

Poli & Humanities - Ep 10

[00:00:00.06] TOM MERRILL: Hello, everybody. This is welcome to politics and humanities. This is a podcast from American University. I'm Tom Merrill, a faculty member in the Department of Government. I'm here with my colleague Sarah Marsh who is in the Department of Literature. Hello, Sarah.

[00:00:14.34] SARAH MARSH: Hi, everyone. Good to be with you again.

[00:00:17.46] TOM MERRILL: And we have a very special guest today, which is my old professor Leon Kass, professor emeritus at the University of Chicago and also now the dean of the faculty at Shalem College in Israel. He's the author of this wonderful new book *Founding God's Nation, Reading Exodus*, which is a sequel to his book on Genesis, which we're going to be talking about. We're going to be talking about exodus. And we're going to be talking about the place of the Hebrew Bible in liberal education.

[00:00:46.11] Before we launch into the conversation, Leon, I have to just say some things. One of the reasons why you're here and one of the reasons honestly why I'm here is that I was in your class a long time ago as an undergraduate, a very naive and shy undergraduate at the University of Chicago. I took classes with you and I took classes with your wife Amy Kass, who's now, of course, gone, that was much beloved by many of us.

[00:01:13.41] And I just have to tell you that class-- I think I took Rousseau with you and the discourse on inequality. And I did Genesis with you. And those classes was, for me, was kind of like the first time I'd ever really read a book and the first time I had realized that a book has layers, that it needs interpretation, that it has subtlety, that the author might put things there that he or she wants you to notice but doesn't put on a billboard.

[00:01:48.63] And it was just a transformational experience for me or a foundational experience for me. I guess I learned how to be sensitive to the difference between what the text says and what the text does. And it's important for me to say this to you but also to say this to our listeners because I really think of what I do in the classroom is, in many respects, trying to reenact what it was that I thought happened to me when I took that class with you and with other people.

[00:02:20.12] There's a whole community of people who are really serious about reading books . I have to tell you, sir, that was a gift. That was a gift that I still think about every time I walk into the classroom. So I want to just start by saying thank you.

[00:02:35.13] LEON KASS: Tom, thank you very much for that. The gift is repaid by seeing what's become of that shy young man and to see that he carries on in a splendid way the dignified and civil inquiry into the things that matter. It's a great pleasure to be with you on this occasion and to be with you too, Sarah. And I look forward to talking about a book that matters.

[00:03:02.74] SARAH MARSH: Thank you very much, Leon and Tom. I'm very moved by that. I have to say when I was reading *Founding God's Nation*, I was also transported back to the happiest times of my undergraduate experience when I was in a lot of poetry classes. And I was

taught by people who cared a lot about what poetry does, and how the line matters, and what images do, and how a work of literature can come alive in one's own mind. It was a very wonderful experience to read the book. And so I wanted to start the conversation today by asking you to give our audience an overview of what this book is about and what is it intended to do.

[00:03:53.66] LEON KASS: Well, thank you. Look, it's very hard to summarize this very complicated and rich book in a few words. But in short, Exodus is the account of the foundation of the nation of Israel. It takes the project that was begun in Genesis with the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, in which God tries to found a new way for human life against the ways of human life uninstructed.

[00:04:26.46] In Genesis, this new way barely defined survives through the three patriarchal generations, barely. But Exodus shows how those families get transformed into a people. And that people formation in Exodus really rests on three pillars. First you have the story of enslavement in Egypt and the miraculous deliverance from Egypt, which becomes the national story of the people. So the first pillar is a national story of slavery and deliverance.

[00:05:06.39] The second pillar is the giving of a law and morality at Mount Sinai, the Ten Commandments, most famously, followed by three chapters of detailed ordinances having to do with what we call crimes and torts, but also things that not only restrain but also encourage and lift up. And then finally, in the last part of Exodus, the building of the Tabernacle-- that's a place where the people have an opportunity to embody their aspiration to be in touch with what's highest through ritual, worship, and sacrifice. It's a place for expression of gratitude, for atonement in relation to the divine.

[00:05:55.67] And these three, I think the thing that is of interest is if you read this merely historically from within the tradition, you could say, ah, this is a book for the people who live by this book. But if you're willing to read it philosophically in a wisdom-seeking spirit, you're invited to think about whether or not a nation well-founded needs a common story, needs a common law and morality, and needs something to look up to in a certain ritualized way. And that, I think, is what is of great interest to me in reading this book.

[00:06:35.22] SARAH MARSH: And so whenever you were conceiving of this project, I think it's important for the readers to know how the book you've written works through the text line by line by line. Why is that method of reading important?

[00:06:57.28] LEON KASS: It's funny that you should call it a method of reading. A colleague of mine was once asked, what's your method of reading? He says, I read the whole book. And very few people read the Book of Exodus as a book. The people whose tradition it is mostly go out and pick out-- excuse me-- favorite passages that have religious and legal significance for the Jewish law.

[00:07:29.62] The scholars are mostly interested in what's the origin of this text? What strands came from this source and from that source? But if you think that regardless of the source, the book might have been put together by a single intelligence who knows what he or she is doing and putting this together, then you submit to reading the book. And you try to understand from

reading it slowly how it's been put together and in the hope that by dwelling with it, you will learn from it how it wants to be read and discover what it has to teach you. And you can't decide, ah, this is the important part because it's important to me.

[00:08:11.02] You have to really take the whole thing seriously and figure out why is this here? And why is this next to this? And to read it, you suspend your disbelief. And you put aside your criticisms and try to understand this book in its own terms. You can criticize it later, which, by the way, is what I do with every book. Every book that I teach, I teach that way.

[00:08:36.06] SARAH MARSH: My students and I talk a lot about practices of charitable reading and what does it mean to suspend one's reactions to the text long enough to let the text do its work on us. And we live in a society that really privileges instant responses to text. We're in the midst of all of these platforms all the time where the hot take is the way to respond.

[00:09:07.48] And so it does feel like a mode that needs to be cultivated right now. I think that students, they don't always understand what I'm asking them to do whenever I just ask them to read and pause and not react right away.

[00:09:25.57] LEON KASS: Yeah, that's very important. It's also important in the age of the screen, in which nobody has any patience to dwell with anything for a long time and to see the longer development of a thought that can't be expressed in 140 characters. I also, by the way, say to the students at the start of every class that I try to tell them why I'm reading this book. And I say something about what are the issues that I picked up this book hoping to get help with?

[00:09:59.26] And I say that we're going to read this book in the spirit that this book might just contain the most important thing you want to know, that you might not otherwise be able to learn unless you get it here. And I have to say that in the writing of this Exodus book, the book that I finished writing was not the book I started out to write because the experience that I advertised for my students happened to me in the course of reading this book. And that's quite a wonderful thing in one's old age to actually be turned around in certain important respects by what one finds.

[00:10:44.64] And it has to do-- I don't have to be coy about it. It has to do with taking the stuff on the Tabernacle seriously. It's 13 chapters of the driest, at first glance and second glance, most boring and detailed stuff. But on the principle that this too is crucial to the whole of the book, I had to do due diligence with it. And by doing that, I noticed things I'd never seen before.

[00:11:12.43] SARAH MARSH: So for our students who are listening, I would love to hear you talk more about what it means to do due diligence with a text. How did that happen for you whenever you were reading Exodus? And how did you understand that your disposition to the text was being changed by the text?

[00:11:35.38] LEON KASS: Well, I could do it, for example-- I'll take a particular story. I'll take the story of Moses at the burning bush, famous story. It's how God catches Moses. Moses is raised as an Egyptian prince in the house of pharaoh. He's rescued from the river by pharaoh's daughter. She adopts him, makes her his own child.

[00:12:11.71] We're not told peep about what happens to Moses in pharaoh's house. When he emerges on the world stage he's in his late teens or early 20s. And he has these adventures, et cetera, where you see him as a person who cares for injustice and has fellow feeling.

[00:12:29.20] But much later, he's living with his father-in-law in Midian. And there is this burning bush. And Moses turns around to see why the bush that's burning is not consumed. Moses has a philosophical disposition. The patriarchs, none of them asked why. Moses wants to know the cause.

[00:12:53.50] And he goes to see with his eyes. And he hopes that he will discover through seeing into the heart of things. And it turns out the bush is not transparent, but the bush talks. And Moses is converted from wonder to awe in one of the most magnificent descriptions of the emergence of the religious passion that you will find in literature at all. The bush tells him, I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham and Isaac, and Jacob. Take off your shoes. You're on sacred ground.

[00:13:29.59] And rather than turn tail to run, Moses somehow stands there at the awe-inspired distance, can't get too close-- but I'm still attracted-- and holds his ground here. And this is a place where my own philosophical impulse to know the cause-- and Moses, by the way, then goes on to say, what's your name? He doesn't say it quite so boldly.

[00:13:57.63] He says, when I come to the children of Israel and they say, who sent you, what shall I tell them? And what's your name? And he says-- God answers him, I will be what I will be, which is a kind of rebuke of a question that seems to want to know the essence. Here is where a philosophically inclined reader like me is in a way, being showed well, you know what? Maybe you should be a little less impatient about this question of knowing exactly who or what this is.

[00:14:33.86] Maybe what you're supposed to do is follow the text and find out who this voice will be from what he says and what he does here after. That began to teach me that I should read God-- the references to God in the text, not according to some preconceived notion that He's omnipotent, omniscient, et cetera, et cetera, which the text never says of Him. But to read this as a place holder in which I'm going to be educated in this text, along with Moses, by following what the story shows me He says and does. And I should forget about the question of His essence or knowing Him through and through or seeking the causes of things. And that I should instead of relying solely on my eyes, I should begin to hearken with my ears and follow the tale.

[00:15:26.32] TOM MERRILL: So I wonder if we could take a step back. So you've gone, in a way, to maybe the most important question, or one of the important questions. Can we take a step back and talk about the great antagonist of the tradition that the nation is being founded, which is Egypt, right? Egypt also wants to the causes. Is that right?

[00:15:48.20] LEON KASS: Egypt is, in fact-- the first thing to say as Egypt is the great civilization of the time. Egypt is the land of good and plenty. When there's a famine, everybody comes to Egypt because Egypt, as Herodotus this tells us, is the gift of the river. They don't rely on rain. But every year the Nile floods, and there is plenty.

[00:16:13.04] Egypt is a place not only of plenty, but Egypt is a place of technology and administration. The pyramids are only one sort of an emblem of the advanced technological civilization that's there. Egypt is a place which on the one hand appears to worship nature gods. And they recognize all of the various powers of nature, which are emblemized in the various gods of Egypt from the dung beetle to the bull to the frog-headed god, the god of fertility; the bull, the symbol of virility; the scarab. The dung beetle, which arises from dung, is the symbol of immortality.

[00:17:07.34] The Egyptians are obsessed with death. And they've got magicians working on reanimation of the pharaohs who are patiently awaiting in their pyramidal tombs for the magicians to get it right. And Egypt is, in addition, ruled by one man as a god. Egypt is a techno despotism in which pharaoh rules according to his own whim.

[00:17:39.58] TOM MERRILL: But I take that part of what's going on in your reading of Exodus is you don't think that Egypt is simply a long-lost civilization, that it represents a human possibility. And it's a human possibility that has some attractive features or features that we recognize.

[00:17:57.84] LEON KASS: Oh, absolutely. Look, actually, on my reading, the ancient civilizations are ancient incarnations of permanent attractive human possibilities. And the two leading ones against which Israel is defined in Exodus, it's Egypt, and in the books that follow, it's Canaan. The Egyptians are a kind of rationalist, technocratic, administratively very successful people that seem to venerate nature but, in fact, are interested in mastering nature in order to control decay and conquer mortality.

[00:18:42.19] With that formulation, I think one can see that Egypt is back. We've got Egyptian strands very powerfully in the United States in our trust of technology, in our pursuit of the conquest of decay, and our pursuit of not only longevity, but even ultimately something approaching bodily immortality. We have the administrative state and rational experts who manage all kinds of things and people who think we don't do this sufficiently. The Canaanites, on the other hand, are an earth-worshipping and very earthy people, too much rationality, not so important. They give themselves over to the pleasures of the moment. And this is a place where worship embodies orgies, and there's unbridled sexuality.

[00:19:35.95] And these are in the way the two alternatives-- and by the way, the Canaanites are back. You and I don't live among them. But if you read the newspapers, the newspapers give a perfectly good account of their enjoyment of the opportunities of the present age. But Egypt is the more important alternative because Israel has to be defined as a people in, out of, and against Egypt. They have to learn to be anti-Egypt before they learn anything else.

[00:20:15.58] TOM MERRILL: So Egypt is the alternative? In a way, it's the alternative that has to be preserved within the psychic life of the nation.

[00:20:24.05] LEON KASS: Exactly. And among the things that are important to know is first of all, Egypt is a place of xenophobia. Egypt is a place of ceaseless labor and toil for the pharaoh.

Egypt is a place where people hoard things against tomorrow. Egypt is a place that controls fertility and tries to master death. Egypt is a place where you've got despotic rule.

[00:20:52.76] In contrast, the children of Israel are going to be taught the humane treatment of the stranger. They remind that over and over again, remember that you were slaves in Egypt. Be kind to the stranger, the widows, the orphans, and the poor. Instead of ceaseless labor, they're going to have a day of rest, where the lowest of the low are invited to be like God, who rested on the seventh day, and to have time out from toil for celebration, appreciation.

[00:21:21.86] There will be plenty. There will be sabbatical year. And the belief is you don't have to hoard against your neighbor but that there is the opportunity of sharing and so on. There is the celebration of procreation. And instead of trying to master death, the way of Israel is transmission of way of life from parents to children to grandchildren. The traditional story and the transmission of a way of life is life's answer to mortality not more of the same for ourselves.

[00:21:59.15] And finally, in place of despotic rule according to the whim of pharaoh, you have the rule of law for each and all. And it applies to everyone. This is, in a nutshell, would be what would be remembered and what would be the contrast.

[00:22:17.99] Egypt is the place to which people like to return. Whenever the going gets tough, the Israelites want to go back. There was at least meat in Egypt. And part of the difficulty of starting in slavery is it's a lot easier to get the slaves out of Egypt than to get Egypt out of the slaves. That's a long project.

[00:22:40.10] SARAH MARSH: I was going to ask you. Leon, what is the relationship between the enslavement of the Israelites in Egypt and the Egyptian technocracy and the administrative state? Because those two things seem to be mutually [AUDIO OUT] to me.

[00:22:55.16] LEON KASS: Yeah. I think, in a way, I mean, if one's reading philosophically, you can say, look, Israel came down into Egypt. They prospered there. They flourished. They became numerous. And a new pharaoh to consolidate his power kind of made a scapegoat out of them and decided to oppress them to rally his own people around opposition and fear of the other.

[00:23:25.85] But it's a way through the contest that God and Moses have with pharaoh in the plagues. The text exposes what Egypt really, really means. Yes, it's a land of prosperity. Yes, it's a land of prosperity and technological progress and so on. But when push comes to shove, and when you actually push it, what you expose in the land is that, in fact, you will have techno despotic rule, which in the end is willing to sacrifice the well-being of the people for the assertion of its own power.

[00:24:08.78] Pharaoh, through the whole sequence of the so-called plagues, everybody else falls away. They see this is terrible for Egypt. Why don't you yield? But pharaoh, in the end, stands alone. He takes only his own advice. He's not going to yield to his courtiers. He's absolutely indifferent to what's happened to his people, but he's going to stick it out to the end and prove that he is masterful.

[00:24:39.58] And what you then see through this whole encounter is the deep meaning of Egypt as a place-- in fact, I'll say it first. And then I'll give you the really great evidence for it. Egypt turns out to be a place which on the surface looks so attractive. It has everything. It has agriculture. It has technology. It has medicine. It has magic. It has-- things run smoothly. It has a bureaucracy that manages everything.

[00:25:15.86] But it turns out that as a result of this sequence of plagues, and as a result of the intransigent of the leadership. What you get to see about Egypt is that it's built on a false understanding of the world. And its politics is, in fact, hostile to the care of the very people that its leadership is supposed to be looking after.

[00:25:42.51] Just let me-- one sentence. At the beginning of the Ten Commandments, God says to the people, I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. And that's a historically true statement in the text.

[00:26:05.34] But if you read it philosophically, what He seems to be saying to them is, look, have two alternatives. There are basically two alternatives. Either you're going to be in relation to me and live under a way which will be uplifting, or you will be as you were before, in the house of bondage in the land of Egypt, in the house. But the alternatives suggested by the text are either life lived in accordance with God and His teaching and His uplifting teaching or whatever way you live, you're at peril of winding up living in a techno despotism of the sort you've just experienced. So-- yeah.

[00:26:51.15] SARAH MARSH: I want to ask you more about the sequence of the plagues. This is the part of the book that I was really captivated by. I teach classes at American University about the history of medicine. And I had never thought to teach the plagues of Egypt, which just seems very obvious to me now.

[00:27:10.40] But I wanted to ask you a little bit more about the plagues. So why are the plagues sent in the first place? Why are they sequenced in the way that they are? What did they reveal about Egypt and then the role that Moses is playing in leading the Israelites out of slavery?

[00:27:30.60] LEON KASS: You may have to help me on this because--

[00:27:32.91] SARAH MARSH: OK.

[00:27:35.10] LEON KASS: But let's start this way. First of all, I don't want to undercut the conversation we're starting by pointing out that almost never in the text is the word plague used. These things are called-- we know them as the 10 plagues. But God describes them as signs, wonders, and chastisements.

[00:28:01.49] They're wonders-- wow, signs-- oh, what do they mean-- and punishments of some sort for something. Only once-- I can't remember where exactly-- is a word which in Hebrew means hit, a series of hits is used. And that's the word that could get to be translated as plagues. But that's pedantry, and we'll leave it go.

[00:28:30.48] But if you want to know why they're instituted, it's not only or primarily as punishment. But they're introduced as wonders and signs, the ultimate purpose of which is not just to get the Israelites out of Egypt. After all, God could do that without going through this whole process. The purpose of all of this, He says very explicitly, is so that the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord. It's a contest about knowledge.

[00:29:09.21] It's a contest that we should come to know what's the world really like. Egypt is built upon a certain view of the world, a certain-- on the one hand, a naturalism in which there is no special standing of the human being. And on the other hand, a standing not of the dignified human being, but of the mastering human being who can make nature better do our bidding. And it's to somehow correct and expose the errors of what the Egyptians think are divine, as well as the limitations of the Egyptian magicians to change nature, and to somehow teach the Egyptians what's the world really like, what governs here, and to also expose for everybody what it means to be Pharaoh, so that the world will see what that kind of civilization ultimately produces.

[00:30:09.49] TOM MERRILL: Can I ask a question? So if it's a contest-- I mean, you're presenting it as a kind of theological, philosophical contest about what the world is really like. But from what you said before, so Moses talks to God in the burning bush. And he asked God, what's your name? And the answer is basically you won't know, or I will be what I will be.

[00:30:37.13] So can you cache out the-- that's not the right phrase. But can you explain that the Egyptian alternative is the world is controllable. [? Plus, ?] the Israelite alternative, what is that?

[00:30:58.54] LEON KASS: Maybe we should do a bit of the plagues, the way Sarah wanted to do first. Maybe it'll fall out.

[00:31:03.16] TOM MERRILL: [LAUGHS].

[00:31:03.46] LEON KASS: No, I'm not ducking the question. But maybe we can work our way to an answer. The plagues begin-- one way to think about the plagues, leaving the 10th plague, which is the death of the first born alone, but take the first nine plagues and treat them concentrically. The first plague is the turning of the river the blood. And the last plague is darkness, in which the sun goes absent for three whole days, and it's complete darkness.

[00:31:43.17] The river and the sun are two of the chief gods of Egypt, and for perfectly good reasons in an agricultural civilization. The river, water, and the sun, light, and warmth are to be venerated. And if I'm an Egyptian before the Bible, I'm on board with those things, right?

[00:32:07.24] The first and last plagues show that there is a power mightier than these two sources, that they are not themselves divine but are, in fact, under some other kind of greater control. And they also mock in the treatment of the first plague turning the river into blood. The river was the place where the children of Israel under pharaoh's Egypt had been drowned. The boys were to be drowned in the river. The river becomes under pharaohs rule not only a source of life giving, but it turns out to be something deadly. And that teaching, once you see the Egyptian manipulation of the river, the river turns out, in fact, to be a source of death because the water becomes undrinkable.

[00:33:00.65] TOM MERRILL: So let me ask. But it sounds to me-- partly what you're saying is that the plagues are speaking to Egypt in language that Egypt understands.

[00:33:09.59] LEON KASS: Exactly right. Exactly right. Take the next is the frogs. The Egyptians have a god, Heqet, who's the frog-headed god. He's the god of fertility. Pharaoh was not content with trying to do something about mortality. But he tried to control the fertility.

[00:33:34.05] And by the way, the crimes of the tyrant are, as one learns, from things like Oedipus, the crimes of the tyrant are, in fact, incest and patricide. The tyrant wants to live forever and be his own source. The control of death and the control of birth are the things that tyranny aspires to.

[00:33:56.55] So Pharaoh has in a way already declared himself. You think you can control fertility, pharaoh? Let me show you. Here's fertility gone crazy. And the frogs are everywhere. The frogs are in your oven.

[00:34:12.18] Pharaoh's magicians can do this. But then they can't stop it. They can't undo this kind of thing. What's being mocked here is both the belief that this natural good is simply splendid and that you can also control it.

[00:34:36.60] The bull is a very big deal in Egypt. It's not for nothing that when the Israelites get off the reservation they make a golden calf. It was a memory of what was the virility and power that was crucial in Egypt. And the bull is-- a young bull is the symbol of masculine power and virility.

[00:35:05.37] And it's not for nothing that the central of these plagues, the cattle disease and the boils, begins to affect the animals. The locusts, which come later, destroy Egyptian vegetation, the pride of the land. And I'm not doing this very well because in the book, I separate different ways of analyzing the plagues in groups.

[00:35:36.49] On the one hand, there's a certain mockery of the sufficient power of these natural forces. In another way, there's a mockery of the technological belief that you can master these forces. In another way, there's a suggestion that Egypt rightly understood will only produce chaos, and only God can undo the chaos that He himself here produces. In other words, he produces the chaos with the plagues but then is able to restore it in a way that the Egyptians can never do.

[00:36:08.14] And finally, unlike anything that anybody who worshipped nature could ever see, the God of Israel has an intellectual discriminatory power. He sees to it, for example, that many of the plagues don't strike the land of Goshen, where the Israelites are ghettoized. They don't suffer from plagues four through nine.

[00:36:37.47] And then in the 10th and final plague, which is the plague of the first born, in which he kills the first born in every house, what kind of natural power could tell the house of the Egyptians from the houses of the Israelites and distinguish between the first born and everybody else? [INAUDIBLE] different power in charge here. Tom, [INAUDIBLE].

[00:37:01.63] TOM MERRILL: Don't you think-- Leon, if the text ended after the plagues, wouldn't you be tempted to think that the god that's being spoken of here is a super pharaoh?

[00:37:11.32] LEON KASS: Yeah, exactly.

[00:37:12.82] TOM MERRILL: I mean, there's a big danger that this God who can do this amazing thing of seeking out only the first born--

[00:37:18.57] LEON KASS: Correct.

[00:37:19.40] TOM MERRILL: Right?

[00:37:21.43] LEON KASS: If you-- look, and my students always say-- and this is important to notice. Lots of people have used the story of Exodus as a story of national liberation. But the word freedom doesn't occur in the text. They're being delivered from slavery. But they're being delivery from slavery to service to a new god. And my students say, they've just exchanged one pharaoh for a bigger and stronger pharaoh.

[00:37:54.29] TOM MERRILL: Well, but even within the text, one question about the plagues is, it's a play that God is putting on, and the questions for which audience? So partly it's for pharaoh. Partly it's for Egyptians. And what you said before is that he wants to show the Egyptians the truth about the world. But it's also for the Israelites.

[00:38:13.51] LEON KASS: Exactly right. And it's, in fact, also for Moses.

[00:38:16.81] TOM MERRILL: Also for Moses, yeah.

[00:38:17.86] LEON KASS: Moses is the Egyptian who most of all needs to know that this god who wouldn't tell him his name actually will be what he will be this way. So in the course of the plagues, Moses' own courage and his own initiative increases so that the story of the plagues actually emboldens Moses. But the most important thing, the Israelites, when Moses presented them the story and pharaoh turned the screws, they say, yeah, yeah, we don't know this god. They reject him completely. If you can bring the Egyptians to bear witness of the superiority of the God of Israel, the Israelites might believe it too. And so--

[00:39:02.63] TOM MERRILL: So the message has to be conveyed in, as we would say, intercoder reliability. It has to be accessible to somebody outside of the Israelite nation.

[00:39:18.32] LEON KASS: And if you could bring the greatest civilization around to bear witness-- and the witness is not finally born at the end of the 10th plague. Pharaoh, the next morning, after he lets them go, decides-- I mean, they come and tell him, look, the Israelites have gone away. And poor pharaoh's in a tough place. He looks weak.

[00:39:40.40] He's actually told him to go. So he pursues them with 600 chariots. And you know they all drown in the Sea of Reeds. The last thing you hear out of the mouth of the Egyptians is, it's too late. The Lord God of Israel fights for them. The last word out of the mouths of the

drowning Egyptians, the last sentence gives the name of the God of Israel. Pharaoh at the beginning said, I don't know anybody like that.

[00:40:12.75] So at this particular point, it's not the whole story. It's the beginning of the story. The Israelites learn that on their side is a champion whose superiority has been demonstrated before their very eyes and has been given the verbal testimony of the chief civilization of the world that had oppressed them for decades. And now, now what?

[00:40:45.91] SARAH MARSH: So I have a question about the now what. Whenever the 10th plague, the death of the first born, is exacted against Egypt, it is coupled to the Passover. And it seems important to me that these things happen with near simultaneity in the text, right? It's the dashing of the dynastic power of Egypt, with these hereditary lines being erased. And at the same time, there are instructions for a communal meal that are designed to create something. Can you say more about the pairing of those two events in Exodus?

[00:41:32.49] LEON KASS: Yeah. Very good. Look even before they go out, there's a commandment that every year hereafter you're going to tell the story of going out. Short formulation-- the going out is for the sake of the story because the story is the foundational piece of nationhood. Every year they re-enact their identity as people who exist only thanks to the fact that God took them out of their servitude.

[00:42:10.54] So they go out of Egypt not feeling their oats, but charged with a perpetual duty to their children and their children's children, and their children's children remember forever. Remember forever you were slaves. If it weren't for your deliverance, you might still be slaves and that this is not the end, but the very beginning of nationhood, remembrance of slavery, gratitude for deliverance, and a sense of the blessedness of having been delivered and still being here to tell the story.

[00:42:55.78] I feel badly. And you'll allow me just a couple of sentences because I've left the God of Israel at the end with the Egyptians in the water as the Song of the Sea says right afterwards, as a mighty man of war. And that looks maybe like, yeah, well, if you want to be on the side of the winning team, you might go with that pharaoh rather than the one you left.

[00:43:20.30] TOM MERRILL: Right.

[00:43:20.89] LEON KASS: But it turns out-- and I don't want to deflect this too much. But that's just the beginning. They then learn that he's a good provider. When they're in the desert, he provides mana and quail and so on and leads them to water.

[00:43:34.93] But most important, He's a law giver. He's a teacher. And we won't get to it today. But the most important thing after the golden calf-- the people learn, and Moses learns most importantly, He's a God of forgiveness and grace, and that the law that He's given in fact is for their elevation, not for His own self aggrandizement.

[00:44:02.23] But in order to get started, He has to, in a way, show them that He can get them out of bondage so that they can begin to be delivered from the bondage that is within their souls,

which is really addressed in the coming law and in the ritual and in the practices. And a person who thinks that it's changing one pharaoh for another at the Sea of Reeds will think very differently even at the end of Exodus when you see what else "I will be what I will be" has in store for you.

[00:44:37.63] TOM MERRILL: Part of the problem of the text, it seems to me is-- or reading the text is that you have a series of events. It's presented as sort of a temporal order in just any story. But it's also you're seeing elements of a national character or national identity. And it seems to me-- so maybe this is one thing that you're saying-- the danger of up to the Sea of Reeds is to think that it is just another-- God's another pharaoh and that, as you said before, getting the Egypt out of the Israelites is a task that might not be finished or maybe even finishable within this text.

[00:45:15.43] LEON KASS: It's never finished. What you have are the beginnings. And you have, in a way, the teachings that could help do it. But backsliding is a permanent human possibility right away. But the question is-- I think what they're shown is not only, by the way, that God is powerful, but He keeps his promise. He's solicitous of His people. He's a God of justice and He punishes injustice. There are things there besides His power that can be attractive to the people who've, in a way, seen the evolution of this.

[00:46:05.46] TOM MERRILL: And you would say that if a person were able to live their life in accord with that sense of the world, that they would lead better, more flourishing lives.

[00:46:16.06] LEON KASS: Look, I would say that I'm not here to preach the text. But the Book of Exodus and its teachings, whether we know it or not, have been absolutely indispensable sources of the moral foundation of the West largely through its spread by Christianity. The Ten Commandments were, until only yesterday, understood to be foundational teachings.

[00:46:51.25] And in addition to the second table, which was not particularly unique to the Israelite way, but the teachings of Sabbath observance and the teaching of honor your father and mother were absolutely indispensable for the development of the spirit of the West and on whose moral capital-- on whose dwindling moral capital, if one might say, we still do as well as we do. I think that for people who are interested in both learning about where they come from and where their civilization has come from-- and yeah, by the way, great political philosophers in the 17th, 18th century read the Hebrew Bible precisely for its political wisdom, and the Book of Exodus in particular for founding. But I think if we take thinking about ourselves and our students today, is this a book that can be read by us, even by those of us for whom the law is not binding-- on whom the law is not binding? Is this something worth our worth our attention? Absolutely.

[00:48:17.66] Why? Not only because it's a source of who we are, and if you don't know where you came from, you won't understand yourself, but because it remains a powerful and competing alternative that has teachings for how one should live one's personal life and what a good community would be like and to be laid down against Aristotle's politics and Locke's Second Treatise and the New Testament and Homer and Shakespeare.

[00:49:00.00] TOM MERRILL: So let's-- maybe this might seem like a digression from the things we've been talking about. But I think that it touches on many themes that are in what you've just said and were in the book. And so maybe I can preface-- I would ask you a question, but I'll just preface this with an observation that one time-- this was probably 15 years ago when I was teaching at St. John's College-- I had this insight that class is a kind of ritual, that there's a kind of form, in this sense, not that we're a shared religious community in any way. But I think I am talking here just for the moment about seminar classes, where we get together around a table and we read a text together.

[00:49:44.80] But that's-- I think the three of us as teachers know there's something that is magical that happens sometimes in a classroom, right? It doesn't always happen, that sometimes you show up and you go through the motions and there's no spark there. But other times there is something that's really special. And it occurred to me that the forms that we have of how we prepare for class, how the class is set up, that just the architecture of the room, that all of these are things that are meant to put us in a position where something special could happen, something that we're trying to put ourselves in harm's way, so to speak.

[00:50:27.58] And from everything from when we prepare, we make a list of texts, of passages that we're puzzled by or have questions by. We make a list of questions. We bring it. But also-- so formal things like that, but also the spirit in which we come to a class, that we come with a sense of wanting to hear what other people have to say. It's not a debate, after all. It's a conversation.

[00:50:50.17] So maybe I could ask you to talk about this for a second. At American University, we have a lot of classrooms that are set up on what I think of as the solar system model, where the instructor stands in front of the students. And the students are often in concentric circles. So I'm not sure if it's like this in your building. It's just like this in my building.

[00:51:09.66] SARAH MARSH: [INAUDIBLE] --not very big classrooms over in [INAUDIBLE]. But I have been in the classrooms you're talking about.

[00:51:18.01] TOM MERRILL: But can you talk a little bit about the difference in architecture between that model and a seminar table? Like, what's at stake in that difference?

[00:51:28.32] LEON KASS: Oh, everything-- everything. What you say, Tom, is really beautiful. And I learned something from you just this moment in the comparison. The tacit comparison is the classroom to a sanctuary. You didn't want it to be so heavy handed, but I'll make it heavy handed in that way.

[00:51:55.16] I've always regarded going into class as something like a sacred space. And I don't-- sacred with an asterisk. I don't confuse myself with the high priest, and I don't confuse what we're doing in there with worship. But we are, in a way, gathered tacitly. Nobody has to say it.

[00:52:19.79] But to sit around the table and to treat each other as members of a communing community, what we hope will happen when we do that, whether we say so or not, is that this

invisible thing which is in the middle of the room toward which we aspire will appear in the form of insight, in this arm of illumination, and that it will be shared. And it will be the product of the contributions that each of us has made one to the other by doing what Sarah calls not only charitable reading of the text, but charitable reading of each other. That you, in a way, come in a spirit of graciousness, and there could be gracing of that moment with a kind of discovery, illumination.

[00:53:18.52] And boy, when it happens, it's out of this world. It really is. And it's not unlike the kind of experience one might have on a very rare and good day in a circumstance of worship, where somehow the singing is just right, and the community is all together. And you don't know whether what you've experienced is what people say is the indwelling presence of the Lord who supposed to be there. I have no idea whether that's what's meant.

[00:53:57.65] But something out of the ordinary can happen in a classroom. And by the way, the virtues are practicable in the classroom, the virtues of courage to try out and not to be afraid. But that depends upon the other virtue of generosity of spirit to receive what somebody has offered at some risk of exposure, the virtue of fairness, to make way and to see that other people get their turn.

[00:54:34.32] There are all kinds of-- it can't be a substitute for what the Bible has to teach because the classroom isn't the world. And there's other parts of life where other kinds of rules and teachings are important. But there is a community of conversation, which is one of the most precious things in the world. And to be a teacher who can bring such a thing into being and to do it over the deep questions that every young person and every old person cares about, that's blessed work.

[00:55:22.05] TOM MERRILL: So it occurs to me, to bring it back to the classroom for a second, one of the ironies of our situation is that we live in institutions that talk all day long about social justice, about equality. And yet we have a way of continuing to reproduce hierarchy, right? And one sees it in the classroom, right? One could when could talk about what other model, the solar system model, that there's a real temptation for instructors to become a kind of stand-up comedian or an entertainer, which is very tempting, especially when you have things to say, as we all have things to say.

[00:56:05.73] LEON KASS: It is a temptation. You feel a certain obligation to the books. You feel an obligation not to shortchange them. And it's tough to strike the balance. And this is one of the reasons why-- I mean, to undercut the inequality of rank, it was one of the reasons why Mrs. Kass and I would refer to each other by I'm Mr. Kass. She's Mrs. Kass. We would teach together sometimes. And we refer to our students as Mr. or Miss.

[00:56:41.15] You were Mr. Merrill. You would be Ms. Marsh. And we'd ask the students to refer to each other in the same way. This was a way of making it clear this was not an ordinary informal free-for-all kind of place. Our conversation was going to be different. But we were also signaling that with respect to what goes on here, we're going to try as much as possible to level the inequalities in terms of what we call one another, in terms of the way we speak to one another, that I don't have special authority in here.

[00:57:14.67] Yes, I've convened the class. Yes, I made the assignment. But once we start talking, I want to hear from you. And the table is-- it's the symbol of everybody has one seat at the table. And I almost never got up.

[00:57:41.48] I'd write an assignment on the board, but I never got up from my seat. Because to get up from your seat-- no student can get up from their seat to say and what they have to say. So I stay seated. And I tried-- and all by all of these-- and, in a way, it wasn't thought out. It was just a kind of tacit built-in understanding how you're going to create the kind of climate in which everybody's equal in this room with respect to the thing we're interested in, which is the truth about the question under discussion.

[00:58:14.84] TOM MERRILL: Well, it also seems to me maybe the formality allows a kind of openness in the conversation, in the sense that you're not sure-- so you might have an idea of how a conversation will go. But when you actually get in a room with people, human beings have their own minds and hearts and things on their mind. But it's a way of trying to preserve that sense of openness to something that we can't control.

[00:58:38.58] LEON KASS: Yeah. No, the students are not chess pieces to be moved around by the chess master. And many has been a time where something really good erupted in the class where two students went at it. And I just put away my notes. I said, this is good, continue.

[00:59:10.13] TOM MERRILL: I always think it's an amazing thing about teaching is that students don't know when they've said something smart. But they say smart things more often than they think.

[00:59:21.00] LEON KASS: Well, that's another-- and we've talked about this. And in this climate today, it's even more important than before. One should treat the students always as if they were better than they think they are. And my wife was wonderful at it. They would say something, and she would say, another sentence, please. And it was daunting to them. But nobody refused because it was the expression, I think you're onto something. You have more in there than you've already said. Find it. It was invitational, in that sense.

[01:00:12.28] TOM MERRILL: I remember being on the receiving end of that many times.

[01:00:16.72] SARAH MARSH: Me too.

[01:00:18.28] TOM MERRILL: [LAUGHS]

[01:00:21.65] LEON KASS: [INAUDIBLE]

[01:00:22.87] TOM MERRILL: Nothing quite so terrifying as the "another sentence."

[01:00:27.61] LEON KASS: But part of the reasons that things are so angry on campuses is the great things that are supposed to happen in the classroom with the books and the questions and the conversations are all too rare. If people were getting their souls nurtured in the room and being shown that the deep questions in their souls had an outlet and that they were going to have

company, and their faculty was, in fact, going to make room for it and not just profess at them, but nurture the conversation freely so every voice can be heard and respected, the educational task would be better, and the anger would be toned down. At least that's my strong sense.

[01:01:17.02] TOM MERRILL: So let's ask one last question since we're coming close to the end of our time. So Sarah and I have been working this year with a group of faculty from around the university. And there are-- many of, Leon, our mutual friends are so down about the university that they would like to destroy it. But my experience is there are many more people who are open to this kind of thing, who care about the things that we care about across the university, many more than you would expect, that the university is better than sometimes it feels like.

[01:01:49.70] And we're trying to put together a and we will. It's been approved. We'll teach a common class, with a common list of books, each in our own way from our different disciplinary points of view and our different political, philosophical points of view. But we're going to have a common set of texts. That's really the key thing. And we're going to try to teach all in the same semester so that we can all be part of a common conversation.

[01:02:13.10] And as you can imagine, part of the challenge to that is picking books that we can all live with, which, of course, is not a small thing. And so the question for you is, what should we say to our colleagues if-- what would you say-- why should we include some part of the Hebrew Bible in that project?

[01:02:41.76] LEON KASS: Well, two things-- one, on both grounds, first of all-- and I would think probably if you were going to try to sell this to colleagues, Genesis would be an easier sell than Exodus. After all, there are 13 chapters on building the Tabernacle. Genesis is filled with wonderful stories that almost teach themselves.

[01:03:09.33] But the Hebrew Bible is one of the founding texts of the West. And if we-- I don't know if one can use that kind of an argument. But we are, like it or not, children of a civilization of which the Bible is one of the founding strands. And to know ourselves, it might be worthwhile having a look at where it began.

[01:03:33.38] Second, the Bible has an anthropology, an account of the human being, of the human psyche, in all of its moral ambiguity, told not as a treatise, but told through stories. And stories are a wonderful way of getting the same kind of thing that you can get at by reading Platonic Dialogues or Aristotle's Ethics and that these are deep stories that are very illuminating not just of what might have happened once long ago, but what might happen always, absent other kind of instruction.

[01:04:13.25] TOM MERRILL: Can I ask, Leon, you think these texts have a human wisdom about what we are like, what human beings are like. It may not just be only that, right? But one could read these texts and come to understand something more about ourselves, our desire for justice, our desire to punish, our desire for certain kind of purity, right? And I'm thinking here, on campus, the cancel culture's a thing. People get angry at each other. But you might see in these texts some reflection on those parts of us that are otherwise undiscussed by a society that says getting a job is the most important thing.

[01:04:57.42] LEON KASS: Absolutely. I think-- look, how did I start reading the Bible? I wasn't raised on it. I started reading it when my wife and I and four other colleagues designed a course called Human Being and Citizen around the question, what is a good human being? And what is a good citizen? And what to think if the two were not identical?

[01:05:20.05] And we put together a reading list for half the students' time in their first year, full-year course, and couldn't teach a full-year course on the question of what is a good human being and a good citizen without including some Bible. So we taught Genesis and Exodus. My wife taught Genesis in the humanities part of the course. And I taught Exodus in the social science part of the course.

[01:05:46.81] We sat in each other's class. We taught the Gospel of Matthew. There was a Christian text. This was part of a long thing that began with the Iliad and finished with War and Peace. And it was only by starting to teach this that I began to see, ah, this is a book that actually speaks not only to believers who've signed on the dotted line to begin with.

[01:06:12.81] And over the dinner table and talking about these stories over years, I got hooked on this. I got hooked on this because I learned deep things about permanent human features. The story of the Garden of Eden, you could have a whole class on for 20 weeks.

[01:06:38.02] SARAH MARSH: I have maybe a comment that has a question in it. It seems to me that we are now-- school is happening now in a highly technologized atmosphere. The classroom that we are talking about does not exist right now because of a plague. It seems to me that we are going to be in position next year or in 18 months or when things return to "normal," in scare quotes, to remake this world. What is the role of liberal education in remaking the world on the flip side of this pandemic?

[01:07:20.32] LEON KASS: Look, it's going to be a long time before, I think, we discover what the meaning of this plague is for us. Right now we're too much suffering under its weight. And no one suffers more than the people who are in school. And I don't mean just the young, but I mean also college students who live off each other when they come to class. And they can't do that on the screen.

[01:08:01.85] They might be learning a lesson from all of this about the dehumanization of life lived on the screen altogether and crave the company of three-dimensional flesh-and-blood human beings that can be hugged and smiled at without getting in trouble with the authorities for this expression of normal human affections. But look, the loss of human speech, the loss of face to face is one of most beautiful passages in Exodus. It's said of Moses that he spoke with God as with a friend faced-- God spoke with him as with a friend face to face, that there's the possibility of speaking face to face about the things that matter.

[01:09:03.28] If we haven't learned the absolute spectacular worth of that in the course of this time, we haven't learned anything. The plague, in a way, you could say, is a kind of wake-up call to the trust in technology. Yes, thank god, for the Operation Warp Speed and for the gifts of science.

[01:09:31.97] But it's, in a way, also held up a mirror to the way we've been living, to the things that we've taken for granted, to the things that we've been willing to sell short for the sake of convenience, prosperity, and so on. And the Egypt story, in a way, raises the question, can technological progress and prosperity and the private pursuit of our pleasures really substitute for a life in which we live among people who have a shared story, who have a kind of shared morality, and who get together whether in classroom or place of worship ritually to affirm things that are higher? We're missing those things.

[01:10:23.04] People are missing being able to worship, just as they're missing being able to be in class with their fellows. And boy, if I were in your place, I would hit the ground running next fall. And I would make sure that they know what a real blessing it is to have the two of you in class to be talking about these books with them.

[01:10:55.00] TOM MERRILL: Well, Leon, I'm afraid that we're coming close to the end of our time. There's more to be said. I think, what was it, that we got to the place in the Sea of Reeds, and we said, now what? And-- which is maybe the continual question. Maybe we should say now what as we end this conversation. Leon, it's a blessing to us to have you talk to us and to be the person that you are. So I just want to say, again, thank you for that.

[01:11:26.83] LEON KASS: And let me say that I'm not one of the people who gives up on the universities because the young people who come up, god knows how the culture tosses them up. But they come hungry for meaning. They want a life that makes sense. And it's just very encouraging to me to have spent this time with two people who will help them do it and who haven't given up. So blessings on both of you and your work.

[01:11:59.79] SARAH MARSH: [INAUDIBLE] the encouragement has been mutual. Thank you for spending this time with us.

[01:12:06.05] LEON KASS: Thanks very much.