

Episode 22 Vayekhel-Pekudei

Several years ago, I faced a crisis in my professional life. I had gone to law school and worked for two years as a lawyer. I then realized what I had perhaps known all along—that I didn't really *want* to be a lawyer. I went to law school with romanticized conceptions of what it means to be a lawyer, telling myself that some of my heroes like Barack Obama, Franz Kafka, and Abraham Lincoln had been lawyers. I'm still very grateful for the five years I spent as a lawyer and law student for the education I received, but I knew it wasn't something I wanted to do for the rest of my life.

So, I then had to figure out what I wanted to do instead. If you listen to *The Schrift* regularly, you know that I eventually became a not-quite-yet PhD in German literature. But at the time I had no idea what the hell I was going to be. So, I embarked upon a kind of career exploration journey which, in retrospect, would have worked great as a kind of montage in a bad comedy film. I considered all kinds of career options and “shadowed” people who were already working in these fields. Some of these professions were, but were not limited to: veterinarian, farmer, psychiatrist, high school teacher, nutritionist, food truck owner, professional wrestler. Okay, the last one was a joke, but the others were real. I probably took a few years off my father's life, so, if you're listening, which I know you are—sorry, Dad.

These jobs seemed good in theory. But once I actually visited and “shadowed” the professionals working in these fields, I figured out pretty quickly that this was *not* the kind of life I wanted for myself. In fact, I often walked away from these shadowing sessions and wondered what in holy hell drove people to pursue these careers.

Let me give an example. I love animals. I particularly love dogs. So, during this period of career exploration, I thought that maybe I would become a veterinarian. My local veterinarian allowed me to come to the animal hospital and observe vets for the day in action. Yet, at one moment during the day, it became clear to me that this was not going to be a good fit. I went into the surgery room and saw a dog being operated on. The purpose of the operation was to clean the dog's teeth, which had become terribly dirty and inflamed. I remember seeing the dog, unconscious on the operating table, while a veterinarian thoroughly cleaned out his gums and his teeth. It was not pleasant. It was not cute. It was not fun. I love dogs because I love playing with them, cuddling with them, bonding with them, seeing them do all kinds of silly and ridiculous BS. I don't love dogs because I like to put them under anesthesia and clean out their mouths. That, for me, was a dealbreaker.

Yet, I spoke with the veterinarian later, and she told me that she loved her job. She loved doing surgery on dogs. I couldn't understand why, but then again, I am not her.

The other evening, I was out for an evening stroll, and I was waiting in line to order a coffee. I struck up a conversation with a woman who, I found out, works as a surgeon. This woman was very kind, down-to-earth, had good taste in fashion and had a good sense of humor. Yet, I then thought about what her daily existence must be like. Blood, guts, cutting open flesh, sewing it back up again. I don't like seeing my own blood if I slightly nick myself while shaving. It freaks me out. I don't like touching strangers. And the last thing on earth I would ever want to do is reach inside a stranger's flesh. Yet, this woman, and pretty much every surgeon I've ever met, do this all the time. And, the surgeons I've met all tell me how much they love their jobs.

If I see a clump of hair, even if it's my own, I recoil in disgust. Yet, somehow barbers touch the heads, the hair, the ears, of total strangers on a daily basis, and find it absolutely

invigorating. If I were talking to a stranger, and suddenly he began to tell me his deepest psychological problems, I would quickly find a way to exit myself from the conversation. Yet, psychologists and therapists do this every day and feel on top of the world. This is what makes a them tick: talking to strangers about matters so personal that they wouldn't even share it with their spouses.

What I like to do is to write episodes of *The Schrift*. I read texts, analyze them, think about them, and share my opinion. Yet, when I tell people what I do, often they seem as alienated and horrified as I was when I saw the unconscious dog getting his teeth cleaned. Many people have told me: I would feel like I am suffocating if I did what you do. I hate books. I hate libraries. I hate writing. What I enjoy is just as foreign and torturous to them as what they do is to me.

But this is only the beginning. It is not just that I wouldn't want to have a job involving blood or guts or hair or other people's skeletons in the closets. Actually, even *neighboring* professions to mine I would shudder at doing. For example, I study literature and philosophy. What I do is awfully similar to what a historian does. Writing, researching, thinking, going to libraries, etc. But I would *hate* to be a historian. I don't want to pore over primary sources and data records and statistics try to figure out *what* happened in history. I want to know what happened already and then to analyze it philosophically and artistically. Moreover, even within literature, I would not want to study the literature from most other countries. If I suddenly had to start doing twenty-first century American literature instead of nineteenth century German literature, I would lose my passion for my field. I would imagine the same is true for surgeons and therapists and teachers. Some surgeons may love operating on the liver, but not on the heart. A psychologist who loves treating people with anorexia, may hate treating people with schizophrenia. A teacher may love teaching kindergartners, but tremor at teaching sixth graders.

Yet, it is actually quite beautiful, and certainly pragmatic, that we have such varying and idiosyncratic ideas of what a "dream job" is. Imagine, for a moment, if everyone's dream job was to be the host of *The Schrift*. In a matter of weeks the world would look like a post-apocalyptic wasteland. Or imagine that everyone wanted to be a dentist. That wouldn't be too good, either. The fact that we love and are passionate about such different things is what allows our society to function and to thrive.

In fact, this is not an accident. This is how we evolved as a species.

Tragically, for most of my life, I was rather ignorant about how evolution and natural selection work. Until I actually read Darwin's *On the Origins of Natural Selection*, I basically thought of evolution through pithy catch phrases I had heard tossed around. Survival of the fittest. Only the strong survive. Alpha male. White polar bears. Giraffes with long necks. And so forth. This is the take-away from Darwin which is widely known. If an animal wasn't "fit" to survive long enough to pass on his genes, that animal died off and his genes along with him. If you were a black polar bear living in the white snow, you couldn't camouflage yourself, and you died because you were easily hunted by other animals. The genes which gave polar bears white fur were passed on. Or put another way, nature *selected* the white fur genes for polar bears.

When I first learned of this theory in high school, I had no idea how it was relevant to my life. I thought it only applied to polar bears and giraffes. But actually, through picking up a few books on the subject, I would learn later in life that all of our thousands of genes have been selected for by nature. When we sense danger, for example, our muscles tense up and our heart begins to race. This doesn't just "happen." Rather, our genes have programmed our bodies to become more alert when there is a threat. Millions of years ago, those animals or bugs or

whatever whose hearts didn't start racing when they sensed a threat were the first ones to be killed. Our bodies' instinct for "fight or flight" was passed down. This was an adaptation which allowed animals to survive, and this is why we have it today. The animals that didn't have it didn't live long enough, on average, died off and took their undesirable genes to the grave with them.

But life in the genetic world is not just about *surviving* as an individual. There is a second and third key component of natural selection which I had no clue about until I actually read Darwin. The second is sexual selection. It is not enough just that we survive. It is also necessary that we find someone to mate with so that we can pass on our genes. Do you ever wonder why some humans have beautiful voices, or long and flowing hair, or nice smiles? I hate to break this to you, but if you are running from a lion, your beautiful singing voice and your perfectly coiffed hair is not going to help you escape. These traits have nothing to do with survival. Rather, they help you attract a mate. Nature, then, selects for these genes, too, because if you have beautiful hair or a beautiful voice, you will have a better chance of attracting a mate, and of reproducing your beautiful hair or beautiful voice genes.

But the most unknown and covered-up components of Darwin's natural selection is the third component. We have a tendency to think of natural selection only in *individual* terms. *I* must survive. *I* must attract a mate. But natural selection also works within a species as a whole. The species itself is being selected for. And hence, nature will *favor* the genes of *individuals* if those genes benefit the *species* as a whole. That is so important, I am going to say it again. Nature will *favor* the genes of *individuals* if those genes benefit the *species* as a whole. Darwin came to this conclusion when observing the behavior of bees and of ants. As we know, within a community of bees or ants, there is a queen bee and a queen ant. The worker bees and ants do not care whatsoever about their individual survival. They devote their lives to their queens. Bees, when they sting you, quite literally die on the spot. Why do bees and ants display such unselfish behavior? Because their unselfish behavior is what allows their *species* to continue. At the same time, the *queen* bee and the *queen* ant are extremely selfish and have large sexual appetites. This is not an accident. The queen and the workers are in a symbiotic relationship. The queen luxuriates, the workers do her bidding, and these genes get passed on through the generations. The system works, so it continues.

The human race, *our* species, has also inherited genetic traits which may not help the individual survive and procreate, but which, in the aggregate, help our *species* to survive. If you look around at society, this should be obvious. It is only because of our society's pitiful distortion of Darwinism that we have forgotten that natural selection works on groups as a whole just as much as on individuals. If you look around at society, is everyone you see concerned only with his or her own survival and with having as much sex as possible? Some people, yes. But for many people, no. Consider the example of soldiers. Now, soldiers do not *want* to die, but they seem to be highly motivated by the idea of sacrificing their own lives for the *good* of their country and of their people. For some people, the idea of taking a bullet for a cause is absurd; why should I give up my own life for the lives of others? Yet, for other people, taking a bullet is the most natural and logical thing in the world. It is *worth it* to sacrifice my own life so that society can flourish and advance. Put another way, the human race has evolved to have both "queen bees" and "worker bees." Some of us have inherited the gene which makes us selfish and makes us preserve our own lives at all costs. Others have inherited the gene which makes us unselfish and willing to die to save the queen, as it were.

Or consider the case of sexuality. A crude notion of Darwinism holds that everyone just wants to have sex so they can pass on their DNA to the next generation. But actually, if you look around, it is rather more complex and nuanced. *Some* people have ravenous sexual appetites and seem to want nothing more than to make endless copies of their DNA for the future. Yet, other people are uninterested or only mildly interested in sex. Moreover, there is also a wide variance in people's desire to *raise* children. Some people have no interest in driving a van full of wild and screaming children to a soccer game. Other people absolutely *relish* this experience.

The point is that we need all of these *types* of people. We need all of these traits in our society if it is to prosper and continue. If everyone had the drive to be a martyr or a soldier on the front lines, then our society would be screwed. No one would care about preserving himself, and all of our genes would die off on the battlefield. But if everyone were a self-centered egotist, then our society would suffer a similar fate. No cooperation would be possible, no trust, no progress. Imagine if, say, Martin Luther King or Ghandi or Abraham Lincoln had thought, nah, I am just going to try to get a good job in marketing so I can get a cool car to impress girls with. No way am I putting my life on the line for others.

Moreover, if everyone were obsessed with having as much sex as they could, then there would be too much energy expended in the process of courtship and not enough toward other ventures. But if *nobody* wanted to have sex, then, well, there would be no more humans. If everyone wanted to raise tons of children, then other important human activities would be ignored. Consider Franz Kafka or Nietzsche, for example. They had no interest in having children, so far as we can surmise. And yet, by not having kids, they had more time to write philosophy and spread their *ideas*. On a more primitive level, it may be that, to successfully raise children, you need the children's parents. But you also need the extended network of aunts and uncles who *don't* have children to help out.

Now, I am aware that culture and upbringing and nurture all play a major role in one's level of selfishness and one's sexual and parenting desires. But nevertheless, I still believe that this spectrum of human personality types indicates something. It indicates that *we need each other to be vastly different from one another in order for our species to prosper*. We need worker bees and queen bees, married couples and life-long singles, martyrs and egotists. It all works together *sympiotically*. Now, I'm not saying it works *perfectly*. Evolution kind of thinks and behaves like some crusty old CEO of a ketchup company. He's got a thick mustache and he's been in the ketchup business his whole life, like his father before him, and his before him, and so forth. Whenever some new employee or focus group tells him to change his ketchup recipe, he always responds the same way. With a bit of perturbation in his voice, he says: "if it ain't broke, don't fix it." He doesn't know about the latest trends, the newest technology, the most recent political movements. When a colleague pulls him aside and says, "Mr. CEO, I would strongly suggest—" the CEO immediately interrupts him. "This is a family business," he says. "We've been selling the same Ketchup for since the Civil War. I ain't gonna start changing the recipe now. At the end of the year we always turn a profit. That's all that matters, far as I can see." So, we are all stuck eating the same Ketchup made from the same old ingredients, even though it could taste a lot better and be a lot healthier. It's the only Ketchup we have, and we learn to live with it.

The survival of the group explains why humans have such a wide-ranging predilection for different types of jobs. As a species, we need all hands-on deck, as it were, take on all kinds of occupations—from the pragmatic to the strange, from the leisurely to the arduous, from the scientific to the artistic. Evolution has worked across the species on a macro scale, making sure

that one person's dream job would be another's nightmare. I mean, think about it: what if everyone were as repulsed at the thought of being a dentist as I am? Teeth would never get cleaned, bacteria would never get removed, cavities would never get discovered. But writers and artists and thinkers are also important. My inherited skill and predisposition seems to lie in getting people to rethink social norms. Maybe a podiatrist will listen to this podcast, realize she is unhappy with her job, and decide to get her PhD in Anthropology instead. She will then become less depressed and better able to raise a family and support a community. In that sense, arguably, *The Schrift* contributes just as much to the propagation of the species as does a dentist yanking out teeth. Genes have been passed down to us across the species which allow us to play together in a giant symphony of procreation. Some of us play the violin, others play the tuba. In the end, it works, and we have more ketchup to eat.

I believe, then, that we all are given gifts and talents. It is up to us to uncover them and let them lead us forward. I had been a lawyer. I saw how many other lawyers were so passionate about their jobs, how it fit their personalities, how, we might say, they were *born to be* lawyers. I sensed that I was not fulfilling my full potential as a lawyer. Gradually, through a process of self-exploration, I found my way into a career which was a better fit for my natural abilities. Because I have found the right fit as a writer and lecturer, I am better able to contribute to my community. I am happier, healthier, more focused, more productive. By following my natural predisposition, I am, in a way, better fitting into the harmony of evolution and in the reproduction of our species, even if I myself don't have children.

The philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche encourages us to discover who we really are and where our talents lie. At the end of his 1882 work *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche writes, "You should become who you are." *You should become who you are*. This pithy phrase, of course, has layers of meaning and can be endlessly interpreted, like Socrates' famous line: "Know thyself." Nietzsche's line is also a bit of a paradox. How can we become who we are? If we already "are" *this*, how can we *become* it? What I believe Nietzsche is trying to say is that we have a duty to figure out where our greatest potential lies, and to then work toward achieving this better version of ourselves. When we become who we are, we will create flowing energy within ourselves which will run over onto others, onto our community, onto our species. Many years ago, a book was written called *Do What You Love, the Money Will Follow*. If you pursue your passion, if you become who you are, even if it isn't practical or money-making, somehow the treasure and reward will find you. By contrast, if you do something you don't love, just for money, you will end up poor, because you won't be thriving in your career.

The Torah emphasizes the importance of finding a career which best fits an individual's strengths and passions. As I mentioned in Episode 20 on Walter Benjamin and art, the Hebrews needed to build a kind of portable temple in the desert known as the *Mishkan*. In this Parsha, God specifically states that those who are *skilled* should be the ones to build the *Mishkan*. The women who excelled in needlework spun the goats' hair to make the tent flaps of the *Mishkan*. A man named Bezalel was singled out to craft the jewelry and to make designs for the gold of the temple. A man named Oholiab was singled out by God, due to his exceptional ability, to work as a carver, designer, and embroiderer. The Torah states that Moses "called Bezalel and Oholiab, and every skilled person whom the Lord had endowed with skill, everyone who excelled in ability, to undertake the task and carry it out." The Torah, in short, encourages the Hebrews to lean into their quite literally *God-given* talents, to become who they are, to thrive. This pursuit of passion allows the entire community of Hebrews to prosper and continue.

Yet, there is just one problem with choosing a career based on passion. Today, we live in a world which does not fit our genes. Evolution did not *foresee* the world in which we currently live. We did not necessarily evolve to be furniture salesmen, or statisticians, or podcast hosts. Actually, we evolved to be hunter-gatherers, to spend lots of time outdoors, to have ample time for leisure, to stay within close-knit communities. I said above that I was born to be a social critic who makes podcasts. Yet, as much as I do enjoy doing this, do you know what I love doing even more? Sitting on the couch, eating, and watching Netflix. Arguably, this is what I was born to do. But the world simply doesn't accept this as a viable occupation. So instead, I turn to my next favorite pastime: reading books and writing about them and encouraging people to rethink things. Therefore, it can often be that *who we are* doesn't fit the world in which we live. We are thrown into a world which is, in many ways, utterly foreign to our genetic makeup.

Franz Kafka dealt with this problem in his short story "The New Advocate." This is a story about the war horse of the legendary emperor Alexander the Great. The war horse was named Bucephalus and accompanied Alexander on all of his battles and conquests in the Near East. We might say that Bucephalus was born to be this war horse. This role fit him perfectly. Yet, in Kafka's story, he is now in modern times. His name is not Bucephalus, but Dr. Bucephalus. He now must work as a lawyer. Yet, while his profession is utterly different, having gone from war horse to lawyer, his body remains, at its core, the same. Kafka describes how, when Dr. Bucephalus walks into court, the marble steps reverberate beneath his feet. The final image Kafka gives us is of Dr. Bucephalus sitting by a lamp and reading law books. The last sentence reads: "In the quietness of the lamplight, his flanks unconfined by the thighs of a rider, free and far from the clamor of Alexander's battles, he reads and turns the pages of our ancient books." With these words, Kafka wishes to convey the absurdity and tragedy of Dr. Bucephalus' situation—and the situation we all find ourselves in. Modern society often forces us to repress our true selves, to take desk jobs when we would rather be out in nature, to only use our minds rather than our bodies in our occupations, to work long hours when we would rather be sitting on the couch or hanging out with our friends.

Yet, if we read the Torah carefully, we can overcome this seeming mismatch between ourselves and our worlds. We have more in common with the Hebrews from the Torah than one might at first think. The Hebrews, you will remember, were utterly displaced from the Egyptian world they once knew. They had to adapt to an entirely new life, now as free people in the desert. They had to find new jobs, discover new talents, adjust to a new reality. The building of the *Mishkan* shows how, no matter in what society we find ourselves, we have the ability to adapt and thrive. The truth is that we are always being displaced, always having to adapt to a new reality, always needing to rediscover who we are. This is, I think, why Nietzsche said that we must *become* who we already are. Our "dream job" or our "calling" is always in a state of flux, is always contingent on the environment in which we live. In order to do the job we were "born" to do, we must allow ourselves to continually be *reborn*.