

## Episode 26 Tazria-Metzora

When I was in law school, I agreed to participate in a talent show. This talent show occurred on the cusp of spring break, deep enough into the semester that students felt comfortable enough to hang out with each other. But it was also far enough away from exams that students still would show up to a talent show. A friend of mine asked me if I would play guitar while she sang a song. I agreed. The song was to be “Don’t Go Away” by the band Oasis. I am a diehard fan of Oasis, but I knew that we wouldn’t do the song justice. My friend, beautiful of a voice as she had, was no Liam Gallagher. And my little acoustic guitar was not going to cause the crowd to push up their lighters.

Nevertheless, I agreed, because, well, it’s not exactly easy for me to pass up a chance to play guitar before a crowd, in any form or capacity. This goes back to my teenage dreams of becoming a rock star. But that’s another story. The point is that I knew the performance was going to be lame. And even more importantly, I knew it was going to be nerve-wracking and stressful. Why? Because of the audience. Say what you will about law students. The fact is that as law students, we were being trained to be judgmental, critical, skeptical, disapproving. We were being trained to mercilessly assess other people in courts of law—their credibility, their morality, their sincerity.

I had played guitar in front of an audience countless times before. But for this particular performance I was more nervous than I had ever been. I think it had something to do with the fact that I was playing in front of a crowd of *law students*. Have you ever had a table of lawyers all looking at you at once? I have, and let me tell you: it’s not fun.

At the time of the talent show, I had been reading a lot of the ancient stoic philosopher Epictetus, who I discussed last week. In his philosophy, Epictetus stresses over and over again not to care about what other people think of you. Why? Because stoic philosophy preaches separating things we can control from things we cannot control. We cannot control how others think of us. All we can control is how we process our own thoughts and impressions. Moreover, Epictetus knew that stoic philosophy would make its followers unpopular with the rest of the Roman population. So, Epictetus was preparing his disciples: don’t give any thought to how others think of you, because you may get laughed at and scorned.

Epictetus gives the example of a lute player. Epictetus says that when he sees the man playing lute by himself, he plays great. But as soon as he gets in front of an audience, he gets nervous and potentially screws up the performance. Why? Because he not only wants to play well but also wants to attain the applause of the audience. And the latter is not in his control.

When I went on stage at this talent show, I tried really hard to keep repeating to myself this stoic message over and over again. I said to myself: it doesn’t matter what the audience thinks, you can’t control what they think. They’re just law students, they aren’t even real lawyers yet. I really tried. But when you’re on stage, and the crowd is staring at you, and your fingers are getting sweaty, and your leg is shaking, and you can’t remember what the next chord is, none of that matters. Emotion and instinct take over.

In fact, there is a reason why we care about what others think of us, why we want the approval of the crowd. Today, we tend to dismiss people who are overly concerned with what others think as being egotistical or weak or sensitive. But actually, caring what others think of us, wanting to be liked by the group, was an absolutely crucial personality trait in ancient societies. Today, because of modern technology, we have the luxury of being able, if we wish, to live our

lives without the assistance of other people. I don't need to cooperate with other people to gather firewood and start a fire; I can just turn the light on. I don't need to organize a hunting expedition to get food; I can just walk down to the supermarket and pull out my credit card. But our minds still are hard-wired for these primitive times. The people or animals who believed they could be outcasts, go against the grain, irritate everyone around them, go rogue, would not have lasted very long. Hence, these "go rogue" genes would not have been passed on with nearly as much frequency as the "I hope they like me" genes. In those ancient times, it was not "conformist" or "pathetic" to want the rest of the tribe to like us. It was simply an obvious survival mechanism.

Yet, this remains a difficult reality for us to swallow. Our society tends to glorify the people who stand out from the crowd, who welcome the hissing and booing of an audience, who don't give a damn what others think. He's a rebel without a cause, we say. She's a free-spirit. He's an individual. And then, we have all kinds of negative language for those who want to be accepted by the group: she's a conformist, he's a tool, he's a people pleaser, they're always trying to keep up with the Jones. Why do we so adulate the renegade loner?

This phenomenon dates back to the era of Romanticism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Romanticism was a prominent cultural movement most visible in England and in Germany. The Romantic hero was a loner, a misunderstood genius, an artist unappreciated in his time. In Germany, Romanticism had its roots in the artistic epoch known as *Sturm und Drang* or in English, Storm and Stress. We can see *Sturm und Drang* as a proto-Romantic movement which would, a few decades later, unleash full-fledged Romanticism across the continent. The hero of Goethe's novel, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, which I discussed in Episode 7, was the quintessential figure of the *Sturm und Drang* era.

What was *Sturm und Drang*? And how does it relate to the Romantic artist? *Sturm und Drang* came on the scene in Germany in the 1770s. It was heralded by the young and passionate artists Goethe and Schiller. In the eighteenth-century, French culture was the culture of Europe. What American culture is to the world today, French culture was to Europe in the eighteenth century. This is why almost every country in Europe uses the same words for napkin (*serviette*) and necktie (*cravatte*) and even culture (*cultur*). These words had seemingly no importance before the French decided to make them important. French *cultur* absolutely dominated court life in all countries of the continent as far East as Russia under the rulership of Catherine the Great. You will remember that Tolstoy's novel *War and Peace* begins in French and only later switches to Russian. The ruler of Prussia at the time was Frederick the Great. Even though German was his mother tongue, Frederick refused to speak German except with the lowliest of his servants. Everything was conducted in French. Frederick even gave his splendid palace in Potsdam a French name—*Sans Soucci*—meaning "without care" or "without worry."

The leaders of the *Sturm und Drang* movement in Germany wanted to rebel against the dominance of French culture. They wanted to be different, to provoke, to revolutionize. Goethe and Schiller wrote all of their plays and poetry, not in French, but in German. Moreover, they tossed out the classical conventions of French art and instead made their language coarse and chaotic. Dramas didn't need to consist of five well balanced acts; instead, they could be made up of dozens of erratic scenes, as in Goethe's *Götz von Berlichingen*.

*Sturm und Drang* crystallized in the character of Werther from Goethe's 1774 novel. Werther, as you'll remember from episode 7, was different and strange. He had long hair, cool clothes, and could recite poetry from memory. He complained about the conformity of the masses and saw himself as a misunderstood artist and poet. Unable to live in a society of "sheep," Werther commits suicide at the end of the book.

Goethe's novel was a sensation across Europe, resulting in the phenomenon known as "Werther Fever," in which young men began to imitate Werther, dressing like him, speaking like him, bemoaning the fate of the world like him. Tragically, many of these young men even committed suicide, feeling themselves to be just as misunderstood as Werther. This phenomenon of "copycat suicide" or "suicide contagion" is commonly known in science as "the Werther effect," in allusion to Goethe's novel.

The legacy of *Sturm und Drang* and the Romantic hero is still very much with us today. When we go into a café and see the troubled man sitting alone in the corner, with long hair, John Lennon glasses, scribbling in his notebooks, what we are seeing is Werther's progeny. When someone tells us that he is going off into the wood for a few days to "find himself," to reconnect with nature, to work on his art, what we are seeing is the posterity Werther has left to us. These types of people simply did not exist in ancient societies, and if they did, they were ridiculed and thought to be very, very stupid.

While we may adulate and "romanticize" the lonely genius today, this is a product of a cultural phenomenon which was "artificially" created in Europe. Today, we have the luxury of cultivating ourselves as individuals, as choosing to "stand out," as welcoming criticism and controversy. But, these last couple of centuries is only a tiny fraction of human history. And for most of human existence, being a "romantic artist" and an outcast would have been a death sentence. Within all of us, then, and perhaps even in Werther, is the desire to be accepted, appreciated, popular. The legacy of *Sturm und Drang* and the Romantic hero is still very much with us today. When we go into a café and see the troubled man sitting alone in the corner, with long hair, John Lennon glasses, scribbling in his notebooks, what we are seeing is Werther's progeny. Popular, welcome.

The Torah is particularly sensitive to humans as inherently *pack animals*, animals that need each other, that need to be part of the group. You'll recall that in other chapters, the Torah can be mercilessly cruel. You ate from the wrong tree? Now you're cursed forever. Some people became evil and began to steal from each other? Except for two of each animal, everyone else gets wiped out by a flood. You worshiped a gold idol? Now you're going to have to melt it down and drink its dust.

But in this week's parsha, we see inordinately sensitive treatment being given to potential lepers in society. This week, the Torah deals with those people who have suffered an outbreak of skin disease, to which we give the blanket term of "leprosy." The ancient Israelites were far more compassionate than their neighbors when someone came down with leprosy. The great Greek physician Herodotus wrote about how lepers were treated in ancient Persia. Herodotus tells us that those who had leprosy were believed to have sinned against the Sun God. Persian lepers were banned from entering cities or from interacting with other Persians.

The Torah, by contrast, advocates taking all possible measures to keep a potential leper within the fold of society. The Torah requires that the priests wait a period before diagnosing the patient with leprosy. The priests were required to wait seven days and to then re-examine the patient. Then, if the patient still had symptoms, the priests were required to let him or her be for another seven days, and then to re-examine. The purpose of this protocol is obvious. The Torah wanted to avoid misdiagnosing people. The Torah understood how disastrous a diagnosis of leprosy would be and wanted to give the patient every possible chance to show that the malady was temporary or was something other than leprosy.

Moreover, the Torah also wants to distinguish between "real" leprosy and skin conditions which merely look like leprosy. The Torah emphasizes, for example, waiting to see if the skin

discoloration spreads to other parts of the body. If the discoloration remains stationary after a period of seven days, then the Torah says that the patient is “clean” and not a leper. The Torah also wants to apply scrutiny to burns by fire. It seems as though sometimes fire burns would become infected and spread through the body. But other times, the discoloration was just the scar from the burn. In short, nothing to worry about, nothing to bother isolating someone for.

Now, I would be lying if I said the Torah was against the isolation of people with leprosy altogether. The Torah doesn’t say, for example, we must love lepers and treat lepers the same as all other members of society. But I don’t think we can really blame the Torah for this seeming insensitivity. After all, it would not have been very responsible to give people with leprosy the same freedoms as everyone else, because this was a contagious disease. The Torah had to worry not just about the individual rights of the person with leprosy but also the rights of the remaining members of society. So, it engages in a kind of careful balancing test, giving as much freedom to the potentially leprosy people as possible, while still ensuring the safety of the non-leprosy people. It is noteworthy that the Torah never explains what happens to the leprosy people once they are declared to officially have leprosy. The Torah never states, for example, they should be banished, or they have sinned against God. This lies in stark contrast to what Herodotus told us about leprosy people in Persian society.

Notice as well how it is simply obvious and accepted that you don’t want to be cut off from society. That this is inherently bad. How different this is from the attitude of the Romantic artists. Think of Lord Byron, for example, who would purposely exile himself, run away from civilization into nature, where he could “be” who he really was. Or think of Werther and all of his followers, who scorned society and fled from it, sometimes literally into death. Romanticism is, in this sense, little more than a modern luxury. In a way, Lord Byron and Werther, ironically and perversely, *chose* to become lepers, *chose* to become outcasts and pariahs. The Torah would only be able to scratch its head at such counter-intuitive behavior.

So, it’s only natural to want to be part of the group, to be accepted, maybe to even receive a round of applause now and again. But it’s by no means a given that every group will want to have us as a member. And yet, sometimes those societies which don’t *want* us are the same societies which we, perversely, so desperately wish to belong to. This is a phenomenon which Franz Kafka explores in his unfinished novel *The Castle*, written in 1922. In this story, a man named “K.”—just “K.”—wanders one evening into a snow-covered village in what appears to be Germany or Austria. The opening lines read: “It was late evening when K. arrived. The village lay deep in snow. There was nothing to be seen of the Castle Mount, for mist and darkness surrounded it, and not the faintest glimmer of light showed where the great castle lay. K. stood on the wooden bridge leading from the road to the village for a long time, looking up at what seemed to be a void. Then he went in search of somewhere to stay the night.”

K., then, enters the village as a *bona fide* outsider. He does not know anyone in the village. Moreover, they all know each other. And even more importantly, they all work for the castle. Actually, not only do they work for the castle, they are “part of” the castle. This castle sitting atop a hill. Kafka’s novel is mysterious and cryptic. But one thing throughout the novel is clear: K. is *not* part of the castle. He is not one of them. But despite this, K. spends the entire novel trying to gain access to the castle, trying to become a part of the castle. He doesn’t seem to understand or care that he is not wanted, that “outsider” is metaphorically stamped on his forehead, that he is a guest merely being tolerated. In one scene, K. hopes that he can speak with one of the castle officials, named Klamm, to convince him to let him go up to the castle. Yet, when he runs this idea past the landlady of the castle inn, she is shocked that K., a stranger,

would ever think that Klamm would speak with him directly. She says to K.: “You’re not from the castle, you’re not from the village, you’re nothing. Unfortunately, however, you are a stranger, a superfluous person getting in everyone’s way, a man who is always causing trouble.” Yet K. continues to hang around the castle and with these people, even though he is destined to remain an outsider.

It is difficult to read Kafka’s *The Castle* and not see it as a metaphor for the situation of the Jews in Germany and Austria. As I discussed in lecture 17, the Germans and the Jews had a kind of hate-love relationship, to speak in vastly over-generalizing language. In the wake of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Code, Jews were gradually liberated from the ghetto. And Jews came out of the ghetto like horses out of the gate. They thrived and flourished in secular society, becoming some of the country’s best artists, writers, doctors, philosophers, and, we must say it, financiers. There was just one problem. The Germans didn’t care for the Jews all that much. In Nietzsche’s 1887 book *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche would write, and here I am quoting directly: “I have yet to find a single German who has a favorable opinion of the Jews.”

But the Jews couldn’t take the hint, as it were. They believed that, in order to be accepted by German society, what they needed to do was just assimilate more, hide their Judaism more, maybe even go ahead and get baptized. Many Jews, in fact, did so eagerly. German Jews genuinely adored German culture, maybe even more than Germans themselves did. And after all, who can blame them? As I hope I have shown from this podcast, German culture can be quite enthralling. Who doesn’t want to sit down in the evening with a cold glass of German beer, prop up their feet, grab a book of Schiller’s poetry off the shelf, and put Beethoven’s “An die ferne Geliebter” on the record player? Have you ever drunk German beer? Have you ever heard Beethoven’s “An die ferne Geliebter”? Both are exquisite.

But the Jews just couldn’t take the hint, and eventually this “hint” became a law, the Nuremberg laws, to be specific. They naively and tragically believed that if they kept assimilating, eventually they would be accepted by the majority. Like K. in *The Castle*, they kept hanging around, hoping to one day be “admitted” and “welcomed.” But instead, they were, like K., merely “tolerated” and continually reminded that they did not belong here. *The Castle* ends mid-sentence, and we don’t know what happened to K. But we do know what happened to the Jews of Germany and beyond. Begrudging toleration turned into eager persecution, to use a euphemism.

We are, as I have mentioned, genetically hard-wired to want to be accepted by the group, to be a part of a *Volk*, to be welcomed with open arms by others. Yet, the Jews of Germany seem to have suppressed this most natural of urges. They put up with being unwanted, with being outcasts. The same can be said for K. in *The Castle*? Why did he go to the village? Why did he so doggedly insist on entering the castle which obviously would never admit him? In short, why did the Jews and K. blind themselves to seeing this as a miserable, fruitless endeavor?

With mindfulness meditation, we tend to associate it with concepts like staying in the present, focusing on your breathing, becoming more aware of your body and your environment. These are all wonderful teachings of mindfulness. But there is another crucial teaching of mindfulness which often gets forgotten. This is the concept of “self-compassion” or loving-kindness toward yourself. The language of Buddhism, known as Pali, terms this concept as “metta.” Self-compassion or *metta* advocates treating yourself with kindness. This is a bit ironic that we even need to have a teaching like *metta*. After all, one might think, obviously I want what is best for myself, and so I am inevitably kind and compassionate to myself. But actually, this is far from the truth. Often, the relationship with ourselves can perversely turn into one of

slavemaster and slave, boss and underling, bully and nerdy kid on the playground. *Metta* teaches us to take the unconditional love we may feel for others, for example, for our children, our cute pets, our kindly old grandparents, and then apply that love to ourselves. Think about it. Would you ever force your dog or your child to stay up all night working in front of a computer? No. And yet, how often do we force ourselves to do this. Moreover, would you ever force your dog or your child to hang out with people or other dogs who don't care about them and who are cruel to them? No. And yet, how often do we try to join groups who don't treat us as equals and with kindness.

There is a reason, however, why *Metta* is a part of mindfulness teaching. Because, in order to recognize ways in which we are unkind to ourselves, it is necessary that we be mindful. We need to become more aware of how we speak to ourselves, our inner monologue, how we spend our time, how we treat our bodies. Without mindfulness, it can be very difficult to recognize what your relationship is with yourself.

This was, it seems, the problem the Jews had in Europe. They had become automatized to see assimilation as their only answer, their only hope. We must assimilate more, they thought. We must become more German, they thought. We must hate Yiddish more, they thought. They couldn't step out of this cycle because they were not mindfully observing themselves.

Yet, one man had an "ah-ha!" moment in which he snapped out of this collectively automatized thinking. This was Theodor Herzl. Herzl had grown up in an assimilated Austrian-Jewish family. For the first three-fourths of his life, Herzl believed that assimilation and acculturation was the answer for European Jewry. That is, until he witnessed the Dreyfus Affair in France. He traveled to Paris as a reporter and he saw how Alfred Dreyfus, the French-Jewish general, was treated after he was falsely accused of espionage. Even after devoting his life to the French army, the court gleefully convicted him without solid evidence. Put another way, Dreyfus was convicted for being Jewish. Dreyfus did everything he possibly could to become French and to join "la nation française." And it wasn't enough. It would never be enough. When Herzl witnessed this, he realized that the Jews would never be accepted as equals in Europe, would always be disliked, even hated. Herzl snapped out of his former automatized faith in integration. He decided that the Jews needed to get out of Europe and form their own state.

We can evaluate Herzl's decision in mindfulness terms. In short, what Herzl did was to become mindful. And then, after observing what was really going on, he decided to apply *metta* and self-compassion to his people. Herzl's decision was a quintessential act of *metta* and self-compassion. To finally decide to *walk away* from a group in which you are not wanted, and to instead form a *new group* where you will be accepted and loved.