

Episode 1, Season 2 Haftarah Bereishit

I didn't know where the North Star was in the sky until I was in my late twenties. On starry evenings, I sometimes ask people, perhaps to their annoyance, if they can find the North Star. They often answer: isn't it the brightest star in the sky? It's that one. But usually they are pointing to Jupiter, the brightest planet in the sky, or to Sirius, the actual brightest star in the sky. No, I say. The North Star is actually quite faint. But if you draw a straight line from the stars Merak and Dubhe in the Big Dipper, you will always land on the North Star. You will always land on *Polaris*, no matter where you are on the northern hemisphere of the planet, no matter what time of evening, or what time of year.

The truth is that, for most of my life, I didn't know where anything was. Obviously I knew that Europe was east of America and that California was west of Philly, but that was about the extent of it. I knew the sun rose in the east and set in the west, but I didn't know that the moon also rises in the east and sets in the west. I didn't know that the sun moves from north to south during June 20 to December 20 and then goes the other way. I didn't even know that the suburb I grew up in, Cheltenham, was north of Philadelphia.

I didn't know where I was on the compass, not just because of a failure of the American education system, but also because, for me, it never really mattered. Why did I need to know which direction north was? I wasn't Magellan; I wasn't even a farmer. I could get by just fine not knowing if the moon rose in north, south, east, or west. If I ever got lost and really needed to know the way, I could just use my smartphone or guess. Not the worst options.

A century or two ago, the directions of north, west, east, and south could not be ignored. You knew exactly where they were from the time you were a child. You may not have known how to read, or what time it was, or even when your birthday was, but you knew how to find the North Star and you knew, quite literally, in which direction the wind was blowing.

The Industrial Revolution began in the mid-nineteenth century. It is difficult to overstate how much this revolution entirely upended daily life. For the first time in human history, people began to *go to work* as opposed to just working from home. Work schedules were set, not by the sun, but by the boss at the factory. Instead of creating an entire product by yourself, you created just a fraction of it on an assembly line which would then be completed by dozens of other employees.

Now, I'm not here to give you a history lesson on the Industrial Revolution. You all know the story. But if you look at film and literature from this era, you see how aghast people were at how their lives were being upended. This shock and outrage can be seen most movingly in Karl Marx's 1848 work, *The Communist Manifesto*. With this book, Marx basically wanted to bring society back from the precipice which it seemed to be driving off of. He wanted to say: your labor should be worth the work you put into it, as it had been for thousands of years. In 1927, Fritz Lang would express similar shock and outrage in his silent film *Metropolis*, filmed in Berlin. This film depicts the modern city of skyscrapers, mass transit, electric light, and robotics.

This is a battle to hold onto our past agrarian existence, an existence which humans enjoyed for thousands of years, which we have lost. In fact, we have lost this battle so thoroughly that we don't even question it or resist it as Karl Marx and Fritz Lang once did. Actually, in a kind of perverse twist of history, we now even romanticize factory life. We now look back on the time when men would go to work in the factory as somehow the "good old days" and we beg our politicians to bring these jobs back. If you happen to go to Times Square, you will notice how

much it resembles the apocalyptic cityscape which Fritz Lang constructed in *Metropolis*. His society of less than a century ago viewed this alien, futuristic architecture with foreboding and horror and lament. Yet, when we view Times Square today, we are more likely to exclaim “cool!” than “O humanity.”

In the haftarah for this week’s parsha, Bereishit, we read from Isaiah. Isaiah was a prophet from the eighth century. Isaiah meditates in this book on how, while Israel may at times seem to have been rejected by God, God will always return Israel from its exile and from its punishment. The connection with the parsha is that Isaiah employs the language of the creation story in his words about God. Isaiah says: “So said the God, Hashem, who creates the heavens and stretches them forth, spreads out the earth and what grows from it, gives a soul to the people upon it, and a spirit to those who walk on it.”

Toward the end of the Parsha, Isaiah writes: “Fear not, for I am with you; from the east will I bring your offspring and from the west will I gather you. I shall say to the north, “Give [back],” and to the south, “Do not withhold, bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth.”

Notice how effortlessly Isaiah speaks of these four Geographical coordinates: east, west, north, and south. Because he lived in the pre-industrial world, these directions would have been a part of his daily existence, just as a metro line or a search engine routine is part of ours today.

We likely can get by without knowing anymore about the directions of the compass. Hell, I was able to for almost thirty years. But if we take the time to re-familiarize ourselves with these ancient signposts of north, south, east, and west, we will surprise ourselves at the delight and richness that this knowledge brings.

This effort is, at its core, an exercise in mindfulness. If you learn quite literally which way the wind is blowing, you awaken your mind to another mode of existence from which you had been cut off, an ancient mode of existence which your ancestors enjoyed for millennia.

We like to think that we no longer need to know which direction north is, that our modern devices have solved this predicament for us. But I can’t tell you how many times I have looked up in the sky to find Polaris and used it to find my way—both spiritually and geographically. Take the time to learn where the North Star is. I promise that it will always be in the same place for you.