

Episode 44

Ki Titzeh

When I used to work in an office as a lawyer, there are some moments which particularly stand out in my mind. I have an image of myself sitting at my desk, on my computer, and doing internet research. But I wasn't *just* working. I was also listening to classical music—usually Mozart. Then, I had a bowl of salad on the desk. In between mouse clicks, I took a hefty bite of salad, filling my mouth with lettuce and avocado and olive oil. On my computer screen, one of the windows was devoted to legal research, but the other was devoted to sending occasional chat messages to friends. And then, of course, my iPhone would buzz every few minutes or so with a text message—usually from a girl I was dating.

When I think back on these days, I shudder a bit. An entire Mozart concerto would play in my office, and I wouldn't hear a single note. I could scarcely enjoy the salad I was eating, as the whole time I was trying just to not let olive oil drip onto my keyboard. Each text message I received was really more of a shot of dopamine than an actual exchange of feelings and thoughts. And meanwhile, all of these side activities were overwhelmed by the persistent thought that I wasn't reading the legal cases fast enough, that I was wasting time eating, or texting, or changing the music instead of, you know, actually working.

It is stressful just to think about, now years later. And this was before I even had Instagram.

For most of human history, it was rather difficult, if not impossible, to do more than one thing at a time—to mix, to multitask. It just wasn't an option. If you went for a walk, you went for a walk—there were no headphones you could listen to, no phone on which you could chat. If you sat down to read, you sat down to read. There was no recorded music to turn on in the background, let alone a device to play that music.

Food, too, was more simple. Bread, wine, olive oil, dates, milk, fish, meat, salt. That was what was on the menu, as it were. In restaurants today, by contrast, every entrée seems to have some kind of “drizzle” or “glaze” on the top, there is an extra charge for sweet potatoes instead of normal potatoes, and the waiter will ask you questions like “are you still working on that?”

Even if you were lucky enough to eat meat back in ancient times, there was a simplicity and humility and gratitude to the meal. The animal was likely local—you probably even knew him or her. Today, by contrast, just one animal at a time is often seen as not delicious enough. In Germany, for example, the most popular ground meat is not made just of beef, but of beef and pork—the cow and the pig—mixed and swirled together like chocolate-vanilla ice cream.

The desire to mix, to multitask, to add-in, comes from a wish to increase pleasure. When I worked in my office, I did this basic calculation. I reasoned: I get pleasure from music, I get pleasure from eating, I get pleasure from texting, I get pleasure from chatting—why not mix them all together and thereby attain maximal pleasure? Yet, as we know, it is often the case that less is more. By trying to heap on more pleasure, we end up not with joy but with stress, confusion, and emptiness.

In several previous episodes of *The Schrift*, I talked about the artistic movement in Germany known as *Sturm und Drang*. This movement was led by the young, up-and-coming artists, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller. The ideology of *Sturm und Drang* was to rebel against the dominance of French art and French culture in the German lands. In the eighteenth century, France was the America of its day, and Paris was New York City. That is, for

all questions of fashion, architecture, style, theater, music, and so forth, European countries let France, and particularly Paris, be their guide.

In Berlin, for example, the eighteenth-century emperor Frederik the Great, Friedrich der Große, was an unapologetic Francophile. French was the language of the court. Frederik spoke German only with his lowliest servants and with his dogs, whom he loved dearly. At German courts all over the German lands, this is how it was done. French was spoken at court, palaces were designed to look like Versailles, operas and plays were done in the French style. German was seen as uncool, unhip, barbaric.

Goethe and Schiller wished to change the status quo. They wished to redevelop pride in Germanness and to shame their fellow Germans for choosing another country over their own.

They attempted to do this through the *Sturm und Drang* movement. The purpose of this movement was to throw off the shackles of the French cultural hegemony and inaugurate a new, proud, German art for the youth generation.

Unlike French art, which was refined, balanced, and elegant, *Sturm und Drang* art aimed to be rebellious, rough, loud, and unorthodox. This dynamic can be seen most clearly in Goethe's 1774 play *Götz von Berlichingen* and Schiller's 1781 drama *Die Räuber*. In *Götz von Berlichingen*, the length of scenes was erratic and unpredictable. Some scenes were just a few lines long, whereas others went on for pages. The protagonist, Götz, spoke a rough, coarse German in which he interspersed profanity and lewd remarks. In Schiller's drama *Die Räuber*, Schiller purposely breaks with all of the rules of classical tragedy typical to French drama, and which derive from Aristotle's rules of tragedy. The characters do not speak with elevated language, but rather in low German, filled with exclamations and grunts. The play also occurs over a two-year period and occurs in multiple locations; these artistic decisions also blatantly ran afoul of eighteenth-century French drama.

Yet, while *Sturm und Drang* exploded French artistic norms in Germany, there was perhaps one problem—or advantage, depending on whom you ask. *Sturm und Drang* had no tradition or rules or ideology of its own with which to replace the vacuum it had created. There were no rules of *Sturm und Drang*; it was anarchy. Schiller and Goethe were just making up the new rules as they went along. In fact, they refused to label *Sturm und Drang* to any aesthetical system; they denied any attempt to turn *Sturm und Drang* into an integrative, artistic, or political concept. The rules of *Sturm und Drang* were that there were no rules.

But *Sturm und Drang*, in fact, did not last very long. It lasted, in fact, only about twelve years or so, from 1774 to 1786. In 1786, Goethe began to feel disappointed and disillusioned with the *Sturm und Drang* movement. He saw it as naïve, juvenile, even ugly. This rapid change occurred when Goethe traveled to Italy. This period would be known as Goethe's Italian Journey. In Italy, now aged thirty-seven, Goethe witnessed for himself the classical art and architecture of Ancient Rome. He saw the Corinthian columns of the Roman Pantheon, he viewed the Ancient Amphitheatre of Pompeii, he read the classical poetry of Cicero.

This journey to Italy completely changed Goethe's view of art. Goethe kept detailed diaries of these days in Italy, which you can read today. These journals were some of Franz Kafka's most beloved reading material. What Goethe discovered was that there was beauty in *simplicity*, in *artistic rules*, in *established form*. For Goethe, this represented a complete reversal from *Sturm und Drang*. *Sturm und Drang* thrived on its anarchy, its disruption of artistic rules, its chaos and rebellious energy. Instead, Goethe decided that art should be eternal, that it should be timeless.

Goethe saw the art of ancient Greece, which the Romans would later adopt, as the culmination of artistic achievement. Ancient Greek art was timeless and perfectly balanced reason with emotion. This was not a return to the French Enlightenment art which had dominated Germany in the eighteenth century. Goethe continued to believe that Enlightenment art was too controlled by Reason and was too temporal.

Goethe took his ideas with him back to Weimar, Germany, and introduced them to Schiller. For the next twenty years or so, Goethe and Schiller would herald a new artistic movement in Germany known as Weimar Classicism. The now not-so-young artists would write ballads, classical dramas, elegies, and odes. The death of Schiller in 1805 typically is seen as the end of the Weimar Classical period, which would then be followed by German Romanticism, which I've discussed in several previous episodes.

In *Sturm und Drang*, Schiller and Goethe did everything they could to *break* the rules of classical art and replace them with an anarchical mix of new ones. Now, in Weimar Classicism, they carefully paid heed to the guidelines of tragedy which Aristotle had set forth millennia ago. This can be witnessed most vividly in one of Goethe's plays from this era, known as *Iphigenie auf Taurus*. It is a play about Iphigenie, the daughter of King Agamemnon and Queen Clytemnestra, and her imprisonment on the island of Tauris in what is today the Crimea.

Goethe's *Sturm und Drang* play *Götz von Berlichingen* had dozens of characters, a mixture of high-and-low speech, scenes of various length, constantly changing settings, and an overall chaotic rhythm. By contrast, Goethe's *Iphigenie auf Taurus* is pure, simple, and smooth. There are only a handful of characters. The scenes and acts are all divided into near equal length. The characters speak in a steady, rhythmic, elevated language.

When you watch Goethe's *Götz von Berlichingen*, you tend to feel stressed, uprooted, frantic. By contrast, Goethe's *Iphigenie auf Taurus* is calming and soothing to view. When you read or watch *Götz*, your mind struggles to keep up with the fast-paced scenes, the dozens of characters, the mixture of slang and formal language. *Iphigenie* feels like leaving a busy city street and walking into a quiet art gallery with high white walls and minimalistic paintings. This results from the balance and simplicity Goethe was able to attain with *Iphigenie* and its adherence to the rules of classicism.

There is something joyful and relaxing about simplicity and, in turn, something stressful about combining and mixing things together. In the Torah this week, we receive commandments which emphasize this idea.

The most well-known law against mixing has to do with eating. This is the law which prohibits mixing dairy foods with meat. This law actually isn't in the *parsha* this week, but let me review it anyway. The law originates from the phrase that you should not boil a baby cow in the milk of its mother. For various reasons which we don't have time to get into, this has been interpreted in Judaism to mean that you can't eat any milk or dairy products alongside meat. It doesn't matter if the dairy came from the mother of the meat you are eating or if the two cows or two animals ever knew each other or ever crossed paths. You still can't mix the two.

Why does the Torah forbid this? To me, it seems that it forbids this because there is something grotesque, excessive, depraved about mixing dairy with meat. It's as though the Torah is saying: dude, come on, man, you already have delicious meat for yourself. Do you really need to now mix it with the breast milk of another animal? Isn't that, well, a little excessive? Can't you just wait a bit and have the milk later? You already took the animal's life just so you can have a tasty meal. If you then go on to douse it in the milk of another animal, particularly its mother, that's well, just kind of gross.

That is, at least to me, what the Torah seems to be getting at. But in this week's chapters, the Torah adds what may be similar prohibitions to the list. The Torah tells us that we are not to wear clothes that contain the materials linen and wool together. We are not allowed to mix linen and wool on our clothing.

This anti-mixing law comes alongside two other anti-mixing laws. One law prohibits the Hebrews from mixing two seeds when they plant their vineyards. And another law prohibits the Hebrews from plowing their fields with an ox and with a donkey together. Rabbis have interpreted these prohibitions to extend to all other sorts of mixtures. For example, Jews are not allowed to cross-breed animals, like the wolf and the dog, or the horse and the donkey. If you ever happen to go to a Jewish farm, expect to see an orderly, well-defined place. The plants will be neatly separated off from each other on the field so that they can grow separately. There will be no Romeo and Juliet stories involving farm animals.

Why does the Torah have all of these prohibitions against mixing together? As I already mentioned, there does seem to be something a bit excessive and grotesque about boiling a baby cow in its mother's milk. But I don't think there is anything inherently decadent about mixing wool together with linen or with allowing an ox and a donkey to plow a field together—so long as they don't have sex, and even then, I don't see that as being so terrible.

The Torah, then, seems to be against excessiveness and exorbitance *for its own sake*. The Torah indicates that there is a certain beauty and gracefulness in *simplicity*, in doing one thing at a time. This was, I think, also one of the reasons which prompted Goethe to discard *Sturm und Drang* for Weimar Classicism. *Sturm und Drang* was excessive, rambunctious, and disorderly. In classicism, Goethe found an elegance and a calmness which allowed his art to become more elevated.

When I sat in my office, eating, drinking, listening to music, texting, typing, and, of course, working, technically I wasn't breaking any of the commandments against mixing things together. I wasn't eating meat and dairy, my shirt was made only of cotton, and the only ass nearby was another lawyer down the hall. But as I see it, I still was breaking the spirit of the laws in the Torah. I just didn't need to be doing all of these things at once simultaneously. It was opulent and excessive. Not only that, but by mixing together so many activities, I prevented myself from enjoying and appreciating any of them.

I'm not saying you shouldn't eat popcorn while you watch a movie or eat a salad made up of dozens of vegetables or listen to music while you work at your computer. I'm merely saying that we should take a step back and look at when we are being excessive. We should be aware of when we are throwing more and more stimuli into our activities just to suck a little more "joy" and "pleasure" out of the experience. But there is no all-encompassing rule for when we cross this line or how far we want to take simplicity. You need to decide for yourself when you are rejoicing in mixture or wallowing in it.

As Albert Einstein said in 1879: make things as simple as possible, but not simpler.

There is a modern word for this, and that is minimalism. Minimalism operates under the simple premise that "less is more." Minimalism teaches us to remove excess from our lives. This doesn't just mean to donate old clothes you don't wear any more or to clean out your inbox—although you should do both of these things regularly. Minimalism can extend to all areas of our lives. Try having just one book or one magazine on your coffee table. Try listening to just one band on Spotify when you workout. Go to only one spot for your vacation and stay there. When you eat, just eat. Don't watch TV or read the newspaper or even let yourself become distracted in conversation. Finally, listen regularly to only one podcast, I'd personally recommend the Schrift.

Minimalism is intimately tied into the practice meditation. When we meditate, we engage in one of the most minimalist experiences imaginable. We remove all distractions and allow ourselves just to be with our surroundings and our breathing. Meditation is basically just making *being* and being itself the object of our experience. Meditation reduces, minimalizes our experience to the one thing of *being*. Shabbat, too, is an exercise in minimalism.

Our minds are not meant to focus on more than one thing at a time. When we try to cram multiple activities and experiences into one moment, on some level we find this stressful. Our minds were not meant to multitask, and when we force them to do so, we create unrest within ourselves, even on an unconscious level.

Now, you don't have to go on staring at the wall anymore and you may all stand up from your armchairs in your perfectly silent living rooms. Because I know you wouldn't dare to multitask, while listening to The Schrift.