

## Episode 35 Chukat

In the television series and epic novel *Game of Thrones*, one of the most loveable and admired characters is Ned Stark, the Lord of Winterfell. He is brave, humble, a family man with a good sense of humor and a belief in justice. These are the qualities which make him so popular and so beloved. But he is not *always* so beloved. Once upon a time, Hollywood gave us heroes and superheroes who were impeccable, both morally and physically. Superman serves as the most obvious example. Superman did *everything* right: he was kind, courageous, handsome, charming, and humble. Any criticism or insult hurled against Superman simply would not stick. His one flaw was that he was allergic to Kryptonite, an Achilles' Heel for which he can hardly be blamed. The logic of Hollywood at this time was: make heroes as *perfect* as possible. Remove all flaws. If audiences are faced with a hero who is good *all* the time or only good *some* of the time, they will always prefer the former hero.

Yet, in *Game of Thrones*, in the very first episode, the hero Ned Stark is immediately made to look bad. The first image we get of Ned Stark is not defeating the bad guys or rescuing a baby. Rather, we first meet Ned Stark chopping off the head of an innocent and sympathetic soldier. The soldier of the Night's Watch, who is in charge with protecting the northern barrier of Ned Stark's kingdom, has been sentenced to death for leaving his post. But the soldier had a good excuse; he saw monsters and, in terror, ran away from them. It didn't matter. He left his post. And therefore, he must be beheaded. Ned Stark himself performs the execution, raising the sword into the air and chopping off the poor man's head. He famously comments, just before the execution, that he, as king must do the chopping. Ned Stark famously says: "The man who passes the sentence should swing the sword. If you would take man's life, you owe it to him to look into his eyes and hear his final words. And if you cannot bear to do that, then perhaps the man does not deserve to die."

Ned Stark obviously carefully considers whether to execute this soldier, and he performs the execution nobly and regretfully. Still, it never exactly looks *good* to audiences when a king beheads a sympathetic and honest man. This is not how a character "scores points" with audiences, we might say. Or is it?

The decision of the writer of *Game of Thrones*, George R.R. Martin, to open up his epic novel with this scene is not accidental. Martin *wants* to make his heroes look bad, flawed, corruptible, immoral. Yet, counter-intuitively, this literary strategy does not make the audience like the characters *less*. Quite the contrary. It is these very flaws and shortcomings in characters which make them so beloved. When Ned Stark chops off the Night Watchman's head, we are more drawn to him, more attracted to him—not less.

Hollywood seems to have gotten the hint from *Game of Thrones* and now pretty much all protagonists and heroes are flawed, morally ambiguous, complex, even depraved. Hollywood figured out that audiences are far more likely to fall in love with disturbed and broken figures than with picture perfect ones. Characters like Superman, in their boy-scout-like morality and imperviousness to sin, are, today, more likely to be loathed by audiences than celebrated. Don't be surprised if in the next Superman film you see Clark Kent chop some pedestrian's head off.

Why do audiences fall in love with flawed and disturbed characters? It is because these characters seem more *real* to us, more *human*. We recognize ourselves in these characters, for we, ourselves, are equally flawed—and usually more so. In last week's episode, I talked about how politicians now market themselves as *average* and, in recent years, even as *sleazy*.

Politicians figured out that this image works with voters. Voters now want politicians in whom they see mirrored back their own shortcomings and inadequacies. It is the *humanness* of politicians which causes voters to fall in love with them, not their perfection or their loftiness. Today, coming off as lofty or as incorruptible is a great way to make sure you lose the next election. Flash your beer belly, make some grammar mistakes, throw a temper tantrum, and you will be sure to get some more votes.

But the truth is that we do not just fall in love with characters and with politicians when they show their darker sides; this is also how we are drawn to people in real life. Nobody wants a friend who is an overachieving moralizing perfectionist. Those people who wear masks to the world, continually hiding their flaws, pretending like they don't have a dark side, tend to not have many friends. We find them nauseating and unapproachable. But when a person brashly shows anger, rage, jealousy, pettiness, vulnerability, insecurity, fear, vindictiveness, ruthlessness—we like to be in their company. We feel more *comfortable* with them because they are intriguing and real. They are open.

Today, more than ever, we are pressured to wear a mask of innocence to the world. We are taught that showing flaws and weaknesses and oddities are going to wreck our social and professional lives. We are encouraged to limit our topics of conversation to the weather and sports. To pretend like we are always in a good mood. To pretend like we love all things and all people equally. But eventually, the mask comes off—all masks come off eventually. And then the consequences are ten times worse than if we never wore the mask in the first place. Because the one thing people despise more than an innocent person, is a duplicitous person.

Franz Kafka made this idea a perennial theme in his fiction. In 1912, he wrote his short story *The Judgment*. Kafka wrote this entire story in one eight-hour sitting, from midnight till 8 a.m. It was, for Kafka, his breakthrough story, the moment he became “Franz Kafka.”

The main character of the story is named Georg Bendemann. He is a young businessman engaged to be married. He lives with his father, and takes care of his father, who has become old.

Last week, I talked about how morning talk shows are very careful to make their hosts as “average Joe” as possible. I forgot to add that they also strive to make their hosts and anchors as *uncontroversial* as possible. Don't expect to ever hear any off-color jokes, angry outbursts, radical opinions, or unsavory predilections on a morning talk show. Everything is carefully crafted to be pleasant, inoffensive, likeable, bourgeois, Biedermeier. Well, Kafka's character Georg Bendemann would have been a perfect fit on a morning talk show. He is clean-cut, exceedingly polite, thoughtful, and considerate. He has a respectable job, a respectable fiancé from a good family, and he is even kind enough to take care of his ageing father.

There are no charges, no accusations one could level against Georg Bendemann. Unlike Ned Stark, he seems to be flawless. Modern pop psychology would call him a “Teflon man”—like *Teflon*, nothing *sticks* when thrown against Bendemann. He is perfect—or is he?

In the second half of the short story, Georg walks into his father's bedroom to put his father to bed. He is tucking his father in, pulling the blanket over him, asking his father if he is “well-covered up.” Symbolically, it is as though Georg is burying his father and taking his place. Yet, when Georg asks his father one final time—“are you well-covered up, Dad”—the father stands upright in bed and explodes in rage at his son. No! He cries. No, I am not well-covered up. The standing upright in bed is a clear phallic symbol; the father is “erect” and virile, while his son cowers in the corner, enfeebled and “limp.” The father goes off on a long speech against his son, which can only be described as a tirade.

Interestingly, the father doesn't really have specific charges against Georg. Whatever charges he may have are unwarranted and not very incriminating. But it doesn't matter. There is a sense in which Georg is *guilty* before his father because he is so innocent.

Kafka captures this paradoxical judgment—that one is *guilty* because one is so *innocent*—in the climax of the father's speech. The father says to Georg: "You were actually an innocent child. But even more actually, you have been a *devilish* human being." Let's think about these words for a moment. "You were an innocent child, but a devilish human being." What is Kafka trying to say here? As I see it, he is saying that innocence is the realm of children. Children are, by their nature, innocent, and it is the very innocence of a child that we love so much. But when an *adult* behaves like an innocent child, wears the *mask* of an innocent child, then this former innocence comes across as *devilish*, as *unseemly*, as *condemnable*.

The father's next and final sentence is as follows: "I hereby sentence you to death by drowning." Georg, upon hearing these words, runs down the steps, outside of the house, and to the nearest bridge over the river. He then jumps into the water, presumably committing suicide and drowning to death.

There are a couple of important details here we should mention. This climax and denouement is rich with religious symbolism. As Georg runs down the steps, the maid cries out "Jesus!" The father seems to symbolize the God of the Old Testament whereas Georg is the Son of God. In Christianity, we know, God sent his only son down to Earth to be sacrificed. What made Jesus so unique, what made him the Christian God, was that he was innocent, the innocent lamb who had never "sinned."

What is Kafka trying to get at here? Is he saying that Georg Bendemann is really Jesus? Hardly. Rather, as I see it, Kafka is drawing a sharp line between Jesus and *humans*. *Being* innocent, not "sinning," Kafka is saying, is the territory of children and of Jesus. Any adult who tries to pretend he is innocent is really just a kind of wannabe Jesus. And a human who acts like Jesus makes for a laughable and contemptible figure. Kafka wishes to say: Georg, get over yourself. You're not Jesus. Stop pretending like you are not human, flawed, and decadent. Take the mask off.

Notice as well that Georg dies by drowning. This is an allusion to the Yom Kippur prayer Untannen Tokef. The prayer lists the many ways God may decide to take away somebody's life over the coming year. The prayer famously asks: "Who by water?" Georg thought that Christlike innocence would serve as protection—as Teflon—against punishment. Yet, the laws of the Hebrew God still apply. The father, symbolizing the Hebrew God, shows Georg that he will die like all others, in his case, by water.

Perfection is not only irritating in other people, but also in art. Beethoven hit upon this realization as a young composer. Beethoven grew up when the high classical era was at its peak. Classical music was dominated, of course, by Mozart, but even more by his older colleague Josef Haydn. Beethoven, though growing up in the classical era, would forge a new era in classical music—the Romantic era.

The classical era connotes images of kings and queens sitting politely in a salon while an old man in a powdered wig plays pleasing, inoffensive, and angelic music on the piano. Well, actually, this image is pretty close to the truth. Classical music was supposed to be *refined*, *calming*, *pleasing*, and *proper*. Haydn pioneered the classical style, both in music and in personality. Haydn was an affable elderly man. He dressed elegantly—always with freshly-pressed shirts, a carefully coiffed wig, and neatly polished coat buttons. His music was equally genteel. Let's listen to his twelfth string quartet as an example.

When Beethoven came on the scene in the 1790s, he was in his twenties. Haydn was in his sixties. Haydn was Beethoven's mentor in Vienna. Most young pianists and composers would have been thrilled to have the great Papa Haydn as their mentor. Not Beethoven. He couldn't stand Haydn. As personalities, they clashed. Beethoven was young, fiery, rebellious. He did not wear a wig like Haydn, but let his hair grow long and wild. Beethoven's clothes were often wrinkled, dirty, even torn. He showed no respect for nobility or authority, least of all Haydn's.

But they clashed even more as musicians. Haydn believed that music should be restrained, calming, unemotional. Beethoven believed—and was perhaps the first to truly believe—that music should be the exact opposite. That music should reflect one's innermost soul, that it should be stormy, offensive, and defiant. Haydn, having lived his whole life composing classical music, simply could not understand Beethoven's art. Why, Haydn thought, would someone want to listen to music which made them excited and unmoored? Aesthetically, Beethoven achieved his artistic goal by writing music which was dissonant, abrasive, loud, jarring. Haydn was appalled by such music. Why, Haydn reasoned, would one listen to dissonant and "ugly" music when one could hear concordant, mellifluous, and pretty music, pleasing to and easy on the ear?

At first, Beethoven tried to comply with his master's wishes. He wrote music which, though a bit stormy, still remained acceptable within Haydn's classical style. But in his third symphony, written in 1803, Beethoven broke free. This symphony, it is often said, was the death knell to Haydn's classicism. Beethoven made this symphony so rough, so bumpy, so violent, that it was clear the young composer would never compromise his music to Haydn's wishes, would forever leave behind the stuffiness of classicism. Let's listen to the beginning of this symphony.

I believe that the actual "execution" of classical music can be heard in this symphony. In the first movement, during the development section, the orchestra crashes out a row of the same loud, violent, dissonant chord. This moment has been described by critics as "outbursts of rage forming the kernel of the whole movement." It is as though, after these notes were played, a wall had been breached. There would be no going back to Haydn's pleasant music after this.

The five shrill, violent crashing sounds you hear at the end of this excerpt was a special moment in the history of music. With this crashing chord, played five times, it is as though Beethoven fired five shots into the heart of the classical era. Suffice it to say, no one had written music so deliberately *ugly* and abrasive until now. Even Mozart, who also did not shy away from writing raw and expressive music, would never go this far. Mozart took classical music to its very limits, but never went past them. Beethoven, by contrast, obliterated these boundaries.

Beethoven *deliberately* made his music imperfect and dissonant and raw. He realized that Haydn's music, though perhaps "pretty," was too perfect, too angelic. Beethoven brilliantly discerned that audiences do not want music which is too flawless. Instead, audiences want in music that which they want in people: complexity, imperfection, emotion, and wildness. And it is for this reason why Beethoven's music has become a part of popular culture, while Haydn is largely appreciated only by classical music connoisseurs.

In the parsha for this week, we find the Hebrews doing what they have seemed to do best thus far—complaining. Once more, they are complaining to Moses, this time about not having any water—a reasonable complaint, to be sure. But then they also add a bit more whining in their go-to refrain of "Why did you bring us out of Egypt? We had it so good in Egypt. But then you had to come along. The figs, the pomegranates, the water. We would rather be dead than stuck with you in this desert."

As usual, Moses goes back to God for assistance. God gives Moses clear instructions. Take your rod and assemble the people. Then, lean down to the rock and speak to it in front of all the people. Then, you will bring forth water out of the rock. These instructions could not be more simple and clear.

Yet, what happens? As Moshe approaches the rock, he is agitated, frustrated by the Hebrew people. He's reached his limit, so it seems. And so, he does not speak to the rock. Rather, he strikes the rock with his rod, two times. Water spews out of the rock—Moshe and the people got what they wanted—but Moshe not only disobeyed God's instructions but also seemed to momentarily almost *rebel* against God.

God's punishment against the great Moshe is swift and unambiguous. In the very next line, God says to Moses: "because you did not believe in me, to make me holy before the children of Israel, you will never come with them into the promised land." And God will make good on his punishment. Moses, as we know, will die on Mount Moab, just before the gates of Israel, while all of his people are flocking inside to enjoy the land of milk and honey.

What is going on here? Why does Moses, always so patient and loyal, lose his cool at this moment? Why does God punish Moses so severely after one slip-up in his otherwise perfect résumé? And most importantly, why does Moses strike the rock not *once* but *twice*?

This scene has, of course, been debated by rabbis for thousands of years. It is open to endless interpretation and no answer is the "right" answer. Undoubtedly, one of the most common interpretations is that Moshe, as the leader of the Hebrews, was called to a higher moral standard. For us regular folks, an occasional outburst is understandable and easily forgiven. But for Moshe, greater expectations are in order. And why did he strike the rock not once but twice? The same reason Meursault in Camus' *The Stranger* shot the Arab on the beach not once but twice. Because the two strikes leave no room for doubt that Moshe *knew* what he was doing. The two strikes show that he really "did" sin—end of story.

Or is it? Allow me to offer my own take on the parsha Chukat.

God was doing Moshe a favor. Yes, you heard right. God was doing Moshe a favor.

What is the relationship between Moshe and the Hebrews just before he hits the rock twice? It is, to say the least, not good. It is dysfunctional, toxic, failing, scary. You'll remember that, since leaving Egypt, the Hebrews have not stopped complaining. But now, forty years later, the complaining is worse than it's ever been. (This parsha, by the way, skips ahead thirty-eight years. The Hebrews are now at the end of their wandering. But, of course, they do not know that. They think they are going to die in the desert.) Two weeks ago, we read of how the Hebrews wanted to stone their military leaders—Joshua and Caleb—to death. Last week, Moshe had to put down a mini-rebellion from Korach and his clan. And this week, thirty-eight years later, the Hebrews are whining and complaining one more.

Today, as readers of the Torah, we stand in awe of Moshe. As I discussed three weeks ago, the Torah describes Moshe as the most humble man on the planet, the only prophet with whom God spoke face-to-face or mouth-to-mouth. We love Moshe today, and can only say good things about him. But Moshe is not *our* leader. We do not have to interact with Moshe on a day-to-day basis. The same cannot be said for the Hebrews. The ancient Hebrews were with Moshe day-in and day-out in the desert. How did *they* feel about him? Quite frankly, it doesn't seem as though they liked him all that much.

Here they were, the Hebrews, ex-slaves, uneducated, immature, childish, flawed, unbecoming. And here was their leader, Moshe, a kind of golden boy, Chosen One, a boy scout, prodigy, and *Wunderkind*. Moshe, who not once did something to anger God. Moshe, who never

succumbed to his baser instincts. Moshe, who got to speak directly with God whenever he wanted, while everyone else sat around in the camp and tried not to touch dead bodies.

As I've tried to show, we have an aversion, a disinclination, to those people who are too upright, too unblemished, too, in short, perfect. Instead, we are drawn to those who make mistakes, who err, who are human with warts and all. And this is, I think, one-thousand times more true when dealing with people in our actual lives than with characters in stories. Moreover, the more sordid and debased a person or a community becomes, the more they will be repelled by angels in their midst. Let's think about the mafia, for example. Wise guys want to see the same sleaziness and disrepute in their mob boss as they see in themselves. Wise guys do not want Moses as their leader; they want Don Corleone. Not just because Don Corleone would be willing to do the dirty work necessary to be a mob boss, but also because he is more relatable, more sympathetic, in short, more likeable.

Just before striking the rock, Moses says to the Israelites: "Listen up, you *teachers*, are we going to bring forth water from the rock?" Moses sarcastically calls the Israelites *teachers*, as if to say, you don't know anything, you are idiots. Well, this is certainly out-of-character for Moses. He is being sarcastic, ironic, mocking, petty. Hmm, who might that remind you of? Moses has at last momentarily sunk down to the level of his people. And they love it.

But why does Moshe strike the rock not once but twice? Remember: the Israelites don't know that God told Moshe to speak to the rock. If Moshe were just to hit the rock *once*, he would still have disobeyed God's command. But his people wouldn't know that. They would see him strike the rock, see the water come out, and think: There he goes again. Moshe. God's pet. Always on God's good side, always getting what he wants from God. This is why it is so critical that Moshe strikes the rock *twice*. Because it allowed the people to view the first strike as a *failure*. They finally got to see their leader falter. God purposely has Moshe hit the rock twice, so that the Israelites could finally embrace their leader by seeing his humanness. Finally, by forbidding Moshe to enter Israel, God influenced the Israelites to sympathize more with their leader. When they saw that they would receive a gift which Moshe would not, when they saw that Moshe was leading them without hope of reward, they became ready to themselves step up and to back their beleaguered leader.

After Moshe strikes the rock and everyone drinks water, something incredible happens. The Hebrews go on the offensive, and win one military victory after the next. They are now fighting passionate for Moshe, their human, all-too-human ruler. One army after another falls before the Hebrews.

But here is the best part of all. After this story with the rock, we never once hear the Hebrews complain again for the rest of the Torah. Up to this point, the bitter complaining had been unceasing. And then, it just vanishes. It is as though, the moment they at last saw their incorruptible leader Moshe himself complain, they were all symbolically handed a pacifier to suck on.

Too often, we strive for perfection, both in ourselves and in our expectations of others. Yet, it is the raw edges which make us who we are, which make us human. One of my meditation gurus, Bodhipaksa of Wildmind, leads his listeners through self-compassion meditations. In nearly every meditation he reminds us, very tenderly, that "we are all doing this very difficult thing by being human." There is something immensely relieving about these words—that being human is a difficult, a very difficult, thing to do. We somehow are deceived by society into thinking that we shouldn't make mistakes, that we should be perfect, that we should beat ourselves up if we err. Instead, we should retrain our minds to see mistakes as

inevitable and often as a gift, a gift which makes us who we are and brings us closer to others. Christianity developed an entire religion around a god who could “die for our sins,” take responsibility for our mistakes, provide us with exoneration and exculpation. But we don’t need Christianity to do this for us. Instead of outsourcing forgiveness and understanding to an external god, why not just take on the role and responsibility ourselves. We need only tell ourselves: I am doing a very difficult thing by being human, and the effect may be just as powerful.