

Episode 48

Ha'azinu

A wise mystic once said, “there is nothing to be prized more on this earth than true friendship.” Indeed, this prophet would later remark that “the things that we love tell us what we are.” Let us see if we can combine the wisdom of these two quotes for a moment. If we love our friends, then that means we love the earth. Moreover, if the things that we love tell us what we are, that means that we *are* our friends and we *are* the earth. How can we *be* our friends and *be* the earth all at the same time? It defies the very laws of physics to contemplate such an idea.

Yet, this contradiction throws us right into the very heart of early modern economic theory. In lecture halls throughout the great cities of Europe—Milan, Paris, London, Prague—a philosophical debate echoed across the continent. This debate involved some of the greatest and most prestigious thinkers of the era—Thomas Aquinas, Baruch Spinoza, and Thomas Hobbes, who would later famously remark that life in the state of nature is “nasty, brutish, and short.”

As we look back at this period, we can see that this debate divided itself into two warring camps. One side was known then as the Knights of the Silver Sword. The Knights of the Silver Sword defended the principle that, when we hold up a mirror to ourselves, we see in ourselves both our friends and the earth, and that all three are connected. Baruch Spinoza was the leader of this movement, largely based in the university town of Bologna. The Knights of the Silver Glove believed in the economic principle of mercantilism. Mercantilism. This economic theory argued that all factors of the economy were interconnected, both between foreign powers, between individuals, and between man and nature. Actually, this theory of mercantilism would send shockwaves through the European markets of high finance in this era. And it even has minorly influenced economic theory surrounding climate change to this day.

On the other side of the great debate were the Defenders of the Truth of your Sentiment. The leader of this movement was Thomas Hobbes, who I already mentioned. Hobbes had fled England during the English Civil War and was living in Paris in exile. Here, he wrote some of the greatest economic tomes if not of all time, then certainly of the seventeenth century. Hobbes and his followers staunchly believed that economics came not from people but from—you guessed it—God. They said that all economic activity should only be seen as prayer. Whereas the Knights of the Silver Sword argued that there was a triangular relationship between nature, community, and individual, the Defenders of the Truth of your Sentiment believed exactly the opposite. They saw a triangular relationship between God, angels, and the devil.

This debate would culminate at the University of Lyon, when Hobbes and Spinoza would for the first time, meet face-to-face. Spinoza came dressed all in silver, holding his silver sword. Even his eyeglasses were made of silver. Meanwhile, Hobbes dressed in peasants’ clothes, to demonstrate how, in the eyes of God, man was just as hopeless to control the economy as man was to control the weather.

There they stood, in the lecture hall of Lyon, surrounded by hundreds of students. They stared at each other, daggers in their eyes. The debate began gentlemanly. Hobbes explained his theory of economics, and Spinoza countered with his own principles. But the tension grew and grew. You can guess what happened. Spinoza drew his silver sword. And the crowd went wild. His side of the crowd, that is. But what were the Defenders of the Truth of your Sentiment doing at this moment? They were watching their spokesman—Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes stood there, eyes wide as the sun, looking at Spinoza and his silver sword. Everyone expected at this moment that Hobbes would admit defeat. He would admit that God had no influence on the economy, but

that the economy was intimately connected with nature, with nation-states, and with the autonomous individual. But Hobbes had a surprise in store for everyone. He reached into his peasant dress and pulled out a golden cross. He held it before Spinoza's eyes. Spinoza slunk backward. And Hobbes, clutching the golden cross, stood over Spinoza—the Jew. And then Hobbes would say: “there is nothing to be prized more on this earth than true friendship. It is the very things we love, which tell us what we are.”

The Defenders of the Truth of your Sentiment had won the day.

Or did they?

Hobbes believed he had emerged victorious. He turned to his supporters and received a wave of applause. But little did he know that Spinoza had gotten back onto his feet. And Spinoza, quiet as a mouse, began to creep toward Hobbes. In his trembling hand, he was clutching his silver sword. And Hobbes, in his excitement, had taken off his peasant hood, exposing his bare neck. Spinoza inched closer and closer. The crowd became silent. Everyone watched in horror what was about to unfold. All eyes were focused on Hobbes' thin, delicate, exposed neck. With two hands Spinoza held the silver sword in the air. And then, Spinoza—

Excuse me.

And then, Spinoza—

Excuse me.

And then, Spinoza took the sword and—

Oh my god, I am so sorry. The thing is, you see, I just drank a huge cup of coffee and that sometimes that causes me to burp afterwards. I know I shouldn't do that when I'm recording *The Schrift* but, I mean, it's not like I'm going to give up my morning coffee. Normally, I would just edit this part out, but I'm just feeling kind of, I don't know, lazy today. Sorry.

So, where were we? Oh, right. Hobbes was just about to get his head chopped off. So, as I was saying, Spinoza held the silver sword in the air, and gave a little smile to the crowd. He knew that he was so worshiped by his cabal that he could decapitate the great Thomas Hobbes and not lose a single supporter. And then, with his hands clutching the sword—

Oh. Just hold on one second. There are a lot of sirens in my neighborhood. Just bear with me for about ten or twenty seconds.

[you are listening to *The Schrift*...]

Nowadays, when we hear the word “art” or “artistic” or “artform” we immediately jump to romantic conclusions. If someone is an “artist,” we see him or her as an almost holy figure who has gained access to the deep mysteries of the universe. Artists are saintlike geniuses, concerned with sacred matters of truth, working on their masterworks, bringing us closer to connection with the divine.

But let us take a moment to think more about this word “art.” While “art” has a positive, sacred connotation for us, all other words associated with art are negative. They connote deception, trickery, fakeness. When something is *artificial*, it is a *cheap* replacement for the real thing, the thing-in-itself. When someone uses *artifice*, it means they act with deception. An *artful* person is a manipulative person, one who wears a mask to engage in schemes. *Craft* has a similarly negative connotation. Sure, if we say that the artist is perfecting her craft, then craft sounds like a wonderful and mystifying accomplishment. But if we change the context a bit and say, the salesman always speaks with craft, then we know that the salesman is cunning, tricky, two-faced.

As moderns, we tend to associate art with truth, but it may be that they are opposites, utterly estranged from one another.

The German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel would explore this problem in his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, first published in 1835 in Berlin. Hegel argued that Art was a symbol for some true Idea which lay behind the symbol. Art was a way to access the Idea. Let us think about a tree, for a moment. When art first appeared thousands of years ago, the best attempt to *access* the Idea of tree was perhaps to draw some small, childlike picture of a tree. You could see the picture of the tree and realize, okay, this is meant to be a tree. But it is, of course, not *really* a tree. It just is a pathetic imitation of a tree, an *artificial* tree, if you will. The better the art of tree-drawing becomes, the closer and closer art becomes to the Idea, the closer Form becomes to Content. Eventually, the drawing of the tree becomes so accurate, so perfect, that it flawlessly captures the Idea within itself. But at this moment, something strange and paradoxical occurs. The art is no longer art. It is just, well, the tree. Northwestern Professor Erica Weitzman has an incredible chapter on Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics* in her book *Irony's Antics*, and I am using this book as my source for this discussion on Hegel. Weitzman astutely notes that, at this moment when art becomes a perfect representation, "the concrete form of art will *annihilate itself* of its own necessity. Art will 'realize' that it is ultimately nothing but a confused grasping after essential content with means that can never be adequate to it ... To think art, therefore, is already in some way to think art's end." This sentence from Weitzman is so important that I would like to repeat it: to think art, therefore, is already in some way to think art's end.

In this sense, the best and most perfect art for Hegel was not art at all. Rather, it was philosophy. For Hegel, philosophy was unadulterated, pure Truth which did not require the masks and manipulations of art. When art reaches perfection, it seems to metamorphose from art into pure philosophy. To be art, art must remain in tension with the Idea it wishes to represent. It is this very tension which allows it to be art in the first place. And yet, at the same time, it is this tension which prevents it from perfectly representing the Idea.

One of Hegel's goals, then, in these lectures on aesthetics, was to keep philosophy as the "reigning champion" of Truth. He wanted to show that philosophy had a monopoly on the true expression of the Universal. Art was inherently flawed, philosophy was unchallengeable and spotless. The beautiful could be approached by art but never fully captured. Art is just a distant, imperfect copy of the infinite truth of the universe.

In the parsha for this week, Ha-Azinu, Moshe will recite a long poem to the Hebrew nation. It is not the normal, straightforward and direct speech which Moshe often gives. Rather, it is a poem. It is filled with metaphor, symbolism, simile, rhythm, and musicality. One line reads, for example, "May my words come down as the rain, My speech distill as the dew, Like showers on young grass, Like droplets on the grass."

The poem is beautiful and moving. But it nevertheless leaves us with a question. Why does the Torah need to use *craft* and *art* and *frills*—we might say—to convey its ultimate message to us. This question applies not just to this particular passage in the Torah but, in a way, to the entire Torah itself. Much of the Torah is, or at least seems to be, art. It is a book, after all. It is literary, it is often literature. It employs character development, tension, suspense, story arcs, even humor.

If you merely view the Torah as a manmade book, then there is nothing problematic about the artistic nature of the Torah. But for millions, if not billions, of both Jews and non-Jews, the Torah is seen not as art or literature but as absolute Truth, as written by God, as perfection incarnate. Yet, if there are artistic elements to the Torah—which there undoubtedly are—how can it be perfect, how can it be Truth? As I've tried to show, Art, by definition, always involves some level of deception, of trickery. It requires its audience to be subtly, or not-so-subtly,

manipulated, in order to bring the audience closer to the Idea, yet never fully arriving. Art, moreover, is inherently subjective. Faced with the subterfuges and craftiness of Art, audience members will react differently. Art will be interpreted in thousands of different ways; because it is abstract and indirect, people will respond and react to it differently.

Can the Torah be art and yet still be true and divine? This is, in fact, a deep theological question that goes to the heart of Jewish Mysticism. (And this time, I am being serious. I promise there will be no made-up stories this time about Hobbes and Spinoza.)

The Torah is obviously a book. But it can't *just* be a book if it is to be divine. Literature is art, and therefore it is inherently flawed. The Torah *seems* to be literature, but it must be *more than* literature, *more than* a book—in fact, it must be *a lot more*.

This is a question which Jewish theologians have puzzled over millennia. If we look deep into the teachings of *Kabbalah*, we can find an answer which may satisfy, or at least partially satisfy, you.

As a child, I once learned that it was not an easy task to be a Torah scribe. The writer of the Torah, I learned, had to copy each Hebrew letter down perfectly onto the scroll. If one letter were left out, if one mistake were made, the entire Torah would be judged unusable, and the scribe would have to start over. As a child, I thought this rule was in place just because the Torah is a really important book and you're not supposed to screw it up—the equivalent of not spilling red wine on a wedding dress, say. As I learned just today, in fact, that's not the reason at all.

Kabbalah teaches that the Torah is not just a representation of God or literature about God; rather, it is God Himself. The Torah is transcendent art, we might say. Hegel wrote about how art may approach the Idea but will always remain in tension with it and will always need to, in some sense, *deceive* and *lie* to *seem* to be more near to the Idea, the thing-in-itself.

With the Torah, Art and Idea are one and the same. The Torah is God.

This is why the Torah scroll must be perfectly written in order to be usable. The Hebrew letters have been arranged in such a way that they tell stories and provide laws. They are arranged to give us words, sentences, paragraphs, and eventually an entire book. But the letters themselves are seen as the essence of God. The belief is that each of the thousands of letters in the Torah contain the Name of God, and that the Name of God is, itself, the universe. One way to think about this, as I see it, is to compare it with computer programming. Computer programming takes long “codes” of numbers and symbols to create software. The numbers and symbols which make up this code are not themselves important; if we look at a long row of them, it is like reading nonsense. But these numbers are actually the expression and the code of software which is capable of miraculous tasks on the computer. The numbers are not symbols or stand-ins for the software; rather, they *are* the software, they *are* the thing-in-itself.

Indeed, this concept can be felt in an ancient anecdote dating back to the second century BCE. One of Rabbi Akiba's students, named Rabbi Meir, was a Torah scribe. He was asked one day by Rabbi Ismael what his occupation was. Rabbi Meir responded that he was a Torah writer, a Torah scribe. Rabbi Ismael responded: “My son, be very careful with your work, because it is God's work. If you leave out a single letter or add one letter to many, then you destroy the entire world.”

When we say that the Torah is God's name, we need to try to understand the kabbalistic conception of God's name. For most of us, our name is a kind of symbol of who we are. My name is “Steve” but I am not my name. If I changed my name, I would still be “me.” The same goes for everyone else and every *thing* else. Words are just symbols, placeholders to get closer to

the essence, the real “thing.” God’s name, by contrast, is not just a word or a symbol. The name *is* God. And the letters of the Torah are each like a brick in the house of God’s name.

Actually, that’s not the best analogy. Each letter is like a number in the computer programming code of God’s name. Kabbalah believes that it is through God’s name that the creation of the universe occurred and through God’s name that existence itself was created. The word “name” here is misleading, as it causes us to think that some “word” caused the Big Bang. A better way to think about it, as I see it, is that the long strand of letters in the Torah is like the ultimate computer programming code which, rather than creating software, created the universe. If you remove one brick from a wall, the wall will not crumble. But if you take one letter out of a code, the entire system becomes meaningless.

This is why the fourteenth-century Kabbalist, Menachem Recanati once said that: “Before the universe was created, it was just God and His Name who were there.”

Meditation is typically associated with the spiritual practices of India and the Buddhist tradition. But meditation is also an essential component of Judaism, particularly in the Kabbalah. Normally on *The Schrift*, I discuss mindfulness meditation, which derives from Buddhist meditation and practices. When you think about it, the purpose of mindfulness meditation is really to remove all masks, all deception, all symbols, all *art* from our experience. Mindfulness meditation allows you to push aside all of the distractions and to see the world as it really is. Whereas Art uses Symbol to approach the Idea, meditation aims to dissolve the symbol so that only the Idea, only Reality as it really is, remains.

From Talmudic times through the Middle Ages, an extensive literature on Jewish meditation was written. According to the Kabbalist Aryeh Kaplan, “virtually every method found in general meditation can be found in ancient Jewish texts, as well as a number of methods that are found nowhere else.”

The difference between mindfulness meditation and Jewish meditation is that mindfulness meditation aims to uncover our experience of the world as it really is. Jewish meditation, by contrast, aims to reveal God to us as He really is. Mindfulness meditation asks us to focus on our breathing, or on the sounds around us, or on our body. In Jewish forms of meditation, we focus on specific words in the Torah to enhance our understanding of them, and in turn, of God and the universe. One meditation asks us to look at God’s name itself. In the meditation, we stare at God’s name, spelled Yud-Hay-Vav-Hay or YHWH, written with black ink on white paper. According to ancient Jewish teachings in the Midrash, it is believed that the primeval Torah, the Torah written at the dawn of existence, was composed with black fire on white fire. According to the Kabbalah, one can stare at God’s name for long enough and eventually one will visualize the black and white fire of the primeval Torah. Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan writes that this meditation “provides one with a direct link to the Divine.”

Anyway, yeah, that’s the end of the podcast episode for the day. I would have done a better outro but my back is getting stiff from sitting so long, and I’m getting kind of hungry. I also really need to go to the bathroom. But yeah, cool. Good stuff. Anyway, I guess I’ll just play the music now.