

Ki Tissa Episode 21

In my apartment in Berlin, I have about seven or eight plants. Every afternoon, as the sun moves to the western half of the sky, a beam of light from the sun comes through my window, which, unfortunately, is rather narrow. If I am at home and I see this ray of sunlight, and I'm not feeling too lazy, I will move the plants so that they are struck by the light. I figure that plants should at least get a little sunlight when they can, even if they are indoor plants. It is normally difficult to find space for all of the plants, so sometimes I have to pick and choose which plants will get the sunlight on this particular day and which will not.

The other day, I had a kind of epiphany as I was maneuvering the plants in the beam of sunlight. I realized that, if I moved the objects in my apartment around a bit differently, suddenly there would be way more space for the plants. In my small apartment, I had thought of the sun as a kind of "guest" of the apartment. But I saw, in fact, that it was the other way round. The sun was spreading infinite light in all directions, never to be used up. My apartment was, we might say, the "guest" of the sun. Put another way, what I realized is that the sun behaves differently from other objects. We are so used to seeing the universe in *finite* terms. If I water my plants, for example, I have to measure how much water I need and then pour out that water proportionally to the plants. If I buy a new plant, I have to calculate how much space I have in my apartment and where the plant can *fit in*. But with sunlight, there is no question of space or of quantity. No matter how many times you divide sunlight or share sunlight, it is spread evenly all around.

In 1887, there was a famous experiment conducted by scientists Albert A. Michelson and Edward Morley at Case Western Reserve University. At the time, science thought that there was a substance in the universe called *the ether* through which sunlight moved. Sound waves need, for example, *air* to move through. So, it was believed that light also needed something to move through. Michelson and Morley wanted to measure this "ether wind" as it moved around the Earth. It's beyond the scope of this episode to get into the details of the experiment. But, essentially, what Michelson and Morley did was to set up mirrors which the light of the sun would strike against. The mirrors directed the sunbeams in various directions. Michelson and Morley wanted to compare the time it took for the sun to hit the mirrors and then to hit against another target. However, to their shock, Michelson and Morley discovered that all of the measurements were the same. There was no difference in the measurements. This was baffling to the scientific community at the time. It suggested that it didn't matter how far away or close you were to the sun when you measured its relative speed. The results were always the same no matter what direction the measuring object was moving in.

About seventeen years later, in 1905, the Jewish-German physicist Albert Einstein would explain why Michelson and Morley's experiment failed. Einstein would call this new theory the Special Theory of Relativity. Again, without getting into the details, Einstein figured out that light is fundamentally *different* than all other forces in the universe. What Einstein realized is that the speed of light is *constant* and *nothing can move faster than it*. This theory sent shockwaves through the scientific community and took at least a decade before it was accepted.

Now, I am not a scientist. I don't even have my PhD yet. So, far be it from me to try to explain special relativity to you or even to myself. But, what I think we can take away from Einstein is that it was very difficult for people to grasp the idea that something could behave fundamentally *differently* from what they were used to. Until light, everything hitherto had been measurable and quantifiable. If you couldn't measure something properly, it was just a question

of not having the right scientific tools to do so. Moreover, all measures of speed should be comparable with each other. For any object, a sentence could be written “object A moves slower than or faster than object B.” Yet, with light, Einstein showed how both of these assumptions were false. The speed of light would be constant no matter where the measuring tool was or whether the measuring tool was moving toward the light or away from the light. Moreover, the sentence “object A moves faster than light” was a false statement on its face .

The concept of God is equally difficult for the human mind to grasp. God, if you believe in Him, does not follow the same “rules” as what we are used to. Not at all, in fact. Indeed, the ways in which God defies every possible law of Newtonian physics are too numerous to name. This may be why, in fact, so many scientists have such a hard time believing in Him. We can start with God’s name. In Hebrew, this would be written with the four letters, yud-hay-vav-hay. In Hebrew, you read from right to left. The hay represents “haya” – “was.” The vav-hay represents “hoveh” – “is.” And the final yud represents “yehiyeh” – “will be.” These four letters of God’s name, a name which Jews are forbidden to say because it is too holy, symbolize the idea that God was, is, and will be, that He exists across the eternity of time, even more, that He transcends time, He exists in a realm where time does not exist. Again, if this doesn’t make sense to you, that’s totally fine. It’s not really supposed to work on any kind of rational level.

The Jewish and monotheistic conception of God is also that He exists outside of space. This is another concept which is utterly counterintuitive to everything we, as humans, are used to experiencing. How can something exist outside of space? Where would it go? What would it be?

Actually, we can’t even talk about God without, in some way, distorting the concept of God. Because when we state that “God is XYZ,” we are attempting to characterize God in some way. But in Judaism and monotheism, it is believed that God created everything, *including* the words and categories we are using to try to describe Him. So, every description of God will inevitably miss the mark.

This is a similar problem that scientists run into when they try to measure the speed of light. Einstein showed that, in fact, when you measure the speed of light relative to other bodies, you can never get an objective measurement. Rather, Einstein figured out that, counterintuitively, the *tools of measurement* change when you measure the speed of light relative to other bodies, but not the relative speed itself. As already stated, the speed of light is constant in all directions. Einstein showed that *space* and *time* change and curve in order to conform to light’s speed.

When we try to describe with God with language, just like when we try to pin down the speed of light, we will never get an accurate measurement. The words will always collapse in on themselves before they reach God’s essence. Actually, according to the great rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, who died in 1984, the best way to try to envision God is to, ironically, envision *nothingness*. This is a concept I have discussed in episode twelve. Often, nothingness is the last step before absolute meaning and transcendence. When we try to categorize God in some way, the words turn in on themselves. Nothingness is more appropriate to define God because nothingness has no words or categories attached to it.

Jewish mystics, known as Kabbalists, describe God through the concept of eternity. Eternity is yet another example of an idea which the human mind cannot rationally grasp. It is beyond the powers of our minds to do so. The Kabbalists refer to this idea as the “Ein Sof,” which translates into English as “there is no end.”

We should pause for a moment to say a word about Kabbalah. Kabbalah is, essentially, not your grandfather’s Judaism. It is based in symbols, in meditation, in mind-bending philosophy. The German-Jewish thinker, Gershom Scholem, was born in Berlin in 1897 and died

in Jerusalem. Scholem was perhaps the most important German-Jewish thinker to bring the teachings of the Kabbalah into his *westernized* and *acculturated* and *secularized* world of Judaism. Kabbalah was then, and still is today, mysterious to and hidden from the Jewish mainstream. Scholem grew up in another one of these highly assimilated Jewish households, just like Freud, Kafka, Benjamin, Theodor Herzl, and Albert Einstein and so forth. Scholem discovered the Kabbalah as a young man, and it became for him a lifelong obsession. Scholem would write dozens of books in German attempting to explain the Kabbalah to his modern, secular Jewish audiences.

In his book, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, Scholem attempts to explain the concept of the “Ein Sof.” The *Ein Sof* represents the eternity of God and, moreover, it is a *parallel way* from viewing God as nothingness. Scholem describes the *Ein Sof* as the eternal, that which has no beginning, that which never itself was created.

Now, it is beyond the scope of this lecture to explain the fundamental teachings of the *Kabbalah*. What is important to take away here is, first, that God does not “behave” like those objects and beings which we are used to experiencing. Second, the tools of logical analysis which we use to describe other topics, like, say, politics, economics, morality, and so forth, do not work very well when we apply them to God.

The parsha for this week, *Ki Tissa*, tells the story of the golden calf. Moshe had been on Mount Sinai communicating with God, while the Hebrews waited for him down below. The Hebrews, meanwhile, had lost their patience. They said to Aaron, build us a God *we can see*. Build us something to worship. And so, Aaron took all of their gold and melted it into the shape of a cow. The Hebrews then worshiped this golden calf. Moshe came down the mountain with the Ten Commandments in hand, signed by God Himself. When Moshe saw his people dancing around this calf like half-crazed pagans, he was, understandably, outraged. He threw the ten commandments to the ground. They broke into hundreds of pieces. Then, he excoriated his people. He had thousands executed. Finally, he ground the golden calf down to dust and forced the remaining Hebrews to quite literally drink the powder.

The message of this story is, admittedly, rather straightforward. The monotheistic conception of God was too abstract for them to grasp. Their attitude was, essentially: we only want to believe in that which we can understand. If we can’t see it, we can’t believe in it. Of course, the irony of this story is that a golden calf is the *furthest* possible thing from God. We read this story and think: how could anyone believe that a manmade object could be God? If anyone today told us, “this rock is God,” we would think they were crazy, or at least very stupid. Yet, while we have generally figured out as a species that mere inanimate objects are not God, we still have a tendency to deny that which doesn’t make sense to us. We still have an attitude of: if it’s beyond my logical faculties to comprehend, then I am just going to shrug my shoulders and deny it. It goes without saying that this attitude is rather hubristic.

Ironically, the Torah’s depiction of God is actually not at all what God *is really like* in Judaism and in Kabbalah. Actually, if we look at God superficially in the Torah, He’s hardly God at all. He’s emotional, He’s petty, He has mood swings, He behaves an awful lot like a human. Ironically, the God of the Torah is Himself a kind of idol. He has become so anthropomorphized that he scarcely resembles the God of the *Ein Sof* which Gershom Scholem discussed.

Why does the Torah depict God in this way? The twelfth-century legendary Jewish philosopher Maimonides had a rather helpful answer to this question. In his landmark work, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides explains how the depiction of God in human terms is a kind

of *concession* the Torah makes. There are simply too many people who cannot come anywhere close to comprehending what God *really* is. Ideas of the Infinite, of Nothingness, of Omniscience, are just too much for our minds. Ironically, then, the depiction of God in the Torah has an uncomfortable amount in common with the golden calf itself. The Torah's God is a replacement for the true God in order to satisfy the masses.

If you read the parsha this week closely, you see that sometimes the Torah even goes out of its way to make God seem awfully *human*. For example, when God learns of the golden calf fiasco, he tells Moshe he will wipe the Hebrews off the map. Yet Moshe argues and pleads with God to continue to support the Hebrews. He says to God, if you destroy the Hebrews, then everyone in Egypt will think you had evil intentions in leading them out of Egypt. Moshe says, "the Egyptians may say that you only led the Hebrews out in order to kill them." Do we really think God cares what his approval ratings are in Egypt? This is the kind of stuff that humans care about. The Torah, then, almost *overemphasizes* God's anthropomorphized qualities.

Unlike the golden calf, the Torah does contain, for lack of a better term, the Real God, but you have to know how to look for Him. Unlike the golden calf, the Torah can be read on multiple levels. It is a bit like a Disney movie, which both children and adults can enjoy simultaneously, but for different reasons. Some jokes appeal to the kids, some to the adults. But everyone likes the movie. All of the evidence that God is the God of the Kabbalah's *Ein Sof* is in the Torah. Yet, there is also the "God Lite" L-I-T-E for those people who can't grasp the concept of the *Ein Sof*. And, indeed, I count myself often as one of these people. Do you think I understand what infinity or transcendence of time really is? I don't. Anyway, in these over-the-top attempts to make *humanize* God, the Torah is able to have it both ways. It gives the masses the story they can understand, but also allows itself to *wink* at other readers who are willing to see beyond the surface level. Each of these overly simplistic anthropomorphized moments serves as a clever *wink* to those Torah readers who are more *in the know*.

But the Torah offers other clues, too, that the real God of this religion is the God of the *Ein Sof*. One clue I already mentioned is God's name. Yud-Hay-Vav-Hay. It contains within it the Hebrew root for Being, *lihiyot*, and it also contains the acronym of *hayah-hoveh-yehiyeh*—was, is, and will be. God's very name indicates His transcendence of time and space. The clues are, in fact, all over. As one example, in this parsha, God instructs Moshe about keeping Shabbat. He says, "Six days you shall work, but the seventh day shall be a holy day to the lord." Here, it would seem that God is referring to himself in the third person. Why say to the Lord and not to Me if God is the one speaking? Because the Torah wants to emphasize that for God, the same rules do not apply as what we are used to. God's speech does not need to make logical sense, because God Himself does not make logical sense, under the limits of human logic.

Now, many listeners of *The Schrift* are keenly astute, rigorously trained in argument, and intolerant of unsupported claims or specious reasoning. And no doubt, at this point, these listeners probably have some critiques of my argument thus far. And they would be right to do so. There is an important difference between Albert Einstein and the speed of light and Maimonides and Gershom Scholem and God. Albert Einstein *saw* something that no one else could see, Albert Einstein realized that the typical tools of scientific analysis break down when analyzing light. Einstein knew that, to understand light, he had to move beyond the typical confinements of the human mind. But Einstein *proved* his theory with science and with logic. Einstein was a scientist, not a theologian. His claims, trippy and mind-bending as they might have been, were still grounded in math and physics. To understand God, however, there is not going to be an $E=mc^2$ equation. The mind still needs to move into other dimensions of thought

to intellectually understand God, but this understanding will not have scientific proofs attached to it.

And I can already hear the objections of *Schrift* listeners. Isn't the statement that God is beyond human intellectual comprehension a kind of cop-out? Doesn't this idea rest on the logical fallacy of *argumentum ad ignorantiam*, appeal to ignorance, that if something can't be disproved then it is proved?

Judaism does not by any means want us to believe in God only through blind faith and to leave our tools of logical analysis and reasoning at the door. Quite the contrary. The Torah wants us to employ reason to take us as far as it will go, but to accept that there are some regions of thought into which reason dare not go. Reason is necessary to bring us to the doorway of the *Ein Sof*, but transcendental thought is necessary to take us through into belief.

If you are still skeptical, you may find some comfort in the philosophy of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. No philosopher was so rigorous and painstaking about reason than Kant. Kant would have shuddered at the thought of ever committing a logical fallacy in his arguments, or of applying mystical or superstitious thinking to philosophical questions. Kant's philosophy reads more like a deductive mathematical proof than like a humanistic essay. Yet, Kant believed in God. Moreover, Kant admitted that God could not be proved to exist. Kant's theory was that reason could take humans to the limits of knowledge, but that only faith could move beyond those limits. Yet Kant did not advocate for a blind faith. Rather, Kant believed in faith grounded in reason. Kant summed up this idea in his famous quote: "I had to establish the limits of knowledge in order to make room for faith."

Today, we tend to think of yoga as exercise, or as relaxing, or as a mere hobby—and it is, indeed, all of those things. But the original purpose of yoga was to allow the human to glimpse the eternal, to glimpse God. The word yoga, in fact, is connected to the English word "yoke," or the German word "joch," which means to join together two things. Sadly, this word only survives in English in farming terminology. A yoke is what *joins* cattle to the cart they are pulling on. The ancient practice of yoga sought to *join*—to yoke—the physical with the spiritual. Yoga contains this balance between the logical and the irrational, between the explicable and the ungraspable. Each yoga position, known in Hindi as an *asana*, was designed to bring about, for lack of a better term, a kind of energy flow in the body. These *asanas* are based in science, in physicality, in trial-and-error. Yet, when all of these *asanas* and *movements* and *breathing exercises* come together, they allow for transcendence to occur. There is a *yoking* going on between yourself and the universe which can't be explained through the limited tools of human rationality. This *yoking together*, this *yoga*, is best encapsulated in the yoga routine known as the sun salutation. The sun salutation is a series of yoga movements which utilize the entire body, which balance invigoration and relaxation, which emphasize both concentration and letting go. The sun salutations are ideally performed outside, underneath the morning sun. When you perform the sun salutations, you become a bit like the plants in my apartment. The sun streams down on you, as if it were there *only* for you. And yet, there is always infinitely more sun streams available for whomever else may roll out their yoga mat next to yours.