

## Episode 27 Acharei Kedoshim

Mark Twain famously once said: “I never let my schooling get in the way of my education.” Education has probably come a long way since Mark Twain’s time probably got beaten on the rear end with a rod if he didn’t know what a passive participle was. But the truth is that, when I look back on my high school education, it seems that I did spend a lot of time learning things which would prove to be of no value whatsoever for the remainder of my existence. It wasn’t like, say, *The Schrift*, where every sentence is akin to a sagacious adage to take with you on life’s journey. In high school, you have to memorize a lot of information which then exits your brain immediately after the exam, never to return again. But one thing I had to memorize has proved to be exceedingly valuable. When I was in high school, we were forced to memorize the literary devices. What is a metaphor, a simile, a symbol, an allusion, hyperbole, metonymy, personification, and everyone’s favorite, onomatopoeia. As a PhD student in literature, these have proved to be enormously helpful.

When I learned these literary devices as a high school student, I recall having a bit of a tricky time wrapping my head around metaphor and simile. A simile is when we compare two separate ideas using an “is like” statement. Let’s use the music of Simon and Garfunkel as examples. The song “Like a Bridge over Troubled Water” is an example of simile. “And friends just can’t be found / Like a bridge over troubled water / I will lay me down.” Here, Paul Simon is comparing himself to a bridge over “troubled” water and saying he will lie down. I guess the idea is that a bridge, if it’s above a wild river, eventually it will collapse. With this simile, we know that Paul Simon isn’t himself the bridge; rather, he is *like* the bridge. He is *similar* to the bridge.

Another song by Simon and Garfunkel is “I am a Rock.” In this song, Paul Simon sings, “I am a rock / I am an island.” This would be an example of *metaphor*—not simile. Here, Paul Simon doesn’t say I am *like* a rock; I am *like* an island. Instead, he sings, I am a rock, I am an island. Now, we know that Paul Simon isn’t actually a rock or an island. Here, too, he is really saying that he is “like a rock” or “very much comparable to an island.” But no sane person would actually think that you can go on a tropical vacation getaway on Paul Simon’s body.

Yet, the question remains: why did Paul Simon write I *am* a rock? Moreover, what is the difference between saying I am *like* a rock and I *am* a rock? This is the question I struggled to grasp as a high school student. Isn’t every metaphor really just a simile only with a bit more melodrama added to it? Obviously, saying I *am* a rock sounds more severe and dramatic than merely saying I *am* like a rock. But in both cases, we know that the speaker is not actually a piece of geological stone. So, why even bother distinguishing between the two, between metaphor and simile?

We have discussed the literature of Franz Kafka more than a few times on *The Schrift*. One innovation Kafka brought to literature was to take metaphors and make them literal. Let’s take *The Metamorphosis* as an example. In Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*, Gregor Samsa wakes up one morning to find himself transformed into a giant insect. In this story, Gregor Samsa has quite literally been turned into a bug. He is a giant cockroach lying in bed, with thousands of little legs, a hard shell, and antennae. Previous literature perhaps would have had a character *compare himself* to an insect. He would have said, “I woke up this morning and I felt *like* a bug.” My family treats me “like a bug.” For example, let’s compare this with Dostoevsky’s novella from 1864, *Notes from Underground*. In this novella, the protagonist, equally troubled as Gregor Samsa, writes, “I’ll tell you, gentlemen, that many times I wanted to become an insect. But I was

not deemed even worthy of that.” Dostoevsky’s protagonist, in other words, says I was less than an insect, I wanted to be an insect. But no one reads this and thinks that he wishes he were a literal beetle crawling on the ground. Kafka, in his literature, takes this concept one step further into absurd conclusions. The characters are not merely *like* animals or *akin* to animals; they actually are these animals.

Yet, when we read *The Metamorphosis*, we are very quick to presume to *metamorphose* Gregor Samsa back into a human. We read the story and think of Gregor as a human and his bug-like “shape” as only a symbol and a metaphor for human problems. We think, “okay, haha, I get it. Kafka is being very clever and cute here, depicting Gregor Samsa as a *literal* beetle, but we all know what Kafka *really* means. This is a story about a man who feels like a beetle, who is *like* a cockroach, who ‘is’ a cockroach in the same way that Paul Simon ‘is’ a rock.”

There is a certain arrogance to this approach. When we say that Gregor Samsa wasn’t “really” a bug but only *felt like* a bug, it is tantamount to saying that a story about a bug on its own terms isn’t very relevant. When we presume to say that Paul Simon isn’t actually a rock but is only *akin to* a rock, it is like saying that a rock is only relevant insofar as we can assign it human qualities. Now, I’m not saying that Paul Simon actually is a rock or actually is an island. We all know he is neither of these things. My point is that we quite automatically skip past the “bug” or the “rock” only to get back to what we can ascertain about the human. Yet, meanwhile, we have left the bug and the rock in the dust, as it were. We do this because a rock, we think, is just a rock. It has no emotions, free will, consciousness. Sure, it’s great as a literary device to dramatize our conception of what it is to be a human, but once it’s served its poetic purpose we can discard it. Indeed, when was the last time a zoologist wrote a journal article on *The Metamorphosis* or a geologist offered witty commentary on the song “I am a Rock”?

Put another way, we ignore objects, we overlook them, we treat them as lifeless, insignificant, powerless entities. Yet, it was not always this way.

In many ancient religions, it was believed that all natural beings—stones, trees, lakes, seas—had an inner spirit and energy. That a soul exists in every being, even if it is not a “living” being. The pre-Socratic philosophers like Thales and Heraclitus taught that there is a form of life in all material objects. Plato, in his famous *Theory of the Forms*, argued that everything—animals, humans, objects—had its ideal and perfect form in the cosmos. That there was a perfect Idea of the chair, and the chair we see is merely a reflection of that Perfect Form. Even more recent philosophers like Baruch Spinoza of the seventeenth century saw a life force within all matter.

Now, this type of thinking can easily slide over into paganism. And the last thing I would ever want to do on *The Schrift* is turn my listeners into pagans. First of all, I’m not trying to get smited, at least not before I get my PhD. Second, I think that seeing all objects as having a life force doesn’t detract from monotheism but rather brings us closer to it. Now, to be fair, I’m not suggesting that objects are gods and that if you pray to a rock your dreams will come true. I know that mountains do not have brains and that rivers do not have magical powers. But I am suggesting that matter should not be so glibly disregarded as just a lifeless object. We have a tendency today to go through the world and see ourselves and other humans as the “important” entities. Everything else is just kind of “in the way.” But this is a recent development. Before industrialization and the rise of individualism, there was more of an homage and respect paid to the “material” world. One looked at the sun and the stars as vivacious things to be feared and esteemed.

Even in more recent centuries, in comparison to our own, objects were seen more as “alive” and “personified” than we do today. It used to be that when one owned a boat or a ship, one referred to it as “she” or “her.” *She’s* a beauty. People refused to denigrate a ship to just being an object created by some engineer and carpenter. People somehow sensed that ships were more than just ships. I myself am not yet a boatowner, but I imagine I would feel awfully strange referring to my boat as “she.” Yet, even as recent as a few centuries ago, this would have felt normal. If you’ve ever read Hermann Melville’s *Moby Dick*, you know the kind of loving attention paid to the sea. The sea has its own personality, life force, mood swings. The sea is *alive*. Now, today, if you sat down a hyper-rational person, they would scoff at this metaphor and want to tame it into a simile. They would say that the sea is not “really” alive and its own “person.” It just is comparable to being alive, comparable to a person. *Moby Dick* is a realist novel. There is no suggestion that the sea has a mind of its own or has free will. It just “seems” to. But imagine if you were to speak with Ishmael or Captain Ahab about the sea. Would they “put up” with this argument that the sea is only “like” a living being rather than “is” a living being? And even if you could scientifically explain to them how the sea cannot possibly have a brain, would they believe you? I didn’t think so either. And finally, who has more of a right to decide whether the ocean is alive? We, who have spent our entire lives on land, in shopping malls, at the library, in front of a computer? Or Captain Ahab and Ishmael, who have spent their lives sailing around the world?

The German philosopher Martin Heidegger also wanted to change our relationship to objects in the world. In his 1950 essay “The Thing,” Heidegger explores how we view mere objects. Heidegger wants to distinguish between “objects” and “things.” An object is, for us, just another piece of matter, unimportant in its own right, reducible to its component parts. A thing, by contrast, is an object with its own “dignity,” character, and expandability. We tend to conflate the notion of object and thing. We say, “give me that thing” over there when we could just as well say give me that object over there. No one would dispute that an object is a thing. But if you think about it, we use *thing* in far more all-encompassing, aggrandizing terms than we would ever use object. If we say, “she knows a thing or two about it,” it means she is well-versed on the subject. If we say, “he has a *thing* for her,” it means he has a crush on her, strong feelings for her. In this sense, *thing* is the appropriate term, and *object* would not make any sense. Famously, in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, the Danish prince says, “The play’s *the thing*, wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the king.” Here, *thing* is the essence, the ultimate conglomeration, the lynchpin of the drama. Heidegger points out that “thing” is the ultimate goal of Kant’s philosophy. Kant employs the term *thing in itself*—*Ding an sich*—to describe reality as it “really” is.

Thing, however, has been corrupted and degraded in recent times. Nowadays, as I mentioned, we lump it together with object. Historically, thing meant anything *but* an object; it was a culmination of various essences into an ultimate, well, *thing*. Heidegger observes that in medieval German, *Ding* was something powerful and even sacred. The theologian Meister Eckhart referred to God as “das höchste und oberste Ding” (“the highest and most supreme thing”). Yet today, if we referred to God as a “thing,” we would be accused of blasphemy.

Actually, Hebrew bears this out as well. Hebrew speakers will note that the modern word for “thing” is “*devar*.” This is the same word as for “speech” or “speaking.” This word “*devar*” is used over and over again in the Torah when God speaks to Moses. D’ber Elohim el Moshe, le-ehmor. The final book of the Torah is called *Devarim*, which is a collection of Moshe’s *speeches*. And yet, modern Hebrew would translate this as *things*. To even call the Book of

Deuteronomy “things” sounds like a degradation and insult. But that is only because we have mutated the concept of “things” from something holy into something ordinary and scientific.

For Heidegger, it used to be that everything was a thing. There were no “objects.” Everything had this greater essence, was not just a tool to be exploited by us and used up, but to be admired and appreciated in its own right. Heidegger uses the example of a clay jug. When we see a clay jug, we see it simply as lifeless matter, as a tool which we can hold and fill up with liquid. This, for Heidegger, is the “scientific” and “physical” perspective of the jug. We don’t see the jug on its own terms. Rather we reduce the jug to its component parts. Heidegger writes that, according to the scientific perspective, the jug is just a vessel filled with air. When we pour liquid into the jug, the air is replaced by this liquid. This is the jug. For Heidegger, science robs the jug of its *jugness*, steals from the thing its *thingness*. Because a jug is more than just a piece of pottery. A jug, according to Heidegger, can hold wine, which can then be poured in celebration, or in sanctification, or in dedication.

Ancient Judaism also views objects not on *our* terms, not on *scientific* terms, but on the terms of the “thing.” The Talmud section Pesach 111 gives all kinds of warnings along these lines. Certain trees, fields, drinks can release demon-like spirits into the world. There is, for example, a belief in Judaism that if you walk between two palm trees while carrying water, negative energy will be released into the universe and the “evil force” will be awakened. Now, a scientific person would be quick to dismiss this as a mere superstition. And indeed, Maimonides, when he read about these strange prohibitions, said that they are all just metaphors and have no basis in reality. Yet, Maimonides was alone in this opinion. The remainder of the rabbis of his era continued to believe in this “superstitious” law from the Talmud. Now, do I think that if I walk between two palm trees carrying water that I will have bad luck or some evil spirit will be released? No. But at the same time, I would argue that different energy is released when we walk between two palm trees as when walk between, say, two oak trees. The palm trees are not just there waiting for us to walk past them and decide if they’re important. The palm trees are *things* in their own right and carry with them their own *thingness*. Who am I to say what occurs on a universe-wide level when I walk past them?

In the parsha for this week, *Acharei Kedoshim*, the Torah discusses various laws, ranging from incest, to animal sacrifice, to menstruation, to fasting. Basically your typical Leviticus *parsha*. At the end of the parsha, God warns the Hebrews that, when they come into the Land of Israel, they must not do those abhorrent, disgusting things which the people they will soon be kicking out did regularly. God says that when these inhabitants did these abhorrent acts, the land became defiled. Finally, God says, “So let not the land vomit you out for defiling it, as it vomited out the nation that came here before you.” So, the land doesn’t vomit you out. Now, can a territory “vomit”? Can land become nauseous and throw up? Was Gregor Samsa *really* a cockroach? Is Paul Simon somehow *really* a rock? When we read this verse from the Torah, we immediately transmute it from a metaphor into a simile. Of course, the land isn’t actually going to throw up the Hebrews. It will just be *as if* the land is spewing out the Hebrews (if they take on these heathen customs). But the Torah doesn’t say it will be *as if* the land vomits out the Hebrews. It says *it will*. Of course, if we try to explain this scientifically, it doesn’t make sense. We know that a land doesn’t have a “mouth” or a “stomach” or “bile” or a “digestive system.” But what if we were to reattach Heidegger’s notion of *thingness* to this *thing* of the Land of Israel. Then, it may be that the *land* could indeed *throw up* the Hebrews, not figuratively, but *literally*.

Meditation has the ability to bring us in greater contact with the world which surrounds us. Meditation allows us to realize that the world doesn't revolve around *us*. Rather, we are part of a vastly interconnected world in which every entity, humans, animals, plants, and even objects, has its own being. A common practice of meditation is to close your eyes and become aware of the objects around you. Even though your eyes are closed, you can still sense the objects in the room. You can sense their energy and their being even without seeing them or touching them. Indeed, if you think about it, this is a phenomenon we experience all the time. Have you ever left the dishes in the sink without cleaning them and gone into the next room? Even though you can't see the dishes and they are "out of your way," you can still sense them. Somehow, you feel less at ease, as though even the next room you are in is "unclean." It's important to be aware of the energy being emitted from all objects in our surroundings and how this energy is affecting us.

The parsha also discusses the fasting holiday *Yom Kippur*. The Torah tells us how on the tenth day of the seventh month, we must afflict ourselves and abstain from work and creative activity. On this day, Aaron, the high priest, will be responsible for offering two goats by way of sacrifice. One goat Aaron will sacrifice in the Temple to God in the usual way. But then there is a second goat. This goat is not to be sacrificed. Rather, Aaron will send this goat into the wilderness carrying upon it the sins of Israel. There is more. This goat will be sent to Azazel. What? Azazel? Yes, Azazel. Who is Azazel? We haven't heard of him or her or it before. The Torah does not explain who or what Azazel is but he is generally thought to be a fallen angel or a forest demon. (Also, as a side note, we get the term scapegoat from this goat sent to Azazel. All of the sins of the community were laid on the head of this one goat.) Every year on Yom Kippur we read several times about Azazel. And of course, we read about him in this week's parsha. Yet, I don't hear many Jews talking about Azazel. When Azazel *does* come up in Enlightened Jewish circles today, it is, once again, brought down to the *symbolic*. There was no forest demon; this was just a *rite* to allow the ancient Israelites to ceremoniously relinquish their sins of the past year. Azazel has become a *symbol*, a *simile*, a poetic *idea*.

Yet, there is just one problem with this castration of Azazel, with the surgical removal of the *thingness* from this thing. The problem is this: no one ever asked Azazel what he thinks about all this.