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Earlier this week, Louise and I finally saw the Tom Stoppard play on Broadway— Leopoldstadt.

The play is stunning. There is a great deal I would like to say about it but won't because for those of you who have not seen it, I do not want to give anything at all away. I highly recommend it and should it come to Washington, which I really hope it does, I will absolutely go see it again.

There is a lot there.

The play is set in Vienna and covers the years 1899-1955.

The opening scene of the play- stunning is among other things a kind of plunge into the pinnacle of Viennese Jewish creativity and western cultural vitality brought about by the European Enlightenment.

Picture

Freud, Adler, Bergmann, Frankl, Wittgenstein, Mahler, Schoenberg, Kreisler, Kafka, Roth, Zweig, Herzl. The list feels endless and these are just a few of the more familiar names of Viennese Jewish giants in the arts and sciences who left their mark on history- it is staggering.

The opening scene, therefore, brought to mind a question that a dear friend and highly respected colleague asked me very recently in an email:

“You've said many times-- Jews need to be defenders of Enlightenment values. Do you mean by that, at least in part--defenders of true liberalism?”

My answer in one word is yes.

As Louise and I left the play and walked through always dizzying and enlivening Manhattan, I said to her something like the following:

“In the history of Western Civilization –as we know it—going back to antiquity--
Authoritarian regimes always seek to do two things—

1. clamp down and control intellectual, cultural creativity
and
2. come after the Jews.

In some ways—the two are one.

The authoritarians out there inevitably hate books, intellectual curiosity and
creativity and, therefore us. We are, after all, the People of the Book—I might
say—people of many books.

Our post Enlightenment Judaism stands on two things-

1. A very few self evident Truths
Human dignity
Freedom
Opportunity for all

And

2. A passion for searching for truth—science, philosophy, the arts—these are
all paths for searching for something more –discovering something more
about the human condition. These small “t” truths are the object of the
human quest to overcome Jurgen Habermas’ “sense of something missing”
of which I spoke on Rosh Hashanah.”

This commentary on the revelation in the Book of Exodus captures it as well
as anything—

The great scene of Moses on Sinai seeking to know God.

(“GO TO SHARED TEXT”)

Exodus 33:12-23

Now therefore, I pray You, if I have found favor in Your sight, let me know Your ways that I may know You, so that I may find favor in Your sight. Consider too, that this nation is Your people.” And He said, “My presence shall go *with you*, and I will give you rest.” Then he said to Him, “If Your presence does not go *with us*, do not lead us up from here. “For how then can it be known that I have found favor in Your sight, I and Your people? Is it not by Your going with us, so that we, I and Your people, may be distinguished from all the *other* people who are upon the face of the earth?” The ADONAI said to Moses, “I will also do this thing of which you have spoken; for you have found favor in My sight and I have known you by name.”

Then Moses said, “I pray You, show me Your glory!” And He said, “I Myself will make all My goodness pass before you, and will proclaim the name of the ADONAI before you; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion.” But He said, “You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live!” Then ADONAI said, “Behold, there is a place by Me, and you shall stand *there* on the rock; and it will come about, while My glory is passing by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock and cover you with My hand until I have passed by. “Then I will take My hand away and you shall see My back, but My face shall not be seen.”

Arnold Ehrlich, *Mikra Ki-Feshuto*, commentary to Exodus 33:23

“You shall see My back but My face shall not be seen.” If there is an esoteric meaning to this phrase, I am not privy to it, because I am not part of the divine inner circle. What I see in it reflects the words of a German sage (Gotthold Lessing) who wrote the following: “Were I to have stood in the presence of God, whose right hand was holding Truth, and whose left hand was holding The Search for Truth, and were I to have been given the choice of one or the other, I would choose The Search for Truth.” A similar thing was said in Mishnah Avot (4:22): “A single hour of repentance and good deeds in this world is more delightful than an entire lifetime in the World to Come.” They said this because one who arrives at

Truth, and thus to the life of the World to Come, is now at rest from all striving, having arrived at the desired destination; and when one works toward something of supreme value, the striving itself is a greater good than the reward yielded. It is just the same with the matter of knowing God and God's ways: were a person to be able to ascend to the highest rung bar none, what would that person do subsequently? Therefore, a human cannot see the face of God; only God's back is shown to the God fearing, so that they will study, search out, and infer things about God's face from that back. Thus they will strive all their days to know God with a full and clear knowledge, and that striving is their reward.

Michael Gelven, *Truth and Existence: A Philosophical Inquiry*

The story is deeply paradoxical. For if Lessing genuinely desires the truth, then is he not disingenuous in turning down the offer of truth itself? If I desire gold and someone offers me gold or a stake in a gold claim, I would take the gold. By denying God's offer of truth Lessing seems to be denying any meaningful sense of a search for truth. Why search for truth if, when offered it, one turns it down? Yet this fable of Lessing's suggests a deeper insight than mere frustration with someone who does not know what he wants. **There is the suggestion in this little story that only an infinite being can possess truth**, and that to accept the right-handed offer is to forfeit one's humanity.

(END SCREEN SHARE)

This is the best interpretation I know that Judaism abhors dogma. We are allergic to absolutes that are dictated to us. Our Judaism loves questions and tentative answers.

Defending the Enlightenment means defending the right to a multi vocal society with a crowded public square filled with noisy but respectful debate.

Defending liberalism means defying the book banners who are really book burners.

It means opposing those who want to curtail questioning anything and everything.

It means defending liberalism and its spirit of inquiry that was the hallmark of the European Enlightenment.

Defending liberalism is the Jewish mandate of our time because it entails the absolute refusal to forfeit our humanity—I might say—our shared humanity and the right to think differently.

To close with words that I always love from Archibald MacLeish.

“There is not a single police state of any ideology which does not confess by its Berlin Walls, its nets of concentration camps, its prison hospitals for the “insane,” its censorship of books, its silencing of mouths, its suppression of minds, that it is afraid. And what it is most afraid of?... Opposition from within, the police state can put down. Wars it can win for a time ... But the free man, the free mind, it cannot conquer...”

Let us hope Leopoldstadt comes to Washington. It will instruct us and inspire us for the struggle we currently face in many parts of our own land.

SHABBAT SHALOM!