

Episode 0 – The Death of Moses and German Romanticism

I'm not a rabbi. I don't even have a PhD ... yet. I'm just a guy who probably should have been born two-hundred years ago who decided that the Torah and German Literature are two of the most important things in life.

This Shabbat, we start the Torah anew, from the story of Creation, the first chapter of Genesis, Bereishit. Yet, I would like to “begin” this podcast by talking about the “end” of the Torah, that is, when Moses dies at age 120, just a little bit short of entering the land of Israel.

Why should we “begin” with the “end”? I hope that in the course of this episode, that answer will become more clear. For now, let's just say that our notion of time as moving from Point A to Point B is a bit elementary. Every year, Jews read the Torah from beginning to end, and then start anew. The movement, then, is circular, where the “end” is just as much a “beginning” as the beginning itself.

In this last *parsha* of the Torah, Vizot Habrecha, translated into English as, and this is the blessing, the Israelites are finally on the doorstep of the Land of Israel, after having struggled for so many years, forty to be exact, to reach this point. There is one particular aspect of this parsha which immediately will jump out to readers and bother them immensely. God tells Moses that he is not allowed into Israel, that he must die on Mount Moab, that he may see the land with his own eyes, but he may not cross over into it. The Torah concludes by saying that “never in Israel did there again arise a prophet like Moses, whom God singled out and to whom God spoke face to face.” (In case you're wondering, this was Moses' punishment because many years earlier, when God asked him to speak to a rock to provide water, Moses, frustrated for various reasons, struck the rock—two times, no less—instead).

In short, the most *deserving* of all people to enter Israel was forbidden to do so by God. This would seem to be a draconian and cruel punishment and would make God seem rather arbitrary and unjust. The Torah itself states that God singled out Moses among all other Hebrews. It is because of Moses, and Moses alone, that the Israelites were freed from Egypt, and successfully made it through forty years in the desert. How do we deal with the fact that Moses, despite all of his worthiness, was deemed unworthy?

One way of understanding this is to essentially chalk it up to the tragedy of life and the tragedy of existence. The death of Moses is perhaps a kind of “reality check” for all of us. We spend our lives striving to achieve a certain completion, a certain wholeness, which seems to remain forever just out of our grasp. How many people really get to “say” they achieved everything they wanted and can die feeling completely fulfilled? No one. This is *tragedy par excellence*. No matter how much we strive, we are left short of our ultimate goals.

The German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer captured well this sentiment in his philosophy. He was known as the philosopher of pessimism, and for good reason. He wrote that life moves from desire to satisfaction and then again to desire. We, as humans, always *want* something. Schopenhauer would refer to this as *willing*. Our *will* always moves in a certain direction. So, if we are hungry, we try to find food, sometimes with great passion. Then when we finally eat, we

achieve satisfaction. We are content. But, as we all know, this contentment is short-lived. Eventually, we get hungry again, and the process repeats itself *ad infinitum*. We are in a kind of endless circle in which we are kind of chasing our tails, never fully achieving the salvation we so crave.

However, I would like to ask us to see Moses' fate in a different way. Let us ask ourselves the question: do we really *want* Moses to safely and happily arrive in Israel? How would we feel if Moses were to stroll into Israel, order a *falafel*, and declare "mission accomplished"? In a way, I would almost find this ending *less* satisfying than Moses' wholly unsatisfying death on Mount Moab. Why?

I would argue that, at our core, we derive more meaning and more satisfaction from the *process of becoming* than from the achievement of our goals. I don't mean this in the sense that when we get what we want, we discover that it isn't that great, and we are disappointed (although obviously that happens a lot, too). Rather, I would argue that "salvation" itself comes in the state of *striving* itself. This is, of course, a paradox. *Striving*, by definition, is seemingly antithetical to contentment, inner peace, and satisfaction. Yet, what if *striving* is not antithetical to bliss but rather the *eternal* itself?

A group of German philosophers in their early twenties can help us to better understand this idea. They were known as the early German romantics and were based in Jena, Germany, from the years 1798 to 1804. They were, essentially, young, idealistic, passionate, inspired students with a lot of extremely mind-altering, revolutionary, I would even say "trippy," ideas. The core of this group consisted of the Schlegel brothers—August Wilhelm and Friedrich—the great novelists Ludwig Tieck and Novalis, the poet Friedrich Hölderlin, and the philosophers Fichte and Schelling. Goethe, too, occasionally made an appearance. The wife of Friedrich Schlegel was Dorothea, who had been born as Brendel Mendelssohn. She was the oldest daughter of the great German-Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, and she was an incredible novelist and romantic in her own right. I would imagine that many of you have never heard of these thinkers, as I myself had not until beginning a PhD program in German literature. Nevertheless, when I finally wrapped my head around what these guys were trying to express, I was blown away. This was really trippy stuff. Of course, you would not have guessed this from looking at the early German Romantics from Jena. They looked, as pretty much everyone did in those times, stuffy, formal, old-fashioned. They dressed in knickers, they wore loafers, they had powdered wigs, etc. These are just our own modern biases. In their minds, they had the mentality of rock stars, and their ideas were just as mind-bending as Jimi Hendrix's guitar solos.

One of their main philosophical obsessions was how humans could access the eternal or Truth with a capital "T." This is naturally an ancient philosophical question, going back to the Greeks. In the Middle Ages, it was clear that God was the answer, and the only answer, to this question. But even for those in the Middle Ages, this was still a question they struggled with. Thomas Aquinas, for example, felt it necessary to write five proofs of God's existence to shore up any doubts about a human's ability to access the eternal and achieve Oneness and unity—albeit only in the afterlife.

The Romantics of the Jena School were writing, as said, at the turn of the nineteenth century. So they were writing at the tail end of the Enlightenment, and in many ways, in the wake of the Enlightenment's alleged failure. The Enlightenment was in a kind of love affair with the notion of human Reason. Humans had the ability to attain perfection in all spheres—political, social, economic—if they simply meticulously exercised their God-given gift of Reason. Reason could lead a person to Oneness with the Eternal, to bliss and salvation.

The French Revolution broke out in 1789 and after a few years turned radical. To intellectuals watching from afar, the belief that Reason could lead to a heavenly utopia on Earth seemed to have been proved to be a farce. The French Revolution rallying cry was “Reason!” Indeed, the Cathedral of Notre-Dame itself had *its name changed* to *The Temple of Reason* where the Feast of Reason could be celebrated. All over France, in fact, legendary medieval churches were changed into Temples of Reason. Yet, the Revolution did not lead to a democratic paradise of Reason as so many had hoped. Instead, it turned radical and anarchical very quickly. It is said that the Revolution devoured “its own children.” That is, the most fervent supporters of the Revolution were somehow betrayed. They all wound up on the guillotine. Furthermore, the Revolution did not produce an Enlightened and benevolent leadership but rather Napoleon—a ruthless, megalomaniacal dictator intent on conquering, perhaps quite literally, the entire world.

Now, here you might be thinking: what about the American Revolution? That was also guided by the principles of the Enlightenment and was quite successful. Well, leaving aside the many ways in which it wasn't so successful, i.e., slavery and the Native Americans, the truth is that America was not the center of the world in those days as it is today. In fact, to many Europeans it was just some place across the sea which did not concern them. In Europe, the eyes were on France—the “America” of its day.

Enter the Jena school, safely tucked away in Eastern Germany, where the failed Revolution could be reflected upon, and where a new philosophy could be inaugurated which would offer a new pathway to the Eternal that Reason could not provide. What did the Jena Romantics do? They went in the opposite direction, as it were. Truth would not be found in carefully reasoned arguments or in deductive proofs. Truth was, in fact, at odds with Reason. Truth and the Eternal would be found in their opposites: in paradox, in art, in fragmentation, in the collapsing of Truth.

I would like to read some excerpts from the Jena Romantic's kind of “Bible” as it were. This will hopefully give you an idea of the kind of trippy ideas they were expressing and will show you their paradoxical conceptions of the Eternal. This was the Schlegel Brothers' newspaper known as the *Athenaeum*, printed from 1798 to 1800. Despite the enormous philosophical power and influence of this work, it appears on Wikipedia, in both German and English, as little more than a “stub.”

Fragment 206 from the *Athenaeum* reads: “A fragment, like a small work of art, has to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world and complete in itself, like a hedgehog.”

Let's think about this quote for a moment. Schlegel tells us that a *fragment* must be *complete* and yet also like a hedgehog. Here we have an obvious paradox. Fragments are by definition *incomplete*. How can a fragment be complete? Hedgehogs, are, indeed, rather remarkable

animals. They have the ability to form themselves into little balls so that all of their pointy spines point outwards to protect them. Yet, when not threatened, when a hedgehog feels relaxed, it lays down its spines and you can actually cuddle up with the hedgehog and pet him. In short, a hedgehog is always in a state of flux, he is always a fragment of his whole self.

The early Romantics celebrated the fragment as the most perfect work of art, as that which is capable of uniting with the eternal. A fragment is an unfinished work, so it is, in a sense, always in a state of *becoming*, it is always alive, it is a circle which is always on the verge of completing itself. A “finished” work is, by contrast, finished—that is, it is dead, it is lifeless, it is at odds with the eternal.

This should strike us as entirely paradoxical. That which is *unfinished* is actually the most perfect and the most complete. It is almost as saying, to be incomplete, is to be complete.

In perhaps the most famous section of the *Athenaeum*, known as Fragment 116, Schlegel tells us that the most perfect art form is poetry. He says that romantic poetry “should always be in a state of becoming and never be perfected.” Here, once more, we have a paradox. The *imperfect* is the perfect, because it is always *on the way* to becoming perfect.

In fragment 54, Schlegel wrote, “One can only *become* a philosopher, never *be* a philosopher. As soon as one believes oneself to be a philosopher, he ceases becoming one.”

For those familiar with Goethe’s play *Faust*, published in 1808, the influence of the Jena Romantics is apparent. *Faust* is seen to be the most epic work of German literature, a “classic” which creates a perfect totality of ideas. Yet, it is not a coincidence, that the story of “Faust” does not “begin” until there has been a dedication, a prologue, and a prelude. Moreover, the work seems to end mid-scene, with Gretchen simply crying out “Heinrich!” before ascending to heaven. This is not an accident. *Faust*, this most “perfect” piece of literature, is constructed so that it is always in a state of flux, so that the beginning never really “begins” and the end never really “ends.”

Let us go back to Moses for a moment. After what we have learned about German romanticism, I believe we can view his death not as tragic or unfair or cruel, but almost as a gift, as a kind of perfect ending to his life. Sure, Moses “dies” on Mount Moab, but, in fact, by making it to the gates of Israel but not actually *entering*, he, in a sense, achieves eternity. For us, he will always be *on the way* to entering the Promised Land, he will always be in the state of *becoming*. There is a sense in which, had Moses entered the Promised Land with Joshua, he would be, in our minds, less “alive,” less memorable, less eternal. By dying, he lives. In being exiled, he enters.

It is for this reason that I chose to *begin* this podcast with the *end* of the Torah. It is worth remembering that as soon as Moses dies, the Torah is rolled back to the beginning of the scroll to the story of the creation of the universe. Does Moses ever really “die”? Does the Torah ever really “end”? Does it ever really “begin”? The Torah, and Moses, are in a state of eternal *becoming* to which no other book, or figure, can compare. They, too, then are in a way, like Romantic poetry, fragmentary, as they never really *begin* or *end*. They become.

Now, at this point you might be thinking: Steve, are you just telling me that I should appreciate the journey and not the destination? Because I've been hearing that cliché since high school and I figured out pretty quickly it was total BS. No, that's not what I'm saying. This is not about "appreciation" or being in the moment, although those are two very important concepts to which I will likely return in a later episode. This is about understanding that the wholeness for which we strive is most manifest in the act of *striving* itself, in the state of *becoming*. The wholeness is already with you, in fact, if you're listening to this podcast, it's probably with you right now, because you are—we are—considering the idea of the eternal, rather than holding it fast.

For this type of episode, for Romantic poetry, for the Torah, there cannot—there must not—ever be a true conclusion. Therefore, it is only fitting that I end this podcast in midsentence, because, you see