

Episode 32 Behaalotecha

I am a big fan of the writer Franz Kafka. Kafka was born in 1883 in Prague to a middle-class Jewish family. German was his mother tongue—not Czech, as many people think. In 1883, Prague was part of the Austrian Empire, in which German was the official language.

Because I am such a diehard Kafka fan, I once traveled to Prague in order to retrace Kafka's steps. I wanted to see the house he was born in, the synagogue he attended in the Jewish Quarter, the insurance office where he worked, the apartment of his best friend Max Brod, the fancy goods store on the Old Town Square which his father owned, the legendary golden lane where he wrote his famous short story "A Country Doctor." So, I walked around Prague with a map of all these landmarks. But I found the enterprise to be a bit disappointing. His birth home had been turned into a touristy and kitschy café quite literally called the Franz Kafka Café. The apartment in which he wrote "The Metamorphosis" had been bulldozed to the ground decades ago, and now a Hotel Continental stood in its place. The Jewish Quarter had hardly a pious Jewish in sight, but just long lines of tourists dressed in shorts and sandals.

I realized that I would never get to the "real" Kafka. I've read multivolume biographies of Kafka, seen countless black-and-white photographs of him and his family, read his diaries and letters, watched films from his era. Still, after all of this effort, I can really only say I have "gotten to know" about one one-thousandth or even just one one-millionth of the "real" Kafka and his real German-Jewish *milieu*. I wasn't there when he woke up in the morning, I did not know how he greeted his parents in the kitchen, I didn't see which book he kept on his nightstand, and I certainly am not privy to the thousands of random thoughts which ricocheted through his mind every day. We are left with the mere crumbs of his existence and lifespan.

When looking over the precipice of this dispiriting black hole of knowledge, our next move might be to take comfort in what we can know. Maybe we can't get to know Kafka, but we can get to know ourselves, so we think. We spend every sleeping and waking hour with ourselves, with our thoughts, feelings, opinions, desires. Absolute union and absolute knowledge, then, is possible, so long as we seek it from ourselves, whom we quite literally "meet with" every day.

In fact, we are all very much in the dark as to who we "really" are. There is a sense in which I can't even *know* myself any better than I *know* Kafka. This is ironic and counter-intuitive, as, in terms of pure data, I have more information about myself than about Kafka to the millionth degree. Yet, simply having more information about yourself doesn't mean you really "know" yourself. Just spending time with yourself also doesn't mean you know yourself. If you don't believe me, consider the following situations. Have you ever seen yourself on film and been a bit shocked that that person is "you"? Yet, if you ask your friend "do I really *look* like that? Do I really *talk* and *walk* like that?" she will answer, uh, yeah, of course you do. In this instance, your friend is more familiar with you than you are with you. Or consider the moments when you look at your résumé. You read all of these facts and information about you on paper and you see your name at the top. But you feel like this résumé of "you" is not the real you at all. Moreover, not only is the résumé not *you*, but it is deceptive and misleading as to who you really are. You feel frustrated with the false image the résumé creates of yourself. But this false image does not come about because the information on the résumé is *false*. Rather, in a troubling irony, it is *true* facts and data about who you are disguise and corrupt the "real" you.

Moreover, one can have enough data about oneself to fill an entire hard drive. That still doesn't mean one can know oneself. Because my *perspective* of myself could be terribly distorted. When I look at Kafka, for example, I see him through *objective* eyes; my own ego and biases don't get involved. Yet, when I look at myself, there is, we might say, much more at stake. I might want to lie to myself about who I am. With Kafka, I have no interest in assuaging *his* ego. Indeed, how often have we encountered people who are totally deluded as to who they "really" are? Narcissists, for example, have the personality disorder, that they kind of think they are gods. Yet, to everyone else, it is obvious that they are not gods at all. We detect after awhile that they are closer to insecure and self-hating children than to gods. And they are being laughed at rather than revered. Clinical narcissists are incapable of self-reflection and self-criticism. This is what, by definition, makes them narcissists. So, even though the narcissist has spent every waking hour with himself for a lifetime, he is utterly deceived as to who he really is. Ironically, a narcissist is the *least qualified* of all people to analyze and know himself. This, despite the fact that he has inhabited his own body and world for a lifetime. We might say that I can better know Kafka than a narcissist can know himself.

Or sometimes we encounter people who have depression and think of themselves as worthless. These people are often incredible artists, highly compassionate and charitable, courageous and accomplished. Everybody else sees these qualities in them, but the depressed people can't observe them in themselves. We might say that a therapist can better understand a depressed person than he can understand himself. Or, again, we might say that I can better know Kafka than a depressed person can know himself. At least, with Kafka, I am orbiting around who he might really have been. But a depressed person is often living in another galaxy from his true "self."

In short, the more information or experience we have with someone, including ourselves, does not by any means guarantee we will "know" them better. In fact, it could lead to the opposite, that, in a perverse way, the more information we have, the less we know someone or something.

The question of whether we can *know ourselves* is as old as philosophy itself. The ancient Greek philosophers, Socrates and Plato, believed that the self was the soul which existed throughout eternity. The seventeenth-century philosopher René Descartes famously said: "I think, therefore I am." According to Descartes, if "I" can think my own existence, then "I" must exist. The eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher, David Hume, believed that the self does not exist. Rather, what we think of as "the self" is just an accumulation of our experiences. Finally, Immanuel Kant argued that the self *does* exist but that we can never know it due to the limitations of human thought.

A typical—and incorrect—opinion about Hinduism is that it advocates removing the self. That we should not have a self and just *exist*. Yet, this is not what Hinduism teaches. Rather, it is when we let go of all of the titles, accomplishments, fears, memories we have, the true self will emerge. In Hinduism, the self is that which exists underneath all of the layers of the ego. In many cases, people confuse their ego with their self, believing that our ego is who we are.

This is an idea which Hermann Hesse would capture in his 1922 novel *Siddhartha*. The novel takes place in India in the sixth century Before the Common Era. He is born into the tradition of Hinduism. As a child, Siddhartha is a kind of *Wunderkind*. He is the joy of his parents, he is handsome and athletic, he is loved by his friends. Yet, Siddhartha is not happy. The

text reads: “Siddhartha began to feel that the love of his father, the love of his mother, and the love of his best friend, Govinda, would not satisfy him and make him happy for all time.”

Siddhartha will then undertake a lifelong quest to find peace, to find “himself.” This path is rather windy indeed. Siddhartha experiments with various religious groups, he becomes a businessman, he becomes a beggar, and he even becomes a kind of decadent hedonist for a time. None of this satisfies him. It is only at the end of his life that he finds peace and simultaneously finds himself and enlightenment. In the novel, Hesse describes this moment of enlightenment as an emptying out of the ego. Instead, one becomes a *listener* and an *observer*.

Hesse writes: “Siddhartha listened. He was now nothing but a listener, completely concentrated on listening, completely *empty*, he felt, that he had now finished learning to listen.” Yet, even though Siddhartha’s ego has been dissolved, the self remains. In fact, now the self is at its most vibrant. With the emptying of the ego, the self can now merge with the Oneness of the universe and of humanity. Hesse writes that now Siddhartha could “submerge his *self* into the river, this song of a thousand voices.” This submerging of the self permitted Siddhartha to “perceive the whole, the oneness, the Om: the perfection.” Hesse writes that at this moment Siddhartha stopped fighting his fate, and therefore stopped suffering. His face showed the cheerfulness of a knowledge which knows perfection, which is devoted to the flow, which is belonging to the oneness.

Siddhartha, in short, has become the Buddha.

I realize these passages are a bit overly romanticized and flowery. Yet, there are two points I wish you to take away from these passages. The first point is that, paradoxically, one knows oneself best not by gathering more information or more experiences, but by *listening, becoming empty, accepting, letting go*.

The second point is that when you and your “self” can merge, that allows for a simultaneous union with humanity and with the universe or God. As demonstrated in *Siddhartha*, the moment you stand face-to-face with your “self,” it is as though you are standing face-to-face with Being, with God.

In the parsha for this week, we get some rather important information about Moshe. We know that Moshe led the Hebrews out of Egypt and that he’s an all-around great guy. But this week, the Torah really wants to seem to convey to us how truly *special* Moshe is, how he stands above all the other prophets.

This week, the Torah gives us two explicit reasons why Moshe is so special. The first is that he is humble. Okay, so he is humble. So what? A lot of people are humble. But no, Moshe isn’t just humble. The Torah tells us that he is the most humble person on the face of the Earth. Notice that the Torah doesn’t say Moshe was very humble, or one of the humblest people alive. No: he is *the most humble man on Earth*. This is a statement from the Torah we should take very seriously. What does it mean exactly to be the most humble person on the face of the Earth? We use the word “humble” to describe people all the time. Usually, it implies that someone doesn’t brag about him or herself, that he or she is “down-to-Earth,” that he or she recognizes that accomplishments don’t mean that much in the grand scheme of life. But, when you look deeper, what “humble” *really* means is lack of an ego. Whenever someone has a huge ego, we never would call that person “humble”—right? So, Moshe is the most humble person on the face of the Earth. As I see it, this means nothing less than: Moshe has no ego, zero ego.

By the way, here would be a good time to pause and notice how ahead of its time the Torah was in showing what an ideal ruler should look like. For most of human history, it was the people with the biggest egos—almost always men—who became rulers. We see in the case of

the Pharaoh and Balak, the King of Moab, how, in Moshe's day, the rulers were *huge* egotists. Not so with Moshe. Even today, most of the rulers we elect have huge egos. But at least we kind of have learned to recognize as a society that it might be good to have someone humble steering the ship.

This is what made Moshe so special. He had obliterated his ego.

But the Torah gives a second reason as well why Moshe stands far above all the rest. Exactly three verses after the Torah tells us that Moshe was the humblest man on the face of the Earth God tells us this: Moshe is *not like* other prophets. With other prophets, God says, I make myself known to them in a vision or in a dream. But with Moshe, it is different. I speak with Moshe *mouth to mouth*. I speak to him directly and not in riddles."

Now, I ask you. Could the Torah be any more *clear* here what it takes to communicate with God? It takes humility, or, put another way, it requires that you lose your ego. The Torah is more or less laying out an equation for us. More ego equals less God. Less ego equals more God. And we can take this a step further. The greater your ego, the less you can connect with others. And moreover, the greater your ego, paradoxically, the less you can connect with your *self*.

The person with narcissistic personality disorder bears this out. What makes this a disorder is, essentially, that the ego has become so overblown that a certain psychosis manifests itself. As discussed above, because of his overblown ego, the narcissist is utterly deluded as to who he *really* is. Narcissists, moreover, are incapable of forming real relationships with other people, because of this overblown ego. They are only capable of manipulating others to their own ends, but never connecting with them. And as far as connecting with God, you can forget about it with the narcissist. This is not a coincidence. He who has a deluded ego will not be able to connect with his true self. He will subsequently struggle to connect with others and with the Oneness of the universe.

Put another way, narcissists and Moshe are utterly opposed to each other. Moshe is the ultimate anti-Narcissist; and the Narcissist is the ultimate anti-Moshe.

Moshe achieved the pinnacle state of humility. He had no ego, his ego was dissolved. If you can achieve this level of humility, then you will be in a permanent state of Oneness with yourself, with others, and with God—much like Siddhartha could be. And again, when I say humility, I don't mean that you're someone who doesn't brag a lot or who is constantly turning the other cheek and pitying others. Rather, humility should be thought of as the absence of the ego.

What distinguished Moshe from other prophets is that he was somehow able to *maintain* this level of humility. God says that with Moshe he can speak face-to-face, mouth-to-mouth, but with others he must speak indirectly, through a dream, or through riddles. For most of us, we only get brief glimpses into the Divine Oneness. We have brief, momentary periods of understanding. We have moments of transcendence which last for just an instant. These are those instants in which our egos have been quelled. But, with most people, the ego is always popping up again, always returning. Moshe, by contrast, was experiencing this transcendence *all the time*. This doesn't mean that he was chatting with God all the time. Rather, if we look at it more symbolically, it means just that Moshe was like Siddhartha at the conclusion of Hesse's novel. He was living in a state of continual nirvana.

The Torah is great at *showing* and not *telling*. Even though the Torah tells us that Moshe was the most humble man on the planet, it also gives us concrete evidence. A few passages earlier in the parsha, two men, named Eldad and Medad, are discovered speaking in ecstasy inside the camp. They were briefly experiencing the divine, we might say. What happens?

Joshua, the great Joshua, rushes over to Moshe and says: “Moses, this is your turf. You are the guy who speaks to God, not Eldad and Medad. Are you going to let them get away with that? With trying to usurp your role?”

Moshe’s response demonstrates his supreme humility. He says: “Joshua, this is great news if they are connecting with God’s spirit. I wish everyone could connect with God in this way.” Joshua was thinking of Moshe purely in terms of Moshe’s ego and Moshe’s *status*. Yet, Moshe immediately through the question back at Joshua. Moshe said, it’s not about *me*. It’s about God, it’s about connection. But if you think about it, Moshe could not have responded any other way. Interestingly, if Moshe *cared* about his *status* as the greatest prophet ever, then he would immediately cease to be that prophet. Once one begins to care about the ego, the Oneness one experiences toward others, toward oneself, and toward God, instantaneously evaporates.

But the question becomes, if I lose my ego, then how do I retain the self? If I stop thinking about myself, then wouldn’t I myself dissolve and become lost, becoming nothingness. Quite the contrary. Paradoxically, it is when you become “nothing” that you become most *yourself*. Again, to understand this, we have to go beyond our typical conception of “nothingness” as something bad. Nothingness is not a black hole or an abyss. Rather, in Judaism, nothingness is the closest one can come to connecting with the eternal.

The Hebrew word for “I” is “Ani.” Yet, if you rearrange the Hebrew letters of this word, you get a the word “Ein.” There is no translation for the word “Ein” in English. We would have to say “there is not” in order to translate “Ein” into English. It can’t even be translated into “absence” because the word “absence” implies that there was once something there but it has disappeared. “Ein” does not presume pre-existence of something. So, in Hebrew, the word for “I” and “there is not” are intimately connected. Why should this be? Kabbalah teaches that because it is when all the layers are removed from you that you become who you “really” are. In Kabbalah, the self is not your personality, your body, or even your soul. Because, if you think about it, if you remove your personality, you are still “you.” If you remove your body, there is also still a part of you which is still “you.” And even if you remove your soul, something of “you” still remains. The real “you” is the nothingness within you, according to Kabbalah.

How, then, do we get better at dissolving our egos? Well, first of all, you’ve got to listen to *The Schrift* every week. That goes without saying. And second, the daily practice of meditation and yoga are crucial. And there are countless of other strategies which we cannot go into in this week’s episode. But there is one strategy I would like to point out which we have a tendency overlook. Ironically, this strategy is quite literally right under our noses. This is *prayer*. Prayer. We tend to have a corrupt view of prayer as making a bargain with God or just as asking God to give us something. Give me this God, and I’ll be good. As I’ve discussed in previous episodes, God is not a man in the sky, nor is he Santa Claus.

It is not so much *what* you say in a prayer that is important as is the *act of prayer* itself. As soon as you pray, your mind undergoes a titanic shift. You are suddenly connected with something outside of yourself. You are acknowledging that your fate is determined by powerful forces outside of your control. Put another way, you are *humbling yourself*. When you truly pray, your ego dies a momentary death even if you pray for good things to happen to you. Ideally, you are praying to God. But let’s say you don’t believe in God, which would be, of course, highly understandable. Even if you just pray to “the universe” or to “fate,” the effect is almost the same. If you ask God for help or if you ask the universe to help, your brainwaves are still undergoing this important shift. But there are multiple advantages to praying to God rather than just “the universe.” One advantage is that, in Judaism, God is a much more cultivated and nuanced and

sophisticated force than the mere “universe” or “fate.” Praying to God rather than the universe allows you to feel a greater sense of connectedness and transcendence. But as I said before, even if you don’t believe in God and just pray to the universe, the experience will be similar.

Yet, like so many of these mystical concepts, when we try to explain them through language, something gets lost. Language, with all of its flaws, is not always up to the task to convey these ideas. The experience of prayer, of self-knowledge, of Oneness, cannot be captured so readily through words.

In last week’s episode, I discussed Nietzsche’s idea that real love is always above pity. Nowhere can this be better understood than in the Gustav Klimt’s famous painting *The Kiss, Der Kuss*. It is quite apparent that in this painting, nobody is pitying anyone else. And yet, this painting represents the supreme moment of love. One need only see this painting to understand that this is love in its purist form. The painting is entitled *The Kiss*, but the actual “kiss” occurring in the painting is hardly the painting’s focus. Rather, what Klimt so masterfully shows us in this painting is two people merging with one another, dissolving into each other. Just as there is no pity going on in this painting, there is also no ego. Klimt did not create this painting just to showcase a romantic moment shared by two lovers. Rather, Klimt seemed to want to show how the experience of love is transcendent. When one so fully connects with another person, a simultaneous connection is going on with oneself and with the universe. All egos dissolve into a Oneness. This is why art critics have described Klimt’s painting as a moment of universal experience in which the two lovers are connected with nature, the cosmos, and the universal spirit, all at once.

Yet, we need not view Klimt’s painting to grasp this idea. The Torah already gave us the image thousands of years ago. Because when God spoke to Moses, the Torah tells us not that they spoke to each other face-to-face, but rather mouth-to-mouth. When Gustav Klimt painted *The Kiss*, he was depicting the moment when God and Moses spoke to each other mouth-to-mouth, millennia ago, on Har Sinai. This is perhaps what is meant by the cryptic expression, “God is love.”