

Episode 17

Yithro

Have you ever had the experience where you tried to give someone advice, but they just wouldn't take it? I'm not talking about off-hand advice, where you mention to someone that they ought to check out the band *The Smiths* or try Indian food. By the way, I would recommend doing both of these things. But neither of them is going to change your life or save your life. We are constantly giving each other tips and advice, much of which is better left ignored and forgotten. I am talking about situations where you look someone in the eye and you know that you have a kind of pearl of wisdom to impart to them. You are so excited to be able to help them, to see them heal and improve. And yet, you can tell that the other person isn't really listening, isn't really hearing you, is, as Paul McCartney would, say, looking through you. Your life-saving advice is lost on them.

Many years ago, I was in college and I had the basic problem of overthinking everything. So, I went to a therapist. He told me that I should find time every day to meditate. He stressed this. Here is what I thought: How is sitting and breathing and doing nothing going to help me with anything? Now, in my defense, the therapist probably could have explained the benefits of meditation more convincingly. But, regardless, I didn't take his advice seriously. I went back the next week, and he asked me if I'd meditated. I said I hadn't. Why? He asked. I don't have time to meditate, I answered, fully believing my excuse. This pattern continued for several more weeks. Every time, he would ask me if I meditated, and I would say that I didn't have time that week.

Finally, there came a session where I made this excuse, and he wouldn't have it any longer. He asked me: "Did you meditate this week?" I answered, "No, I just didn't have time." He looked me deep in the eyes and said: "That's like saying you don't have time to save your life."

"That's like saying you don't have time to save your life," he said.

After this intervention, I began to take what he said a little more seriously. At least, I *tried* to meditate. But still, I mostly continued to ignore him. When I graduated college a few months later, he and I parted ways, never to see each other again. It would be another seven years or so before I began taking meditation seriously, before I began to make meditation a part of my daily life. And if you've been listening to the Schrift, you know how strongly I believe in the power of meditation.

Now, mind you, this is someone I was paying to give me advice, someone who was an expert in relaxation techniques, and I still ignored him. It's not that I wanted to be rebellious or that I was stubborn. I just didn't see how sitting and doing nothing was going to solve any of my problems. I now realize how foolish I had been.

As I've gotten older, I've begun to feel more comfortable dispensing advice to others, because I know from my own life how this advice has helped me. Yet, I am astonished at how often I give a person quite insightful and effective, indeed, life-changing, advice, and I can just tell they're not really listening. People tell me they are stressed and are always overthinking things. I say to them: have you tried meditation? Each time, they have the same response, more or less. They say, "I can't meditate because my brain is always thinking." I say what all meditation teachers will then say: "Meditation is not about getting your brain to stop thinking. It is about becoming mindful of your thoughts." But they don't hear me. They are how I was as a college student with my therapist. Nothing I say to them can change their minds. Or they say, "I don't have time to meditate." I don't say what my therapist said: "that's like saying you don't

have time to save your life,” although maybe I should. Rather, I say, you can start meditating for just five minutes a day or even one minute. But I see in their eyes that their mind is already elsewhere. In short, they have already closed themselves off to meditation.

These conversations I have with people are not limited to advice about meditation. I also discovered several years ago that eating eggs and eating butter is healthy. That these foods do not raise your cholesterol. And even if they do, that’s not necessarily a bad thing. Cholesterol is one of the most vital molecules in our bodies, responsible for insulating neurons, building up cell membranes, synthesizing vitamin D, producing bile, and synthesizing hormones, including our sex hormones. When I tell people I eat three eggs every day, they are shocked. They say, “that’s so much cholesterol! That’s going to clog your arteries!” I try to explain to them that this concept is a myth which has been disproved. But I can see that I’m not getting through to them. Their eyes glaze over, they look at me skeptically, they change the subject. Most importantly, they continue eating muffins instead of eggs and thinking that’s healthier.

Sometimes, I tell people to listen to *The Schrift*. They answer, “I don’t listen to podcasts,” or “I don’t have time for podcasts.” I respond to them: it’s not just a podcast, it’s *The Schrift*. You probably would like it if you actually listened. Or they say, “I don’t like philosophy.” Or “I don’t like history.” Or, it’s not my subject. I say, *The Schrift* is about life. It’s for everyone. But they have made up their minds, they have hardened their hearts, there will be no getting through to them.

About two years ago, I offered to teach my dad to speak Hebrew. He immediately responded, “No way. I’ll never learn Hebrew. Waste of time. Not going to do it.” He closed himself off to the possibility. So, I started teaching my mom Hebrew instead. About six months later, he saw me and my mom having a basic conversation in Hebrew. He looked a bit dispirited. So, I asked him: well, Dad? Are you ready to start learning Hebrew? It’s not too late. He swallowed his pride and agreed. Now, after a lot of hard work, he and I can have full conversations in Hebrew, and, through his daily practice, he’s probably gotten even more advanced than my mom.

Why do people so often close themselves off to new ideas, particularly ideas which could transform their lives? Usually, and frighteningly, people generally say “no” to suggestions automatically, without even contemplating the potential benefits. Why? I think it’s for two reasons. First, we are so stuck in our own heads, that we follow our minds like dutiful servants. We are so used to just accepting what our minds tell us at face value, that we don’t stop to question our thoughts or ourselves. By the time someone offers us a suggestion, it is too late. Our minds already have such power over us that we can’t resist their commands. Second, I think it is because we go through our lives on a kind of autopilot. We spend most of our lives not with our wives, not with our children, not with our friends, and not even with ourselves, but with our minds. And our minds have a tendency to repeat the same thoughts over and over again. So, when someone tells us that eggs are healthy, it’s too late. We have already had the thought “eggs will kill you” one-hundred thousand times before. And so, the helpful life tip tragically dies on the spot, like a kind of still-born fetus.

In this week’s parsha of Yithro, Moshe gets a visit from his father-in-law, Yithro, or Jethro. Jethro is an outsider. He is not one of the Hebrews. Moshe, you will remember, left Egypt for some time as a young man. He murdered an Egyptian guard and had to flee the country. He fled to the land of Midian, where he met his future father-in-law Jethro and the woman who would become his wife, Zipporah. Now that Moshe has successfully led the Hebrew nation to freedom and the dust has settled, his father-in-law Jethro decides to pay him a visit in the desert.

The Torah tells us that Jethro and Moshe met outside Moshe's tent and greeted and hugged each other and asked each other how the other was doing and so forth. But then, something very special occurs. Moshe invites Jethro *into* his tent. At this point, remember, Jethro is not a Hebrew. He doesn't believe in the Hebrew God. He is not a descendant of Jacob. But Moshe brings him into the tent just the same. For those of you who haven't spent much time hanging out in the ancient world, let me tell you something. When someone brought you into his tent, it was a big deal. You were entering the inner circle. You were being referred to as "du" rather than "Sie" or as "thou" rather than "You." Moshe and Jethro had their pleasantries and niceties on the porch. Now, inside the tent, it's time to get down to business.

Moshe tells Jethro all that has transpired since they last met. About the plagues, about the parting of the Red Sea, about the manna. Well, Jethro is sold. He says that he now, too, believes in the greatness of the Hebrew God. And then Jethro and Moses, and Aaron, all of the elders of Israel have a feast together. It is a nice moment, to be sure.

Yet, it seems that in-laws cannot pay a visit without giving out some unsolicited advice. Now, I'm not married, I don't even have my PhD yet, but I know that many think of their father-in-law or mother-in-law or both as a real pain in the ass. They criticize your cooking, your decorations, your parenting style—whatever. And typically, the son or daughter-in-law respond, "yeah yeah, whatever you say," and then ignore the advice. So, Jethro wakes up the next day and sees his son-in-law Moshe in action. Immediately, Jethro begins to critique Moses. *What are you doing? Why are you doing it like that? Don't do it that way, do it this way!*

What is Jethro giving Moses advice about? He doesn't like the way Moses is handling disputes between the Hebrews. Until now, Moses had been a kind of control freak, a micro-manager. Every dispute had to be decided by him and him alone. Jethro says: "What is this thing that you are doing to the people? Why do you act alone, while all the people stand about you from morning until evening?" Jethro thinks it is idiotic that Moses is deciding every matter for himself. It is too much work for him. There are too many cases. Jethro says: "The thing you are doing is not right; you will surely wear yourself out, and these people as well. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone."

Jethro then comes up with the brilliant idea that Moses should appoint judges who the people can come to with their disputes and problems. This way, the tasks are delegated, the responsibility is spread out, Moses can relax a bit, the people don't have to wait in line all day. Most critically, Jethro says that for the big questions, Moses should decide, the ultimate decision will rest with Moses. But for all of the minor disputes, appointed judges should adjudicate the case.

Now, Moshe would not be Moshe Rabeinu, Judaism's greatest prophet, if he weren't open to new ideas. He didn't say, Jethro is an outsider, he's a Midian, I'm not going to listen to him, I'm not going to let him in my tent. Instead, Moshe was curious and open. He invited him into the inner circle. When Jethro tried to give him advice, Moshe didn't say, I'm not going to listen to that old kook. I can't wait till my father-in-law goes back to Midian. Instead, Moshe thought, "let's try this out. Maybe he has a good idea." And finally, Moshe was willing to leave his ego aside. He was willing to share power with others. He knew he could be a better ruler if he delegated and trusted than if he tried to micro-manage and control every detail of the Exodus.

One group of people who was ready to embrace a new culture were the Jews of Germany. In fact, they might have been a little too eager to do so. After the Romans invaded and conquered Jerusalem in the year 70 C.E., the Jews slowly made their way to Europe. By the Middle Ages, there were already thousands of Jews settled in Germany. Well, then there was no "Germany";

rather, they were settled in the German lands. But throughout the Middle Ages, Jews largely kept to themselves. They lived in ghettos, spoke their own dialect of German, known as Yiddish, and read predominantly Jewish thinkers and not Christian thinkers. Now, this was not exactly by choice. The law of the Middle Ages forced Jews to live in ghettos and to be restricted in all facets of life—occupation, marriage, land, and so forth.

The first half of the nineteenth century in Germany was one of gradual liberation for the Jews. The first “liberated,” Westernized, enlightened Jew in Germany is generally held to be Moses Mendelssohn. Mendelssohn was a pioneer. He was born in a Jewish ghetto in Germany in 1729. His native tongue was Yiddish. He was supposed to become a rabbi and a Talmudic scholar. Yet, little Moses had other plans. He moved to Berlin and became fluent in High German. He also learned Latin. In addition to reading Jewish thinkers like Maimonides, he also read Christian thinkers like Leibniz and John Locke. He became best friends with one of Germany’s most famous playwrights, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. Lessing saw in Mendelssohn the ideal Jew and proof that Enlightenment could work. Through education, tolerance, and reason, all religions could live together in harmony, as did the Christian Lessing and the Jewish Mendelssohn.

Mendelssohn was the first, but by no means the last, German Jew to embrace German culture and literature. As Jews gradually came out of the ghetto in the nineteenth century, they wanted so badly to be accepted by their German neighbors. They read Schiller, they listened to Beethoven, they cut their beards and *payas*, they joined the army, they stopped speaking Yiddish, and so on.

Moses Mendelssohn, having been raised in a ghetto, stayed true to his Jewish heritage throughout his life, even though he became culturally Westernized. But his children became rather estranged from Judaism. For example, do you remember last week, when I talked about Friedrich Schlegel and his wild ideas about irony and fragmentary poetry? Well, he became Moses Mendelssohn’s son-in-law. He married Mendelssohn’s daughter, Dorothea, who herself became a renowned writer of the early Romantic period. Dorothea, however, was not always Dorothea. She was born with the name of Brendel, but later changed her name. She also converted to Protestantism, and later to Catholicism.

Then we have Moses Mendelssohn’s famous grandson, Felix Mendelssohn. Felix became one of the most famous and celebrated composers in European history. Felix was born in 1809 to a prominent Jewish family in Germany. Yet, his parents taught him nothing about Judaism, and at age seven, his parents had him baptized.

How to describe Felix Mendelssohn’s music? It was pure, heavenly, proper, polite. These are not always good qualities for a composer, especially in the nineteenth century. During the nineteenth century, composers like Berlioz, Liszt, and Beethoven, were taking risks with their music, writing rebelliously, creating *avant-garde* works. Mendelssohn, by contrast, was a *conservative* composer. His music is, indeed, quite easy on the ear. And it has not a trace of foreign or exotic influences, certainly not Jewish or Yiddish influences. But then again, why would it? Felix had converted to Christianity, had grown up in Germany, had nothing to do with Judaism.

Felix Mendelssohn’s light and beautiful music made him extraordinarily popular in Europe during his lifetime. For awhile in England, there was even a kind of Mendelssohn-mania, a Beatlemania for its time. Robert Schumann called him “the Mozart of the nineteenth century.” After his death, monuments sprung up to him all over Germany and England.

Let's listen to a short piece from Mendelssohn. This is from his religious opera *Elijah*. And no, you shouldn't take this as evidence that Mendelssohn had sympathetic leanings toward Judaism. Remember: for Christians, the Old Testament is their Bible, too. Elijah was sacred to both Jews and Christians. And if you need more convincing, Mendelssohn has an equally famous opera named after St. Paul. This is a three-part choral piece from *Elijah*. I actually discovered it while watching the Netflix series *Unorthodox*. It was not a coincidence that the writers chose Mendelssohn's music to intoxicate the protagonist Esty, who has escaped her hyper-orthodox existence in Williamsburg for Berlin.

Now, I'm actually not a huge fan of Mendelssohn. This is, in my opinion, probably the most beautiful piece he ever wrote. It's definitely in the top ten. He has some other wonderful pieces, but this one is more the exception than the rule. It's kind of only downhill from here. But anyway, here is "Hebe deine Augen auf" from *Elijah*.

It's exquisite, pure, heavenly, lovely, unprovocative, mellifluous. That was Mendelssohn. But as I mentioned, it was not always a good thing that Mendelssohn's music was so "popular" and "soothing" and "pleasing." His contemporaries were much more avant-garde, dissonant, rebellious. As it would turn out, I like these mid-nineteenth century composers even *less* than Mendelssohn. I have tried so many times to get into Robert Schumann or Franz Liszt. But after five minutes I always switch to Mozart. And Brahms, don't even get me started on Brahms. I feel like I'm lying inside a coffin when I listen to Brahms.

Anyway, to give you a taste of this kind of more "abrasive" and "cutting-edge" music, here is an excerpt from a solo piano piece by Franz Liszt, entitled the "Mephisto Waltz."

It's not my cup of tea. Too dissonant, too experimental, too, just, irritating. It makes me feel kind of like there's a small elf playing up and down on my spinal cord. I'd rather listen to Mozart.

By the way, a quick aside on Mozart. For me, Mozart was the greatest composer ever. I know it's just my highly subjective opinion, but I think Mozart often gets lumped in with other composers, as though they were all equal: Mozart, Chopin, Beethoven, Bach, Stravinsky. They were all the great masters. They're all equally great. No. Mozart was a thousand times better than all of them combined. Beethoven spent his whole life struggling to write one opera which wasn't even that good. Mozart cranked out the five best operas ever in a period of about nine years. Beethoven wrote five piano concertos, which are a bit repetitive and tiresome. Mozart wrote twenty-seven, sixteen of which will leave you feeling so invigorated and revitalized in a way no other music can. I could go on, but I think you get the idea.

Now, before it seems like I am throwing Beethoven under the bus, I am not. His ninth symphony and his late string quartets are better than anything Mozart ever wrote. Beethoven is great. He was a revolutionary, the first truly self-expressive composer, and so forth. It's just that, with the exception of the works I just named, Mozart is composing on another level than he is.

So, Mendelssohn's contemporaries criticized his music as being superficial, overly pleasing, too harmonious. But no one was a more vicious critic of Mendelssohn's than Richard Wagner. In fact, Wagner was so hateful of Mendelssohn and his music that he wrote a book about it, entitled, *Jewishness in Music*, published long before the Nazis in the year 1850. I have heard one professor refer to this book as the second-most antisemitic book ever written, and, of course, we all know what the first one was.

Before we even get into the details of this book, let's just think for a minute about what Wagner is doing here. Mendelssohn, remember, was Jewish, but he converted to Christianity at the age of seven. His music, as I mentioned, has not the slightest trace of Jewish influences. It is

the most conformist, pleasing, assimilatory German music out there. Yet, Wagner accused this music as being prototypically *Jewish*. Or, put another way, Wagner was suggesting that the more Jews assimilate into German culture and pretend to be German, the more *Jewish* they become. And here, as if it were even necessary to say, the adjective *Jewish* is not being used positively.

Why did Wagner hate Mendelssohn's music and, more importantly, why did he see it as *Jewish*? Sadly, you can probably guess the answer. Wagner argued that Jews could never really be German. That all they could do was *imitate*. That when they speak German, their Yiddish and Jewish innate voices peak through, such that they speak a mangled German. And when they write songs in German, this Jewishness corrupting the purity of the German is all the more apparent. In short, Wagner took the musical critiques of Mendelssohn—that his music lacked soul, that it was superficial, that it was *imitative*—and made these critiques racist. Mendelssohn was a Jew; this is why he wrote music this way.

Now, let's talk about Wagner and his music for a moment. Mendelssohn was popular and a sensation in Germany. But Wagner achieved cultlike, godlike status. Germans flocked from all over the country to his opera festivals, almost as pilgrims going to holy religious sites. He was seen as a kind of prophetic genius. His music was something which had never been experienced or heard before. Wagner believed that his opera festivals could be total art experiences in which the intoxication of the music could bring about a kind of transcendence.

Wagner's music was brashly, self-consciously, ostentatiously *German*. I can't think of any music that sounds more "German" than Wagner's music. And, indeed, this aspect surely had much to do with its popularity. It made Germans proud to be German.

But how can music sound *German*? Isn't this just a stereotype of what Germanness is? Of course. But nationalists and jingoists often take more pride in stereotypical conceptions of their country than in what that country "really" is. So, Wagner's music wasn't really *German*. Rather, it was *stereotypically* German. But obviously, no Wagnerians, and surely not Wagner himself, would ever admit to that.

In Episode 13 of *The Schrift*, I talked about how, as a child, the Christian Bible or New Testament was blatantly suppressed in my education as a Jew. When I finally got around to reading it in college, I was dangerously curious. I thought it would contain some holy truths that my teachers desperately didn't want me to find out about so I would stay Jewish. As I mentioned in episode 13, I soon realized after cracking open the New Testament that it wasn't going to change my worldview. I saw rather quickly that, at least on the surface, it was just some weird ancient book with the usual stories of magic and miracles. My encounter with Wagner was similar. I was expecting big things out of Wagner. Why had he become such a demigod in Germany? Why was his music banned from being performed in Israel? To finally answer these long-simmering questions, I have listened to his operas over and over again.

Now, the truth is that, you have to give Wagner his due. No composer had ever created this kind of music before. It is distinct and daring and seductive. And he has some really awesome arias. And some of these arias are so mind-bendingly divine, that you really have to give Wagner his due. One of these is, for example, "Heil dir, Sonne, heil dir, Licht," from his opera *Siegfried*. But, for me at least, ninety percent of all of his operas are just, well, tedious and dull and boring. Usually, in a Wagner opera, the overture is great, there are a handful of absolutely supernatural arias, but the rest is more or less unlistenable. And not only is ninety percent of his operas unenjoyable to listen to, but you actually feel a bit sick listening to it, a bit heavy. I would even say, a bit poisoned.

I am not alone in this opinion, nor did I come up with it entirely myself. Nietzsche had a similar critique of Wagner's music. Nietzsche, in fact, wrote a book devoted to excoriating Wagner, entitled, *Nietzsche contra Wagner*. Here, Nietzsche wrote that when he listens to Wagner, "a disagreeable sweat breaks out all over me. All my fine weather vanishes." In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche described Wagner's music as follows: "All in all, no beauty, nothing of the south, nothing of the delicate southern brightness of heaven, nothing of grace, no dance ... a ponderous drapery ... something German ... something manifold, formless, and inexhaustible in the German way." And again, in *Nietzsche Contra Wagner*, Nietzsche describes Wagner as "the master of hypnotic trickery," and calls his music "diseased." He has, to quote Nietzsche, "made music sick."

Let's listen to a piece of Wagner's. Now, as we know, some people refuse to listen to Wagner because of his rabid antisemitism. I personally don't have an ethical issue with listening to Wagner. First, he died in 1883. Second, he wasn't as anti-Semitic as you might think. He actually had many close Jewish friends. And third, I separate the art from the artist. If you want to get people to not listen to Wagner, convince them that his music sucks, not that his morality sucks. It was only after listening to Wagner that I realized I didn't want to listen to him that often, not after being told he was an anti-Semite. And by the way, if you're going to stop listening to anti-Semitic artists, get ready for a book burning bonfire. No Dostoevsky, no Renoir, no Phillip Roth.

This is an excerpt from Wagner's famous opera *Lohengrin*, "In fernem Land, unnahbar euren Schritten."

If we compare Wagner to Mendelssohn, it is almost as though Wagner wishes to say to Mendelssohn: you think your music is *German*? No. *This* is real German music. Or put another way, Wagner wanted his music to be *insulated* and *exclusive*. *German music*, written by *Germans, for Germans*. It was this quality of Wagner's music above all others, this exclusivity, this Germanness, this nationalism, which made him so worshiped in Germany in the 1860s and 1870s and beyond.

Yet, Nietzsche pointed out how the insularity of Wagner's music was, actually, what made it, to paraphrase Nietzsche's own words, so "ungraceful, so heavy, so northern, so ponderous, so lacking in dance and brightness." More importantly, Nietzsche believed that Wagner *closed himself off* from anything non-German which could infect his music. By "protecting" his music from anything non-German, by trying to make his music as German as possible, Wagner created music which, in Nietzsche's opinion, kind of sucked.

Nietzsche writes that German music began to decline when it stopped being the voice of Europe (as it had been with Beethoven and Mozart) and instead became something "dealing merely with the Fatherland." He writes that "the fact that the people in Germany deceive themselves concerning Wagner does not surprise me. The reverse would surprise me. The Germans have modelled a Wagner for themselves, whom they can honor ... whom they are thankful that they misunderstand."

In short, Nietzsche says that German music was far *better* when it was open to all the influences of Europe. Mozart, who I already said is the greatest composer ever, was cosmopolitan. His music is just as *Italian* as it is *German*. Wagner, by contrast, would never have let the Italian get its olive-oily hands on his musical scores. To do so would have corrupted the purity of its Germanness.

So, where does all of this leave us? Mendelssohn's music was *too* light, too eager to please, too unexotic, too assimilatory, too cautious. Wagner's music was too insular, too dreary,

too arrogant. Which composer, then, got it right? Whom should we listen to? Whose concerts should we attend? That would be the composer Gustav Mahler. Mahler seems to take the best from Mendelssohn and from Wagner and to then synthesize these tastes such that the result is one-thousand times better than the individual parts—and no, this is not hyperbole. Gustav Mahler is the only composer who gives Mozart a run for his money. Mahler was born in 1860, and he was Jewish. At fifteen, he moved to Vienna where he would live and work for most of his life. He became the director of the Viennese opera house in 1897. The opening performance was Wagner's opera *Lohengrin*, which we just had a chance to listen to (and criticize). Mahler died in 1911. Now, here you might wonder, how did a Jew rise to become director of the Viennese opera? Good question. He didn't. Wagner had himself and his entire family baptized in 1897. He did so for his own career advancement. He said that he knew that, so long as he remained Jewish, all of the highest positions in the musical world would remain closed off to him.

Unlike Mendelssohn, Mahler was not afraid to be, like Wagner, bold, daring, provocative. But unlike Wagner, Mahler wanted his music to be for *everybody*. And he did not close himself off to exotic, foreign influences, including Jewish and Eastern European influences. For example, in the third movement of his first symphony, you can hear how Mahler interweaves Yiddish and Slavic folk music into a piece which remains Western and German at its core. Let's listen.

When Moshe's father-in-law Jethro came to visit, Moshe was open to his new, foreign ideas. Moshe didn't say, I don't want to hear from a *Midianite*. We are the Hebrews, whatever a Midianite would advise is worthless. Moshe didn't say, that's a *stupid* idea. Only I know what's good for my people. Moses didn't say, it's my father-in-law—what could he possibly know? Moshe heard him out, and he liked what he had to say. But Moshe also retained his own authenticity and independence. Immediately after Jethro gives him this astute advice to delegate to judges, he returns to Midian. Moshe still keeps his own counsel, we might say.

Later in the Parsha, God summons Moses to Mount Sinai to give him the Ten Commandments. God makes it very clear that only Moses himself is to climb up the mountain and speak to God. We already know that God isn't too crazy about the Hebrew slaves. God tells Moses that none of the Hebrews are allowed to go up to the mountain. They're not even allowed to touch the border of it. God says that anyone who even touches the mountain will be put to death. So, only Moses goes up.

This idea seems to contradict what we read earlier about Moses and Jethro. What happened to letting people inside your tent, opening yourself up to an array of influences, not putting your opinion above those of others? God and Moses have just set up for themselves what is perhaps the most *exclusive* relationship *ever*. Wagner may have tried to keep foreign influences out of his music. But he never said if any Jew even gets near my music he will be put to death—well, at least so far as we know he never said this. What's going on here?

In Nietzsche's philosophy, he, too, can often be highly exclusive. He says over and over again that the vast majority of people won't understand his philosophy, and moreover, that he doesn't care. He only *wants* the elite as his students. He wants nothing to do with the *rabble*. For a reader of Nietzsche, this is both a thrilling and also disturbing statement. Because one reads Nietzsche and one thinks, Nietzsche is talking to me, I am an individual, I am special, I am in Nietzsche's inner circle. But the doubt always remains: what if I'm not? What if I am not special? What if I am a slave and not a master? I believe Nietzsche sets up this dynamic intentionally. He wants to seduce readers into *thinking* and *hoping* that they are ready for his philosophy, ready, we might say, to talk to him on Mount Sinai, while all of the other people just

wait down below. But he also wants readers to *doubt* themselves, to question their believed specialness. Can there any doubt that Nietzsche felt this way about *himself*? Kafka certainly did. Or even John Lennon, who once said, “I go back and forth between thinking I am a special being, superior to everyone, and thinking I am completely average and nothing important.”

The Torah, I think, is setting up the same dynamic here. It is opening us up to the possibility of being Übermenschen. It is showing that, for some people, like Moses, it is possible to be “elite.” The Torah wants us to see ourselves as exceptional and to trust our own beliefs above anyone else’s. But the Torah doesn’t want us to become too convinced of our own greatness. If we do, we may become like Wagner, closed off to outside influences. Someone like Jethro might pass us by one day, and give us phenomenal advice, and we might just ignore it, thinking that we have nothing to learn from anyone else.

I believe the Torah wants us to think this way, not just as individuals, but also as a people, as the Jewish nation. It is no secret that the Jews think of themselves as the “chosen people,” that God selected us to be a light unto the nations, so to speak. But if you read carefully, I think that the Torah wants us to doubt this idea as well. In chapter nineteen of Exodus, God tells Moses to *tell* the Hebrews that they are a special people. God tells Moses to *tell* the Hebrews that, if you obey my commandments, you will be my treasured possession among all the peoples. In law, we would call this hearsay. One person is quoting the words of another. In law, this is seen as unreliable evidence, and is often banned from court as evidence. God is not telling this to the Hebrews directly, but is having Moses tell them. Moreover, God is also setting up an “if-then” clause. *If* you keep my commandments, *then* you will be a treasure to me among all the peoples. God, then, seems to want the minds of the Hebrews to swing back-and-forth like a pendulum, between thinking themselves special and elite, and also thinking themselves to be unremarkable and just like everyone else.

It is only when we can see ourselves as slaves waiting in humiliation at the foot of the mountain, but also as Moshe speaking face-to-face with God on Mount Sinai, that we will achieve the synthetic greatness of a composer like Gustav Mahler.