

Episode 23

Vayikra

We are nearly halfway through the Torah and, in turn, *The Schrift*. So, at this point you might be wondering: how is it that a nice Jewish American boy like this came to want to learn *German*? It's a fair question, and one that I receive quite often, usually interspersed with profanity. I can answer in one word: Kafka. When I was twenty-one, I read Kafka's novel *The Trial* and was seduced by the story. This experience would transform into a lifelong pursuit of the great Jewish writer from Prague. At this point, I did not speak a word of German. I recall the moment of transformation well.

I was sitting in a literature seminar on European Modernism. I was living in France at the time, doing a study abroad semester in Aix-en-Provence. The professor, Leigh Smith, was teaching us *The Trial*. And I remember a moment which would set my life on a new course. He said that the title of the book in German was, of course, not *The Trial* but rather *Der Prozess*. *Der Prozess*. He then wrote "*Der Prozess*" in what looked like jagged letters on the board. I stared at this word in wonder and even horror. I immediately recognized the connection with this word, *Prozess*, and the English word *process*. As Professor Smith pointed out, the word "*Prozess*" has a different taste, a different character, a different *Geschmack*, than *Trial*. There is something romantic and glorified about the word "trial," whereas process sounds rudimentary, routine, automatized, pre-ordained. I realized that, in the translation of Kafka's novel into English from *Prozess* to *Trial*, something critical had been lost. Moreover, there was also something about the word *Prozess* itself. Maybe it had something to do with the innocent letter "c" being replaced by the wild and jagged letter "z." I can't say exactly why. But compared to the English word *process*, *Prozess* seemed more stern, more haunting, more estranging, for lack of a better word, more German.

To this point in my life, I had absolutely no desire to learn German or to even visit Germany. But after this moment, something new began to ferment within me. A curiosity had been piqued. I began to read more and more Kafka. I decided that I wanted to read him in his language, in German. And so, about a year-and-a-half later, I clicked "play" on one of those "teach yourself German" audio courses. At the time, I felt confident that I was on my way to grasping the *true* Kafka, to understanding what *he* really meant, to unlocking the mysteries of his literature, which could never be found out in English translation.

Now, well over a decade later, I can finally read Kafka in German, although not without a cup of coffee and a dictionary by my side. And, ironically, I can tell you that I probably understand Kafka less now than I did when I first read him as a mere college kid. Learning German certainly helped me understand aspects of Kafka's literature which otherwise I would have missed. I am now clued into certain puns, connotations, and tones, which get lost in the translation. But, at the same time, learning German also estranged me from Kafka. When I read Kafka in English it was as though we were quite literally speaking the same language. When I read Kafka in German, he becomes somehow less accessible to me. Because German is not my mother tongue, even if I speak it well, it doesn't have the same resonance and gravity to my ear as does English. Now, perhaps this barrier can and will be dissolved as my German approaches the level of a native speaker—so help me God.

But it was not just the breaking of the language barrier which ironically brought me further away from my goal. As I have gone through graduate school, dozens of other obstacles have appeared in my path to obstruct the way to the true Kafka. When I first began reading

Kafka, I simply read the book and analyzed what I thought about it. But in literary studies, there are seemingly endless ways with which to approach a text. Here are some of the most well-known methodologies: structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstruction, New Criticism, Marxist, Gender Studies, Queer Theory, Colonialism, Post-Colonialism. No one of these ways is the “right” way—each theory is valid in its own capacity. And then, within each of these categories there are sub-categories and sub-theories. Kafka has been studied from all of these lenses.

The moment I think I have something new to say about Kafka, I am usually checked and put in my place. When I tell a professor my idea, his response is typically, if you’re interested in that question, go and read these three to five books *first* as they have already dealt with it. Then, when you open those books, you find hundreds of footnotes to more books you should check out, which then have additional footnotes, and on and on.

My experience was a bit like that of Mickey Mouse in the Disney Film *Fantasia*. In an episode of that film, “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice,” based on a poem by Goethe, Mickey uses magic to get a broom to clean the floor for him. Yet, he can’t get the broom to stop cleaning. So, instead, Mickey splits the broom in two pieces with an axe, but then these two pieces turn into two brooms. Mickey’s original problem has now been doubled. Pretty soon, there are now hundreds of these brooms spilling water onto the floor as the entire magical enterprise spins out of control. Each time I figure out one riddle of Kafka’s, for example, reading him in German, dozens of others sprout up in place of the first conundrum.

In the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, there had been a belief that, as one acquired more information and knowledge about a topic, one could attain greater and greater expertise, eventually mastering it. One needed simply to apply Reason to Empirical knowledge and the great questions of life could be solved: questions about morality, government, religion, economics, and so forth. The American Constitution, perhaps the most ambitious document ever composed, was written under this framework. While increasing knowledge and vigorously applying reason may help us to master *certain* subjects, it seems to be that, as shown in the case of Kafka, some things are beyond our capacity to know. And the more we investigate the topic, the more literature we read, the more logic we apply, the more confused and lost we become. Late eighteenth-century philosophers like David Hume and Immanuel Kant, writing during the twilight of the Enlightenment, argued that much of life is inherently unknowable. Even Kant, who championed reason throughout his career, maintained that no amount of knowledge or experience would allow humans to understand the universe as it really is. He applied this unknowability to the existence of God, the existence of a soul, knowledge of the self, and morality.

So, Reason is ineffective in answering what we might call “unanswerable” questions. Not only that, but the more we attempt to approach these questions through Reason, the more we flail around. The question, we might say, metastasizes, and soon we have hundreds of questions and are even further away from the answer. The pursuit of Kafka expresses the idea, as I already mentioned. But this is also a perennial theme in Kafka’s literature itself. It can be seen most vividly in his short story and parable “Before the Law”, written in 1914. This parable tells of a man who comes from the countryside to gain access to the Law. Right away, we sense a problem. Kafka uses the loaded word “the Law.” What is the Law? The Law can be moral, religious, manmade, divine. A man from the country cannot simply expect to knock on the door to the Law, as it were, and immediately gain access. We somehow know already that this endeavor is not going to end well for the man from the country.

When he comes to the doorway, he is met by a gatekeeper. The man from the country innocently asks if he may be allowed inside. But the gatekeeper says that entry is not possible. The man from the countryside asks if perhaps he will later be allowed through, into the Law. The gatekeeper responds: “Maybe. But not now.” So, the man from the countryside decides to wait. After some time, he bends down to try to look past the gatekeeper and through the door. The gatekeeper just laughs. He says: “Sure, if you want to go through, then just go ahead and try. But remember: I am powerful. And I am only the lowest doorkeeper. After you pass through my door, you will find another door with another guard. And each guard will be more powerful than the one before. The mere sight of the third guard I myself cannot even bear.” The man from the country ends up spending his entire life waiting, never to even make it through the first door. The story concludes with the man asking, “Why is it that I am the only one who ever came here, who ever tried to gain access to the Law?” Cryptically and notoriously, the guard responds as follows: “Because this doorway was made only for you. And now I am going to shut it.”

The parsha for this week is Vayikra, the beginning to the third book of Moses, known in Hebrew as Vayikra and in English and Greek as Leviticus. From the very opening lines, we are met with an immense challenge. Here is how Vayikra kicks off: “The Lord called to Moses and spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting, saying: Speak to the Israelite people, and say to them.” Here is how it would go in Hebrew:

וַיִּקְרָא אֶל-מֹשֶׁה ; וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֵלָיו , מֵאֵהָל מוֹעֵד לֵאמֹר
 דַּבֵּר אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל , וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם

Notice how strange this is phrased. God *calls* to Moses and *speaks* to him, *saying*: *Speak* to the children of Israel, and *say* to them. This phrase is super awkward, clumsy, and confusing. As far as I can count, there are five links in the chain from God’s original message and its transmission to the Israelites. First, God *calls* Moses—vayikra. Second, God *speaks* to Moses—vayidaber. Third, God *says* to Moses—le-ehmor. Fourth, God *commands* Moses *to speak*—diber. And then fifth, God *commands* Moses what exactly to *say*—amarta. The actual law, which we don’t get to until halfway through the second verse, is about sacrificing cattle. Why not just start out the passage with the law itself: Here is how you should sacrifice cattle. Why do we need to have this long and awkward chain of speaking, saying, calling between God and Moses and the Israelites? After all, we know already that God is speaking to Moses who is then going to speak to the Israelites. Moreover, you can hear in both the English and the Hebrew that the five words involving speech are all a bit different—calling, *Vayikra*, speaking, *vayidaber*, saying, *le-ehmor*, speak! Diber!, and say, *amarta*. Why use such an array of verbs and conjugations of those verbs? The verse could have just said, “God said to Moses,” and moved on.

The move the Torah seems to be making here is the same as that in Kafka’s parable “Before the Law.” As I discussed in episode 21 on Albert Einstein and the sun, understanding God is not as straightforward as knocking on the door and expecting to be immediately let inside. In many ways, God is beyond human comprehension, at least when we try to access Him through Reason and logic alone. If we try to go through one door, and to answer just one small question about God, we will suddenly find another door, with an even more formidable doorkeeper.

The Torah, then, is being very playful in this opening to *Vayikra*. In this long chain of saying, and speaking, and calling, the Torah is indicating that a kind of labyrinth awaits the Israelites in their attempt to understand God’s true message. What the Israelites finally get has already gone through five filters, five whispers down the lane, if you will. The mere existence of the Talmud bears this out. The Talmud is the commentary on the Torah. If you go to a rabbi’s house, say, and see his books, you will notice that the Torah takes up only a sliver of one shelf.

Meanwhile, the books of the Talmud require perhaps two or three entire bookcases all to their own. The ink which has been spilled trying to interpret the “real meaning” of the Torah is more than a hundredfold than the Torah itself. This is how things turn out when you try to go through the first door to the law, or when you begin studying German to get closer to the “real” Kafka.

Yet, there may be something even deeper going on here. Let’s take a step back for a moment and think about the Man from the Country and about the opening lines to Vayikra. We read these passages and think that it is only the Man from the Country and the Israelites who must go through this labyrinth. But, actually, the labyrinth is even more layered than we thought. Because *we* as readers are also involved. Not only must the man from the countryside need to pass through all of these gatekeepers to get to the Law; we, as *readers*, must go through our own doorways in order to understand the story, and to *then* understand the Law.

The same dynamic occurs in *Vayikra*. For God’s message to reach the Israelites directly from the mouth of Moshe, five verbs were required. But what about us, the readers? How many filters did the text need to go through before we would experience it? First, it had to be written down—Moshe did that part. But then it had to be copied, and printed, and perhaps translated into another language. Finally, the message then had to be processed from our eyes into our highly subjective brains. To get back to the original Law which God wished to convey is going to be one-thousand times more circuitous than it was for the original Israelites who at least got to hear it from Moses.

But, in fact, all is not lost. When I added these additional layers between the reader and the text, you may have felt the urge to smile or even to chuckle. There is something *humorous* about the idea that the text is alerting us to the own difficulty we will have in trying to decipher it.

The humor you sense derives from the irony of this situation. And irony almost always has traces of humor within it if not full-blown hilariousness. We don’t *expect* that a text should alert us to our own inability to understand it. We see the text as a kind of passive object waiting for us to come along and make sense of it. Yet now, the text is speaking directly to us, and in turn, speaking to itself and its own existence. There is a specific literary term known for this type of irony and that is *romantic irony*. Romantic irony occurs when literature becomes self-conscious and reflects on itself.. In dragging the reader into the transmission process, the work is ironizing itself in its ability to transmit objective meaning. In both “Before the Law” and the opening to Vayikra, the text is becoming conscious of itself. By calling out the reader as another “gateway” and another “filter” to obstruct the true meaning, the text is, in a way, doubting itself. It is calling attention to the *limits* of the written word, to the limits of literature.

Here, it might seem as literature has collapsed in on itself, has reached its nadir. But, in fact, help is just around the corner. Who is coming to rescue us? Friedrich Schlegel is coming, the greatest theorist of German Romantic irony, who I discussed in Episode 0 on the death of Moses. Circa 1800, Schlegel argued that this moment, when the text calls itself into question, is the moment when the text achieves a kind of completeness and eternity. When a text *ironizes* itself, it undermines itself, it challenges its own predominance. Yet, this is not just regular, run-of-the-mill irony which only mocks and negates. The text, while doubting itself through its own reflexivity, is also continually propping itself back up, substantiating itself, by its being a text. Put another way, the text is undermining and propagating itself in the same instant. Schlegel would jump on this dynamic. What happens when we hold two mirrors up to each other? They reflect each other back, and quite literally extend this reflection infinite times into infinity. The

same occurs when a text holds a mirror up to itself; it creates a kind of endless ping-ponging of reflection within itself, allowing it to become transcendental.

In Episode 0, I discussed how Moshe's death just before reaching Israel is what allowed him to achieve a kind of eternity. His non-arrival situates him in a kind of fragmentary state. For us, he will always be *on the way* to Israel, and this "on the way" places Moshe in a state of becoming rather than arriving. The story of Moshe is like a fragment, in that it is always re-beginning itself, and thereby in a permanent state of motion. Schlegel captured this dynamic when he wrote that "a fragment must be complete in itself, like a hedgehog." Hedgehogs are always expanding and contracting, just like the fragment, which is always interrupting itself and completing itself at the same point.

When a text reflects on its own limits to convey meaning, the hedgehog of infinity reappears. The text's questioning of itself involves this same dynamic of an eternal interrupting of and opening of itself simultaneously. This ping-ponging of reflection, known as romantic irony, somehow frees the text from its chains and transforms an emptiness into a kind of omniscience. Schlegel captures this idea in his famous fragment number 116. Schlegel writes the following about Romantic Ironic Art: "It can also—more than any other form—hover at the midpoint between the portrayed and the portrayer, free of all real and ideal self-interest, on the wings of poetic reflection, and can raise that reflection again and again to a higher power, can multiply it in an endless succession of mirrors."

I recognize that this is a difficult concept to grasp. And yet, this elusiveness is what makes romantic irony so powerful. It comes from our same frustration and yet hope as when we look at two mirrors reflecting each other into infinity. We marvel at the endlessness of this reflective process, yet also feel exasperated that we will never get to the final mirror. Romantic Irony wants to encourage us to be comfortable with finding the infinite in this ungraspable place where the text reproduces itself through criticism of itself. Romantic Irony wants to teach us that it is the very *ungraspability* of this moment which *makes* it so special and eternalizing.

Kafka has another story which sheds light on this question. It is called "The Top," written sometime between 1917 and 1923. It describes children playing with a spinning top on the playground. Meanwhile, an old philosopher lies in wait. He wants to understand the spinning top, believing that if he can grasp it, he will be able to pin down its essence. So, the philosopher chases after the spinning top, finally pouncing on it and arresting its motion. Yet, as soon as the old philosopher grabs the spinning top, it stops spinning and lies dead in his hand. The text reads: when he held the silly piece of wood in his hand, he felt nauseated. The old philosopher throws down the top and the children pick it up and begin playing with it and spinning it again.

The children approach the top the same way we ought to approach Romantic Irony and the beginning to Vayikra. Vayikra is constructed so that it reflects back on itself, setting into motion an endless mirroring process. We are tempted to be like the old philosopher, and seize the text, to try to trace the footprints all the way back to God and what he actually said to Moshe before it went through its filtering process. Yet, we may be better to approach the text like children rather than philosophers, just marveling at its eternal spinning, and seeing in this upward spiraling the universe's secrets which so eluded the old philosopher and the man from the countryside.

In my case, many years ago, I stepped through the first doorway to try to figure out Kafka. And yet, here I am, and all I see are more and more doorways in front of me with evermore formidable guards. This is a typical experience, I believe, for those who wish to grapple Kafka. The more I read about Kafka, the more I chase after his true meaning, the further

away I become. How do I make it to the other side of the labyrinth, how do I find some sense of *completion* and *wholeness* in the pursuit of Kafka. There can be only one answer to this question. To do so, I must write an episode of the Schrift, in which I hold up a mirror to myself and call into question my own dogged and errant pursuit of the Prague writer.