

Episode 39 Devarim

[*Don Giovanni* Music]

And I knew - only I understood -
that the horrifying apparition was
Leopold, raised from the dead.
Wolfgang had actually summoned up
his own father to accuse his son
before all the world. It was
terrifying and wonderful to watch.

In the 1984 academy award winning film, the composer Salieri speaks these lines as he watches the opera *Don Giovanni* for the first time. Mozart's father, Leopold has just died. Salieri theorizes that this opera is Mozart's response to his father's death. The statue of the Commendatore which drags Don Giovanni down to hell at the end of the play is, in Salieri's opinion, Mozart's deceased father Leopold in disguise. Leopold's grip on and terrorization of his son Wolfgang was so strong, that the father continues to haunt and torment the son beyond the grave.

This is the popular image of Leopold Mozart that Hollywood and cheap Salzburg walking tours give us. Leopold Mozart is depicted as relentless, villainous, and criminal. By contrast, the son, Wolfgang, is Leopold's hopeless and traumatized victim.

The popular imagination gives us a similar father-son dynamic between Franz Kafka and his father Hermann. Hermann Kafka is the tyrannical, barbarous father, while Franz is the innocent, good-natured, and misunderstood son. Franz himself is largely responsible for this image of Hermann which has been left to the world. Many of Franz's stories, most notably *The Metamorphosis* and "The Judgment," have cruel and merciless father figures and sympathetic son figures. In 1919, Kafka wrote his famous "Letter to his Father." In this letter, Franz basically psychoanalyzes his childhood and blames and accuses his father for not understanding him, mistreating him, bullying him, damaging him.

But Leopold Mozart and Hermann Kafka are hardly the only fathers to have been dragged through the mud and made perhaps eternally infamous. Our culture has latched on to dozens if not hundreds of similar father-son tales. These are tales in which it is the *son* who is on the right side of history, and the *father* who is on the wrong side. The father just doesn't "get" the son, and even though he tries to help, he fails, because he is part of the "old generation." Therefore, the father is objectively "evil" and the son is objectively "good." Hollywood and modern audiences absolutely drink up these cliché stories. Other examples include, say, the relationship between Beach Boys singer Brian Wilson and his father Murry, Michael Jackson and his father Joseph, and even Tiger Woods and his father Earl.

Yet, the more you study these father-son relationships, the more you realize that they are far more complex and nuanced than they first seem. You also notice that the depiction of the relationship is almost laughably one-sided. The father is akin to a man on trial without a defense attorney, but only a team of vicious prosecutors going after him.

By all accounts, Leopold Mozart was kind of a dick. And Hermann Kafka was also kind of a dick as well. But then again, their sons could be, too. Good biographers of Mozart and of Kafka will not denounce Leopold and Hermann but rather defend them against the angry mob.

In her biography of Mozart, Marcia Davenport would write the following about the father Leopold:

The notable part played by Leopold was his recognition of the child as a creative musician more than as a performing prodigy. Whether or not one blames him for dragging the helpless infant around Europe to be the pet of sensation-loving courts, he was certainly profoundly right in his emphasis on the creative. We dare not think what would have been lost had not Leopold had his pedantic conscience, and had he not been able to temper this with his great love. Wolfgang would surely have been a flash-in-the-pan, a brief blaze destined to be extinguished by his own weaknesses, of which he had many. He could have been cheap, would have been impermanent. As it happened, God was for once intelligent as well as kind. He planted in Wolfgang Mozart what is probably the purest, sheerest genius ever born in man, and then placed it in the care of Leopold. The resultant flowering was no accident.

And in his short revisionist biography of Kafka, entitled *Why You Should Read Kafka before You Waste Your Life*, James Hawes would be sure to offer a defense of the father Hermann. Hawes writes:

Few men who were never convicted of any crime have been so thoroughly pilloried as Hermann Kafka. The standard accounts of Kafka's life make him seem an unfeeling brute who so efficiently terrorized his only son, treating him practically like an insect, as to make him permanently lacking in self-confidence, fatally unfit for adulthood. And yet, hold on. What are all these accounts based on? The (supposedly) autobiographical testimony of Kafka himself. Hermann Kafka was a real man, not a story.

Why does our culture latch onto these stories of parents who “just don't get it” and children who must suffer due to the cluelessness of their parents? I would argue that, in fact, it goes back to German Romanticism. The biggest mistake you can commit is to think Romanticism was just a nineteenth-century cultural movement for which the heyday is long since past. In episode 26, however, I emphasized that Romanticism is, today, stronger than ever. It is, ironically, far stronger today than it was during the Romantic movement itself.

What is Romanticism? The short answer is that Romanticism was a cultural period which prized certain archetypes. One of these was the idea of the lonely, misunderstood genius. This was, for example, Werther from Goethe's breakthrough novel. But if you would like a modern image of the Romantic hero, picture the man with John Lennon glasses, unkempt hair, smoking a cigarette, sitting in a café with his MacBook Air working on his novel. Before Romanticism, these societal outcasts would have been scorned as being strange, weak, perhaps even devil-worshippers. What Romanticism did was to invert the dynamic. Now, it was not the loner who “didn't get it,” but rather “society.” Romanticism made the outcast “normal” and the normal people “comical.”

Romantic heroes were loners but they were also something else. They were invariably *young*. And who was most guilty of not understanding them? Their parents. The previous

generation. The older folks who just didn't get that times had changed. German Romanticism was an outgrowth of the earlier cultural movement known as *Sturm und Drang*. I've discussed *Sturm und Drang* in previous episodes. But to recap: this was a movement in Germany in the 1770s and 1780s led by the literary giants Goethe and Schiller. But they were not literary giants at the time. They were young, passionate, fiery rebels who wanted to bring down the cultural status quo in Germany. The cultural status quo at the time was French courtly culture. Goethe and Schiller and the rest of the *Sturm und Drang* cast wished to *rebel* against the previous generations and ignite, instead, an authentic German youth culture in the German lands.

The dynamic was clear: the youth *gets* it, and the parents *don't*.

In 1781, Friedrich Schiller would publish his first play known as *Die Räuber* or *The Robbers*. It is about a father figure, named Maximilian, who is the count of a small kingdom. He has two sons, Karl and Franz. Let's focus on the character of Karl, who is also the hero of the novel. Karl is away at university. He is tricked by his brother Franz into believing that the father, Maximilian, has chosen Franz to be his heir apparent. This sends Karl into a rage. He forms a group of marauding robbers who roam the countryside murdering, looting, plundering, and basically just being dicks. The father Maximilian, meanwhile, sits alone in his castle, totally ignorant as to what his sons are really like.

It is, admittedly, a rather silly story, and why it made Schiller so famous I will never fully understand. But what Schiller did accomplish in this play was to capture the times. He showed how the new youth generation were rebels without a cause, how they had anger and energy which they didn't know how to channel, how they were fundamentally *different* from their parents, and how their parents were hopeless to try to understand them.

The legacy of Romanticism and *Sturm und Drang* can be felt more than ever today in the present. I asked why we so eagerly latch on to these stories of the misunderstood son and the cruel and clueless father. It is because we have all been indoctrinated by Romanticism and *Sturm und Drang*. These cultural movements have trained us to believe that it is the new generation which is on the right side of history, and the old generation which is hopelessly and dangerously ignorant.

If you look across the last few centuries, you will see this dynamic repeat itself again and again. The kids rebelling against the parents. The kids making the parents look foolish and old-fashioned. We saw it in Romanticism; we saw it in the Revolutions of 1848; we saw it in the Roaring Twenties; we saw it in the Sixties; and now we see it today with the rise of the smartphone and Generation Instagram.

But here's the interesting thing. For 99.9% of human history, it was the opposite. It was the parents who were "cool" and who understood life, and the children who were the inexperienced idiots. In most hunter-gatherer cultures, for example, it was the tribe elders who were respected and who were allowed to make the kill in great hunting expeditions. The younger men—the adolescents and the twenty-somethings—were scorned as being immature, stupid, and naïve.

One reason for the shift in modern times is obviously the rise of technology. It used to be that, there was no new technology. Everything learned had to be passed down. One stood before their elders in awe at their seeming omniscience. Now, however, it is the youth which is privy to the latest technological trends, whereas the older generations are stuck using outdated tools. But it's not just technology. It is also the deep Romantic roots of our society. Technological advancements combine with Romantic ideals and work in tandem with one another. The result is that now when the parents seem to lag behind, a captivating and clever ideology is ready at hand

to justify the estrangement between generations. As always, Hollywood is not to blame for this Romantic ideology. Rather, Hollywood is only a mirror of our culture, reflecting back our centuries-long love affair with the Romantic.

In Kafka's generation of German-speaking Jews, the estrangement between father and son was particularly pronounced. Kafka, and all of his contemporaries, wished to leave their parents behind in the dust. This was a historical period I discussed with you guys in episode 26. Kafka was born in 1883. His father, Hermann, was born in 1852. Hermann's generation was the first generation of Jews to be granted full rights in Austria, under the emperorship of Franz-Josef I. (By the way, *Franz* Kafka was named after this emperor. This is how much Hermann loved the old Hapsburg.) Hermann's generation were eager to assimilate, speak German, serve in the Austrian army—which Hermann proudly did—and basically leave the Jewish ghetto long behind. This was the generation which wanted to “get ahead,” to start businesses, attend universities, and just, for the first time in centuries, be able to be Jewish and also have a “normal” life.

But when Franz was born thirty years later, the enthusiasm of being a Jew with equal protection under the law had worn off. Franz and his friends were dissatisfied. They asked questions which their fathers would never dare have asked. So what if we have equal rights? We are still hated. What is so bad about speaking Yiddish? Maybe there's something to it. Should we perhaps consider reconnecting with our ghetto roots rather than pretending like Judaism didn't exist before 1848? Should we—gasp—leave Europe entirely and go live in Palestine? For Hermann Kafka, all of these questions would have just been stupid—and dangerous. Yet these were questions that his son, Franz, was asking on a daily basis. And it was not just Franz and Hermann who had this estrangement, of course. It was also, to name a few, Sigmund Freud and his father Jakob Freud, Gershom Scholem and his father Arthur Scholem, and Hannah Arendt and her mother Martha. All of these young thinkers shared two things in common. One, their parents were bourgeois, assimilated, German-speaking, and basically attempting to live the American—oops, I mean German—dream. Two, all of these young thinkers had grandparents or great-grandparents, or distant grandparents, who were fully Orthodox, Yiddish-speaking denizens of the ghetto. And I will add a third: in all of these families, a distant grandfather was, without fail, a famous rabbi from some Polish or Ukrainian town.

The children of the first generation of emancipated Jews believed, then, that their parents just didn't understand, were ignorant, were boorishly patriotic. Romantic theories of the misunderstood individual, the lonely artist, only added ideological fuel to the fire. Let's consider Sigmund Freud, for a moment. Do you think it's just a coincidence that half of his psychology rested on the premise that a child unconsciously wishes to murder his father? And is it just a coincidence that Freud's theory so resonated with the young Jewish men of this new era? I didn't think so.

Kafka absolutely loved to dramatize the misfortune of his generation. He believed that he and his friends were caught between the “progress” made by the parents, and the barriers to further Jewish freedom. Thus Kafka famously quipped in a letter to his best friend Max Brod: “Most young Jews who began to write German wanted to leave Jewishness behind them, and their fathers approved of this. But with their hind legs they were still glued to the father's Jewishness and with their waving front legs they found no new ground. The ensuing despair became their inspiration.”

In ancient times, as I already mentioned, fathers got far more respect than they have in the last centuries. Children, by contrast, got little respect at all. They were viewed more as

playthings and not-fully-formed adults than as individuals with their own wills, psyches, and complexities. The father knew everything, and the child knew nothing. That was just the way it was. This can be witnessed merely in the way people used to refer to themselves. People didn't have *last names*; they addressed themselves as the son of their father. They themselves were not important; the father was the man that mattered. In more primitive societies, this custom remains strong. Consider the prince of Saudi Arabia who is called *Bin-Salman*—son of Salman. Or consider the many English last names that end with “son”—*Johnson, Robertson, Stevenson*. These would have simply just meant, son of John, son of Robert, son of Steven.

In this week's parsha, Devarim, we begin the fifth and final book of the Torah. I discussed the word Devarim in episode 27. In modern Hebrew, devarim means “things.” But actually, this is just a poor modern translation of the real meaning of devarim. What devarim means is speeches, or words, related to the beginner Hebrew sentence, Ani medaber Ivrit, I speak Hebrew. Why is this book called *Devarim*? Because it is in this book where Moshe gives his final *speech*, his *parting words*, to the children of Israel, before they will invade and conquer Canaan. If you thought your mother could talk your ear off, then let me tell you: she's got nothing on Moshe. The entire fifth book of the Torah is just Moshe talking, talking, talking, *devar-ing*. And he has quite a lot to say.

How does Moshe begin his mountaintop speech? After a few introductory remarks and some moments of gravitas, Moshe brings up the story of the spies. The story of the spies. Do you remember the story of the spies? I discussed this in Episode 33. This was one of the most humiliating stories in the Torah, in the history of Israel. Basically, to refresh your memory, Moshe sent spies to scope out the territory of Canaan. The spies came back and told Moshe: this is a great land, tons of fresh fruit, beautiful plants, nice soil. But the current inhabitants are far too strong for us. If we invade, we will get crushed.

This moment would go down in Israelite infamy. With the story of the spies, the Hebrew slaves were exposed as being cowardly, dithering, and a bit clueless. Indeed, this was not the only story in the Torah to depict them as such, but the most searing. It is this moment of cowardice in which God decrees that now, instead of entering Israel about a year-plus after leaving Egypt, the Hebrews will now need to wait *forty years*. Forty years. Why forty years? Because this generation is not worthy to live in the Promised Land. Only their children and grandchildren are. Forty years is enough time for all of them to die off—save two men, Caleb and Joshua—before breaching the gates of Israel.

And so, the new generation of Hebrews sits before Moshe on the banks of the Jordan and listens to his *devarim*. In the distance, they see the walls of Jericho. And Moshe begins by telling—re-telling—the humiliating story of the spies. Moshe says: “When God heard your complaint—that is, the complaint of the spies, he was angry. He vowed that none of this generation should see the Good Land which I promised to your fathers,” in other words, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Moshe is, at this point, probably a bit worried. Is this really a *new* generation? Or are they going to show themselves to be like their fathers, to be just as weak and unworthy as their fathers? In short, Moses is saying: don't make the mistakes your parents made. Be different from them. Be the new generation which has left slavery behind and is ready to rule Canaan as masters.

Here, however, the Torah finds itself in a predicament. The Torah realizes, rather quickly, the generation of the parents and the generation of the children cannot be so neatly separated. If the Torah condemns the previous generation it would be, in a way, guilty of *hypocrisy*.

Why hypocrisy? First, as I discussed earlier, parents were revered in this era of human history. There were not yet rebels without a cause, or teen idols, or songs like “My Generation.” Indeed, even the fifth commandment orders us to “honor your mother and your father.” If the Torah begins to flatter the ego of the new kids in town at the expense of the parents, it will make itself afoul of one of the ancient world’s most treasured and established social norms.

But the second hypocrisy is even greater. The entire reason why this generation is *able* to enter Israel in the first place is *because of their fathers*. And here, I am not speaking of their immediate parents, who, to be sure, should get some credit for escaping Egypt. Rather, I am speaking of their distant fathers, that is, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It is because of these *fathers* that they are sitting with their swords on the banks of the Jordan River. Because God *promised* these fathers that he would make their children as numerous as the stars in the heavens, and would let them live in Canaan. And as we know from last week’s episode, once you make a contract, even if it is a verbal contract, you don’t go back on your word. And God, even though making this verbal contract centuries in the past, continues to honor it, at times, it seems, almost for the sacredness of contract making itself. But that was last week’s theme.

Now, we are talking about parents, about generations. And the Torah figures out pretty quickly that it can’t disparage the fathers of one generation and then, in the same breath, say, it is because of your fathers that you are entering this land.

And finally, there is a third hypocrisy which the Torah needs to overcome. What about Moshe? He himself is part of this generation of ex-slaves. His sons, Gershom and Eliezer, presumably are also sitting among the crowds on the banks of the Jordan. Moshe, then, insofar as he tries to disparage the last generation, so as to motivate the new, must denigrate himself in the process.

How does the Torah work itself out of these contradictions, this verging on hypocrisy, this chaotic lineage? What the Torah does it to speak of the new and the old generation *as if they are one and the same*. Throughout the parsha of Devarim, whenever Moshe refers to the last generation, he doesn’t say “your fathers” or “your parents”—instead, he says “you.” You. You are your parents, and your parents are you. Even though you are clearly from different generations, one condemned, the other blessed, you are still intimately intertwined with each other, so much so that you don’t even get distinguished from each other in Moshe’s speech.

Again and again, Moshe, when speaking negatively about the last generation to the children uses the pronoun “you.” *You* were spies. *You* lost faith in God. *You* wept before the Lord, but the Lord would not heed your cry or give ear to you.

Moshe also uses the pronoun “we” to describe the new generation. When *we* left Egypt, when *we* crossed the Wadi Zered, when *we* set out from Horeb and God commanded us. Mind you, most of the people Moshe is talking to at this point were not even born yet during this history he describes. But it doesn’t matter. For Moshe, the children are utterly distinct from the parents and yet entirely interchangeable with them. This is one of the many paradoxes which the Torah relies on to transcend contradictions.

The Torah almost takes this to the point of playful humor. In chapter one, verses thirty-four and thirty-five, Moses quotes God as saying “When the Lord heard your loud complaint, he was angry. He vowed: Not one of these men, this evil generation, shall see the good land that I swore to give to your fathers.” These two verses are almost comically confusing and contradictory. Moses calls the previous generation the “evil generation,” then refers to the present generation as that previous generation, and then, in the same breath, states that it is because of your fathers that this land has been promised to you. A few verses earlier, in verse

thirty-one, Moshe states that “God carried you, as a man carries his son, all the way that you traveled until you came to this place.” Here, the Torah is almost being humorous. It is praising the father for carrying the son through the desert, and also criticizing the father for floundering in the desert.

In this parsha, the Torah is being at once revolutionary and highly conservative. This may be the first instance, millennia before *Sturm und Drang* and the 1960s, that children were praised at the expense of the parents, that the new generation was exalted at the expense of the old. Yet, the Torah also wishes to convey that generations cannot be so neatly separated from one another. When you try to distinguish your generation from the previous one, you inevitably conflate the two. You hold a mirror up to yourself in which you expect to see only yourself, the autonomous, enlightened individual. But instead, you look in the mirror and see your parents staring back at you.