy as they inevitably conflated these two value systems. What was good and what was evil became awfully confusing. By the way, if you think this type of dynamic was only limited to pre-modern times, I would ask you how many rappers wear crosses as symbols of wealth and status or how many Americans would say that Jesus, were he alive today, would defend his right to own an AK-47.

In the Roman Empire, we might say, this war between master values and slave values was fought in society—the Christians and other democratic groups on one side, the aristocracy on the other. Yet, I would argue, now this war is fought largely within our own minds. On one hand, we feel enormous pressure to be "good Christians"—and this is true even if we are Jews, by the way. On the other hand, we also are inevitably drawn to those ancient values, the values of Homer and Odysseus, which we feel pressured to suppress. Now, here you might be thinking: Steve, I believe in the values of the Roman plebs. I believe in the common man, in being meek, in the virtues of being poor, in pity for the downtrodden. Yet, to this I would say: *au contraire*. I

recently finished watching the wonderful documentary *The Last Dance* about the rise of Michael Jordan to becoming the most celebrated and famous athlete basically of all time. It goes without saying that Michael Jordan is a beloved and wildly popular athlete. Now, perhaps if you've only seen the movie *Space Jam*, you would think that Michael Jordan is just a nice, easy-going, friendly guy. But, in fact, Michael Jordan was hardly "likeable" in our understanding of the term. All of Michael Jordan's teammates said the following about the great athlete: he was ruthless, he could be sometimes be mean, he was absolutely sure of himself, he did not tolerate mediocrity, he was cocky. Now, of course Michael Jordan did have a sensitivity to him. He could—sometimes—be kind and compassionate. But he could just as easily be power-wielding and domineering. Now, do these qualities make us more or less drawn to Michael Jordan? I would argue more, simply by the fact that this documentary emphasized these qualities over and over again in a production which was a kind of ode to Michael Jordan. So who is Michael Jordan? He is our hero, he is our Odysseus. Michael Jordan is our own Roman patrician, if you will. And we love him for it. Our conception of what is "good" still remains, in a way, ancient.

For Nietzsche, this cognitive dissonance, both at the personal and societal level, was a catastrophe. Let's stick with the Michael Jordan example. Michael Jordan had a will to greatness, to superiority, to sophistication and to triumph. These are the values of masters. It is said that when Jordan was in high school, he didn't make the basketball team. So he spent the summer working on his game and made the team the next year. But what if Jordan felt compelled to adopt the kind of resentful values of the downtrodden? He might have said, if I didn't make the basketball team, that's actually good, because those athletes are jerks, or arrogant, or selfish. Or, I don't want to be the best—it would not be nice to the other basketball players to make them feel inferior. Or, I don't want to brag about how great of a basketball player I am; I should be humble. You can see already how unnatural, strange, and unhealthy this type of cognitive dissonance can become. And to return to a point I made in episode one, Nietzsche argued that this cognitive dissonance is what causes us to feel such crippling shame.

So perhaps we should not be so quick to say what is really "good" and what is "bad." I think a little skepticism is in order here. Here is how Nietzsche most concisely defined "good" and "bad." From *The Anti-Christ*: "What is good?—All that heightens the feeling of power, the will to power, power itself in a person. What is bad?—All that proceeds from weakness. What is happiness?—The feeling that power *increases*—that a resistance is overcome."

Needless to say, this is a rather different definition of morality and goodness which I received during my education in turn of the twenty-first century America.

Now, here you are almost certainly thinking: Steve, are you trying to tell me that the values of pity, equality, humility, and poverty are bad? And moreover, that superiority, power, wealth and status are good? Well, before I answer that question, I would like to point something out. Isn't it a little concerning how we simply have an automatized reaction to what is moral and what is immoral? Moreover, isn't it even more concerning how much this morality has its roots in our subjective culture?

Let's talk about America for a moment. Since the founding of America, people have had the right to practice religion freely. But despite this freedom, the culture of America for centuries has been thoroughly Christian. Not once have we had a president from any other faith than Christianity—no Jews, no Muslims, no Atheists. Moreover, America's founders were Puritans—that is, radically conservative Christians from England. Now, here you might think: Steve, that was a long time ago. We had the "free love" movement of the Sixties and the alternative music of the nineties, and so on. Let me tell you something: culture dies a hard death. It does not go

away so easily. Moreover, it creeps into your consciousness without your realizing it. In other words, we haven't freely chosen our conception of "good" and "bad." It has been handed down to us, probably by people who we would not want to hang out with if we met them today. This is the same country, after all, which had public burnings of Beatles records in 1964 when John Lennon proclaimed, ironically, that "the Beatles are bigger than Jesus" and for which John Lennon had to issue a public apology.

I remember as a child, I went once a week to Hebrew school where I learned about Judaism. I was maybe about eleven or twelve at the time, so I knew what sex was—or, at least, I kind of knew. The teacher was talking to us about Shabbat, and she pointed something out which shocked the ears of me and my classmates. She said that, in Judaism, it's actually seen as "good" and a "commandment" to have sex on Shabbat—the holiest day of the Jewish calendar. I remember hearing this and feeling absolutely bewildered and confused. I couldn't reconcile these two ideas in my mind: holiness and sex; Judaism and sex; pleasure and sex; fun and religion. I was only a twelve-year-old at the time, so I didn't engage in much reflection on this confusion at the time. I probably just thought: my teacher has no idea what she's talking about, and moved on. But now, with the fortune of hindsight, I know exactly why I thought this way. Because even though I was Jewish, and grew up in a secular household, and had parents from the sixties and seventies generation, in my heart and soul I had the morals of a seventeenth-century Puritan in Salem, Massachusetts. As I said, culture dies a hard death. Morality dies a hard death. At this moment, somewhere in heaven, a Puritan was doing a victory lap.

Say what you will about the Torah, one thing for sure is that it is very old. Like, really old. Whether you believe it was written by God, by Moses, by a hermit in a cave in the Negev desert, or by the equivalent of a "think tank" from Ancient Judea, it is not disputed that is was written a really, *really* long time ago. This means, of course, that it has a kind of "purity" to it which more modern works do not have. In short, the Torah was written before more "trendy" theories of morality and what is "good" could get their hands on it.

Who was Abraham? I grew up learning that Abraham was a "righteous" and "good" man. But until recently, I never really questioned what "righteous" and "good" actually meant. So what did I do? I basically just saw Abraham's character through the prism of this kind of "herd" or "slave" morality and Puritan values. Until I actually began studying the Torah itself and reading Nietzsche, here is how I saw Abraham in my mind's eye: some poor nomad walking around the desert, being nice and smiling to everyone he met, turning the other cheek and so on. Now, I grew up as a Puritan—oops, I mean, as a Jew—in America, so my conception of this biblical figure was filtered through this protestant culture in America. In a way, I kind of just saw Abraham as Jesus with a beard.

Guess what? Abraham was much more like Odysseus than Jesus. Abraham was a baller. We read in the Torah that he had been one of Mesopotamia's most wealthy and powerful men when God summoned him to go to Israel. He was not one of the peasants or one of the herd. He was one of the nobility. He was a patrician, a master. He shook hands with kings and with pharaohs. He also was heroic and a warrior, mounting a rescue operation during the Battle of the Nine Kings and during the Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The reasons why Abraham really was "good" and "righteous" are not the same reasons why we, with our modern biases, today see him as "good" and "moral." I don't know about you, but I find this to be more than a little concerning.

Let's return to Abraham and Lot for a moment. The case of Abraham and Lot provides a nice illustration in master morality and slave morality. When the parsha opens, we find Abraham

in his tent. He sees three guests approaching. When he sees the guests, he begins preparing his household for them so he can appropriately entertain them. If you read the passage, you see how Abraham is absolutely overflowing with joy and generosity to help these guests. He is running up and down the house, bringing out bread and cheese, setting the table, washing the guests' feet. Then, when they leave, Abraham escorts them out on their way. He is supremely generous, kind, compassionate, and attentive.

Now, here you might be thinking, wait a minute: didn't you just say that these values of kindness and compassion and equality are herd values and not master values? Here we must bring up a very important distinction. Masters, too, can be, and *should be* kind, generous, and compassionate. The difference is that this generosity and kindness comes from an overflow of the power they are already feeling. Their positive energy inevitably flows onto others. This is *true* kindness and *true* generosity—when it comes from a place of power, of love, of abundance. This is what we might call *healthy* selfishness. You can give so much more to others when you yourself are already overflowing with goodness. This is, by the way, a teaching of yoga. When you make your own body and mind more vibrant and powerful, this will allow you to share this energy with others. By contrast, when "kindness" and "compassion" comes from slave morality, it is coming from a place of resentment, of weakness, of hatred. So, to return to the earlier question, charity, kindness, and empathy are *good* but only if they are coming from the right place. This idea is captured well in Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*. In section 260, Nietzsche writes that, for a noble person, "in the foreground stands a feeling of fullness, the power which wants to overflow, the happiness of high tension, the consciousness of riches which wants to give and deliver: - the noble person also helps the unfortunate, however not, or hardly ever, from pity, but more in response to an impulse which the excess of power produces." Let me repeat that last sentence: "The noble person helps the unfortunate, not from pity, but more in response to an impulse which the excess of power produces."

With Abraham and these guests, we see how Abraham was overflowing with strength, power, and nobility. Because of this abundance, the goodness radiating from within him naturally flowed onto others as well. This, for Nietzsche, would be true generosity and true kindness. But take the case of, say, the French Revolution. Did the people of France overthrow the nobility because of their overflowing positive energy and this extension of kindness to all citizens? Or did they start a revolution out of hatred for the ruling elites and *mask* this hatred as love for all people? Indeed, how often is love coming from hate, equality coming from jealousy, kindness coming from resentment, "power" coming from weakness? How much better would it be if love comes from love, if power comes from strength, if kindness comes from abundance?

In a parallel scene later in the parsha, we find Lot in his home in Sodom and Gomorrah. Two guests arrive and Lot welcomes them into his house. Yet, unlike Abraham, Lot is not overflowing with good feelings. He gives the guests bread and cheese, but he does so without the exuberance and energy of Abraham. The scene with Abraham is simply bursting with positivity, with optimism, with a sense of rising and joy. Lot's, by contrast, feels sinister and foreboding. To an outsider, the two scenes would appear rather similar. In both cases, we see a man preparing his house for guests. But Lot, lacking the energy of the master seen in Abraham, prepares his house from a place of negativity and of unhappiness. These two scenes, then, demonstrate the most *dangerous* aspect of herd morality. It often *looks like* master morality to a superficial observer. But it is hollow and poisoned at its core. As we read further in the scene, we see, indeed, how unhealthy Lot is at his core, despite his nice home and his friendliness. Later in the scene, an unruly mob comes to Lot's home and demands that he release the two guests to

them so the crowd. Here is what Lot says: I have two virgin daughters, take them instead. This is obviously a repulsive act on Lot's part, to offer up his two daughters to an unruly mob so that his dinner guests won't be harmed. This moment should give us pause. Lot seems to think that he is somehow doing the right thing here. He believes that treating guests with hospitality is an important value, and somehow, in his deluded mind, he thinks it appropriate to offer his two daughters to the crowd. Lot's morality, it seems, is not coming from his own energy and abundance of good feelings, but rather from what his culture has told him he should see as good and evil. His culture has so emphasized hospitality and friendliness that he adopts these values as the greatest good. His moral guidance is so distorted and disturbed that he views hospitality to guests as more important than protecting one's innocent children from danger.

One particularly poignant moment occurs in this story, which is often overlooked. God decides he will destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, basically for making Las Vegas seem like a nunnery. Lot hears that his city will be destroyed, and he tries to warn his family to escape the town before God brings down fire and brimstone upon it. Yet, when he tells his sons-in-law to escape, it is said that they thought Lot was joking and didn't take him seriously. Lot is exposed. Despite his nice home, his friendliness, his so-called "niceness"—these were all just masks on top of an ultimately weak, unhealthy, unheroic core. And, at a moment of crisis, this became apparent to all.

Let us return for a moment to my friend and Attorney K. in the elevator. She told me with absolute conviction that he was "a really nice guy" or, in other words, a "really good guy," a "really moral guy." This was after a thirty-second conversation in an elevator. What made him so "nice," so "moral"? Perhaps that he was friendly, dressed well, asked how her day was going? Was it a modern-day Lot in that elevator? How often do we mistake friendliness for goodness? How often do we confuse being *nice* with being *good*? How often do we form moral judgments about people based on moral standards we may not have examined? What if Abraham had walked into the elevator that day and met my friend. Abraham, we can only imagine, would have had no time for small talk. How would my friend have reacted if Abraham, consumed with greater priorities, had not asked her about her day or cracked a joke? Would Abraham also have received her unwavering conclusion of being a "really nice guy"? No, I don't think so. Even Abraham's best thirty-second elevator pitch could not convey that.