

Life Tip #3 – Put Your Mind on the Paleo Diet
Haftarah Lech Lecha
Isaiah 40:27 – 41:16

The first life tip I gave was to learn to find the North Star. But there are two ways to think of the North Star. The North Star can be that cute, twinkling, fabled shiny dot overhead in the dark night sky. However, that's not what the North Star is, really. It's not just a sparkling dot in the sky whose purpose in life was to give nautical guidance to old sailors. As it turns out, it's actually three stars which are so relatively close to each other that it seems to be one to the naked eye. And it's not exactly a "star" either; it is what is known as a yellow supergiant, that is, a star which is entering its later stage in life and has cooled down a bit. It is forty-six times larger than the sun, and the sun is one-million times larger than the Earth, so that is saying quite a lot. It is also 433 light years away, which means that, if tonight the North Star suddenly exploded, we would not be able to see view this explosion here on Earth for 433 years.

For most of human history, I think, humans looked up at the stars and didn't quite know what they were, but they sure as hell didn't think they were 433 light years away. They were just these jewels gleaming in the sky for our enjoyment and our contemplation. They were here, we might say, at our pleasure, or at least at God's pleasure.

It was not until the great Pole Copernicus in the sixteenth century that humans figured out that it was not the Earth which was the center of the solar system but rather the sun. This was a dagger to the human ego and the harbinger of millions of existential crises in the coming centuries. But Copernicus' discovery was only the beginning. The idea that the sun is the center of the universe and the Earth is revolving around it now seems positively warm and cozy compared to what we know about the universe today. I will spare you all of the awesome and devastating details, but let's just say that there are more galaxies in the universe than the amount of dollars Biden expects his new spending plan to cost.

I don't know about you, but I kind of like thinking of the North Star as just this cute shiny diamond up above eager to guide me home. I like this version. I like this version better than the one which sees Polaris as a three-star collection of yellow supergiants, so distant from our planet that, even if we sent our fastest spaceship there today, the Parker Solar Probe, moving at 0.064 percent of the speed of light, it would still take 676,000 years to get there. I feel this way, in fact, about a lot of things. I don't particularly care to hear some archaeological evidence which suggests that the Hebrews were never actually slaves in Egypt, or to learn that Kafka had a porn collection (although it was classy porn), or to find out that Thomas Mann had a thing for teenage boys. Even if it's true, it doesn't mean I need to know about it.

There are, in short, a lot of things I'd rather not know about and rather not see. I don't just limit this to scientific facts which diminish the human ego or to Biblical archaeology or to skeletons in the closet from my literary heroes. I believe that there are certain things which the mind is just not meant to witness. For example, I don't think it's particularly natural for the mind to watch a video of yourself at your eighth birthday party, blowing out the candles of your birthday cake, in which you are likely surrounded by many family members who are now dead or infirm. I don't think it's particularly natural for the mind to watch movies vividly portraying beheadings and stabbings and, of course, much worse. I don't necessarily have a moral objection to depictions of the grotesque or the lewd; I just question how well it sits with the mind.

As I've talked about many times on *The Schrift*, we live in a culture which hasn't quite shaken off the eighteenth-century intellectual frenzy today known as the Enlightenment. No

doubt part of the reason for this is that America, the world's only superpower, was founded by diehard Enlightenment supporters. The Enlightenment teaches, among other things, that there is never too much information, never too much to be known. Inquire, be curious, get to the bottom of things, keep searching until you find the truth. If someone wants to ignore evolution or pretend like the sun wakes up in the morning wearing a pair of sunglasses and a pearly white smile on her face, we accuse them of being narrow-minded, heathen, cowardly, superstitious, provincial. If it's true, I should know about it, we think. If we hide ourselves from the truth, we are pathetic peasants who should go back to the Dark Ages. The truth can't hurt us, we think, and even if it does, it's worth it, because, after all, it's the truth.

The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who lived from 1844 to 1900, figured out that truth is overrated. And he went about mocking the countless philosophers who made "truth" their goal, who sought "truth" above all else. In the very first chapter of his 1886 work *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche wrote: "The will to truth ... that celebrated truthfulness of which all philosophers up to now have spoken with respect, what questions this will to truth has already set down before us! What strange, serious, dubious questions!"

Nietzsche questioned whether we really *want* truth and whether truth is even good for us to know. Nietzsche wrote: "*What is it in us that really wants 'the truth'? Why should we not prefer untruth? And uncertainty? Even ignorance?*" A few chapters later, Nietzsche would argue that *appearance* is more important than truth. Nietzsche's purpose in writing philosophy was, believe it or not, to help people improve their lives. And he realized that sending people out to find "the truth" would debilitate them rather than allowing them to thrive and prosper.

The parsha for this week is Lech Lecha and the accompanying haftarah comes, for now the third week in a row, from the Book of Isaiah. In Lech Lecha, God promises Abraham that he will make Abraham's descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. He walks Abraham outside and shows him the stars. He says to Abraham, "Look toward the heavens and count the stars, if you are able to. So numerous shall your descendants also be." We can only imagine that as Abraham looked up to the sky, he saw in the stars the thousands of glittering, childlike souls which would one day walk the Earth and call him their forefather. What if, at that moment, Abraham's nephew Lot had popped out from behind a bush and said: Uh, Abraham, you know those aren't actually going to be your children, right? Those "stars"—I can't believe you even call them that, stars, idiot—are actually luminous spheroids of plasma held together by their own gravity which are continually undergoing a nuclear fusion of hydrogen and helium within their cores. Sure, Lot would have been "correct." But would Abraham have been any better off for this insight?

In Isaiah, we get a similar sentiment. Isaiah speaks of how Abraham and his descendants were chosen by God from all people. And Isaiah says of how Abraham was chosen by God out of all humans on Earth. In chapter 41, verse eight, Isaiah says: "Seed of Abraham, my friend— You whom I drew from the ends of the earth / And called from its corners."

In Isaiah's world, the Earth would have seemed to be the center of the universe, presumably. The Earth would have been a vast, infinitely vast place. And to use the phrase "from the ends of the Earth" would have sounded colossal and unboundedly significant. Yet, even though "the ends of the Earth" would have sounded immense, it would also have sounded comforting. The ends of the Earth is a concept which the human mind can handle and relax into. The ends of the "local interstellar cloud," which roughly surrounds our solar system, just doesn't have the same graspability and hominess. Today, however, we have received enough data, acquired enough science, learned enough "truth" to see the Earth as rather puny, relatively

speaking. The “ends of the Earth” just does not have the same gloriousness to it anymore and therefore also does not have the same reassurance.

Last week I talked about food. And when it comes to putting food in our bodies, we, as humans tend to be rather careful, or at least we try to be. Before we eat something, many of us ask ourselves: is it natural for a human to be eating this kind of food? Would humans have eaten this way thousands of years ago before industrialization changed our diets. How is this food going to make me feel afterward? Yet, when it comes to our minds, we are far less prudent. We see our minds like garbage disposals; whatever we put in there, our mind will be able to shred up like a machine and come out unscathed.

Through the practice of regular meditation, you learn that your mind is highly sensitive to outside stimuli. Every thought you have, sound you hear, image you see, affects the stillness of your mind, sometimes in scarcely perceptible ways, sometimes in highly obvious manner. If I am interested in learning about a new star or constellation, I read about its mythology and its symbolism and its location in the sky. The stuff about how many light years away it is or how old it is or how much bigger it is than the sun, I choose to skip over. For whatever reason, this information just doesn't taste very good to my mind, it upsets my mind's digestion.

We often obsess about the naturalness of the food we eat without giving a thought to the naturalness of the images, sounds, and ideas we take in. The paleolithic diet advocates abstaining from foods which only recently appeared on the scene, foods, if you can call them “food,” which did not exist until recent centuries. But we should not only approach our stomach paleolithically. This philosophy of eating we may also consider applying to our minds.