Thoughts on the Writings of Franz Kafka

View PDF



Rabbi Marc D. Angel is Director of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals and Senior Editor of its journal, Conversations. This article appears in issue 38 of Conversations.

Franz Kafka (1883-1924) was a Prague-born Jew, one of the outstanding figures of modern world literature. His name has become an adjective: Kafkaesque. His writings feature eerie situations, disconnected characters, labyrinthine story lines.

Kafka was raised in a moderately assimilated, German-speaking family, and was not given much of a Jewish education. Trained as a lawyer, he worked full time for an insurance company. His great ambition was to be a writer, but during the course of his short lifetime he published very little. When he died, he left numerous manuscripts—diaries, stories, novels-- to his closest friend Max Brod, with the instruction that Brod burn all Kafka's papers! Fortunately, Brod did not heed Kafka's last wish. He devoted years to organizing Kafka's papers and getting them published. Great fame came to Kafka…but only after he had died. During his lifetime, he mostly considered himself to be a failure.

Kafka sensed that he could be a great writer; but he was a perfectionist who never seemed to be satisfied with his own work. In an entry in his diary, June 21, 1913, he wrote: "The tremendous world I have in my head. But how free myself and free it without being torn to pieces. And a thousand times rather to be torn to pieces than retain it in me or bury it. That, indeed, is why I am here, that is quite clear to me" (The Diaries of Franz Kafka, 1910-1913, p. 288). His day job prevented him from devoting himself to his writing. In his diary (August 21, 1913) he complained: "My job is unbearable to me because it conflicts with my only desire and my only calling, which is literature. Since I am nothing but literature

and can and want to be nothing else, my job will never take possession of me, it may, however, shatter me completely, and this is by no means a remote possibility….I am, not only because of my external circumstances but even much more because of my essential nature, a reserved, silent, unsocial, dissatisfied person…" (Ibid., p. 299). His diary entry for November 10, 1919 lamented: "I haven't yet written down the decisive thing. I am still going in two directions. The work awaiting me is enormous" (Franz Kafka, Diaries 1914-1923, p. 190).

For Kafka, writing was the essence of who he was; and yet he was unhappy with his writing…and with himself. In a letter (November 5, 1912) to his beloved Felice Bauer, he spelled out his dilemma: "Shouldn't I stake all I have on the one thing I can do? What a hopeless fool I should be if I didn't! My writing may be worthless, in which case, I am definitely and without doubt utterly worthless" (Letters to Felice, p. 38). Kafka's internal life was linked inextricably to his writing, as he explained to Felice (January 14/15, 1913): "For writing means revealing oneself to excess; that utmost of self-revelation and surrender, in which a human being, when involved with others, would feel he was losing himself, and from which, therefore, he will always shrink as long as he is in his right mind….Writing that springs from the surface of existence—when there is no other way and the deeper wells have dried up—is nothing, and collapses the moment a truer emotion makes that surface shake. That is why one can never be alone enough when one writes, why there can never be enough silence around one when one writes, why even night is not night enough. This is why there is never enough time at one's disposal, for the roads are long and it is easy to go astray" (Ibid., p. 156). He confided in Felice (March 4/5, 1913): "The trouble is, I am not at peace with myself; I am not always 'something,' and if for once I am 'something,' I pay for it by 'being nothing' for months on end" (Ibid., p. 213).

Kafka's life was peppered with failure. He had a very negative relationship with his father. Although he had several lovers, and was actually engaged to be married, he never did marry. He was unhappy with his office work. He wasn't satisfied with his writing. He suffered from tuberculosis and died while just forty one years old. If it were not for the devoted efforts of Max Brod, Kafka would have been just another forgotten scribbler who made no perceptible impact on the world of literature. But as it happened, Franz Kafka, the Prague-born Jew who suffered so much and died so young, became a leading light in modern literature.

Kafka's works are characterized by unexpected and inexplicable events. In Amerika, an early unfinished novel, the main character is a European young man who has to flee to America; he befriends the ship's stoker and they decide to

work together once they arrive in the new land. But when the young man and the stoker go to the captain's office, they find the captain speaking with a senator—who happens to be the young man's uncle! The senator immediately takes responsibility for the young man and treats him very well. But at some point the nephew offends his uncle, who immediately disowns him. Left to his own devices, the young man has various adventures, most of which end badly.

In his most famous novel, The Trial, the main character is simply identified as Josef K. He seems to be a perfectly respectable man, but is one day confronted by officials who place him under arrest. K. asks: "But why?' The men reply: "We weren't sent to tell you that. Go to your room and wait. Proceedings are under way and you'll learn everything in due course" (The Trial, p. 5). K. is outraged and wants to defend himself, even though he does not know what charges have been brought against him. K. is advised: "You can't defend yourself against this court, all you can do is confess. Confess the first chance you get. That's the only chance you have to escape, the only one. However, even that is impossible without help from others…" (p. 106). K. seeks help from others, to no avail. He thinks about submitting a petition in his defense, but that turns out to be another hopeless approach. The "court" itself is in a nondescript building, with a confusing group of officials and defendants scattered here and there. K.'s situation is a nightmare…but it is not a dream. It is reality, and his life depends on getting acquitted. He is told: "Our judges, then, lack the higher power to free a person from the charge, but they do have the power to release them from it. When you are acquitted in this sense, it means the charge against you is dropped for the moment but continues to hover over you, and can be reinstated the moment an order comes from above" (p. 158). In other words, the accused is always condemned to live under threat of arrest. He does not know his crime. He does not know who is making charges against him. He does not have the opportunity to defend himself before a responsible panel of judges. He is guilty, and will forever be guilty, without knowing why, and without any defense. The novel ends with two men coming to K. to execute him. "But the hands of one man were right at K.'s throat, while the other thrust the knife into his heart and turned it there twice. With failing sight K. saw how the men drew near his face, leaning cheek-to-cheek to observe the verdict. 'Like a dog!' he said; it seemed as though the shame was to outlive him" (p. 231).

What was the shame that was to outlive K.'s execution? Perhaps it was the very shame of being human, of living in an unjust and unforgiving world, of suffering perpetual guilt even when one is innocent. The shame was not just K.'s. The executioners are shameful individuals; they are nameless and faceless

bureaucrats who follow orders even when those orders are wicked and cruel. They commit cold-blooded murder under the guise of obeying the prevailing legal system. Did Kafka eerily foresee the Nazi era when Jews, innocent like K., were simply arrested, accused, imprisoned, murdered…all in the name of the Nazi legal system?

Kafka's sense of human helplessness is a theme in his novel, The Castle. K. is a land surveyor who receives an order to do some work for "the castle." When he arrives, he is not at the castle, but in the village. A vast maze separates the castle and the village, and K. has a frustrating time trying to find his way to the castle. He seeks advice; he tries different strategies…all to no avail. As he remains in the village, he is ominously told: "You are not from the Castle, you are not from the village, you aren't anything. Or rather, unfortunately, you are something, a stranger, a man who isn't wanted and is in everybody's way, a man who's always causing trouble…" (pp. 63-64). This is a classic Kafka dilemma. K. seems to be an honorable person with a respectable profession, a land surveyor; and yet, he is totally at a loss in the face of a massively complicated system he cannot negotiate. He doesn't belong, he can't belong, he will never belong. K. is the eternal misfit, the condemned stranger.

The signature Kafka feelings of alienation fill his stories. In "Investigations of a Dog," the dog complains: "But where, then, are my real colleagues? Yes, that is the burden of my complaint; that is the kernel of it. Where are they? Everywhere and nowhere" (The Great Wall, p. 23). In "The Burrow," the mole digs a maze of holes in which it can feel safe from predators. But it never feels safe. "There have been happy periods in which I could almost assure myself that the enmity of the world towards me had ceased or been assuaged, or that the strength of the burrow had raised me above the destructive struggle of former times" (Ibid, p. 55). In his story, "He," Kafka poignantly describes his dilemma: "He has the feeling that merely by being alive he is blocking his own way. From this sense of hindrance, in turn, he deduces the proof that he is alive" (Ibid., p. 154). In his most famous story, "Metamorphosis," the "hero" turns into a despicable cockroach, unable to function within his family, at work, or anywhere else. Ultimately, he dies without ever having fulfilled his role as a human being.

Some students of Kafka have viewed him primarily as an alienated and estranged Jew. Yet, his characters have no distinctive identifying qualities, and some don't even have full names. Even if the characters may reflect the classic dilemma of alienated Jews in Western society, they obviously relate to the general human predicament in modern times: the growth of bureaucracies, the

insignificance of individuals, the feeling of powerlessness against the "establishment," the loss of traditional religious and sociological moorings. Kafka is widely read and widely respected because his writing touches moderns in a unique and piercing fashion.

But Kafka's Jewishness was an essential part of who he was. Even if he was not devoutly religious in a traditional sense, he identified as a Jew, he studied Hebrew, he attended Yiddish language dramatic presentations, and he felt a connection with the national Jewish aspirations connected with Zionism. In his diary (December 25, 1911) Kafka noted his Jewish roots: "In Hebrew [actually Yiddish] my name is Amschel, like my mother's maternal grandfather, whom my mother, who was six years old when he died, can remember as a very pious and learned man with a long, white beard" (The Diaries of Franz Kafka, 1910-1913), p. 197). A few years later (December 17, 2013), he has the following entry in his diary: "The good strong way in which Judaism separates things. There is room there for a person. One sees oneself better, one judges oneself better" (p. 324).

Kafka was not impressed with the "churchly" qualities of Germanic synagogues that attempted to be modern and dignified. He was drawn more closely to Eastern European Jewish immigrants who seemed to be genuinely religious. On Yom Kippur in 1911, he attended the Altneu Synagogue of Prague, which he described as having the "suppressed murmur of the stock market." By contrast, though, he noted three pious, apparently Eastern Jews, in socks, bowed over their prayer books. They were praying humbly; two of them were crying (Ibid., p. 72). Kafka saw these Eastern Jews as more sincere religiously, more authentic.

His sympathetic view of Eastern Jews was evidenced in a letter to Milena Jesenska (September 7, 1920). He described a hall where over one hundred Russian-Jewish emigrants were waiting for American visas, in a crowded, uncomfortable situation. Kafka wrote that "if someone had told me last night I could be whatever I wanted, I would have chosen to be a small Jewish boy from the East, standing there in the corner without a trace of worry, his father talking with the men in the middle of the hall" (Letters to Milena, p. 197).

In a letter to Felice Bauer (January 10/11, 1913), Kafka reflects on the sad state of Jewish life. "Because the Jewish public in general, here at any rate, have limited the religious ceremonies to weddings and funerals, these two occasions have drawn grimly close to each other, and one can virtually see the reproachful glances of a withering faith" (Letters to Felice, p. 151). The loss of religious vitality was not restricted to Jews, but was a phenomenon of modernity. "Today

there is no sin and no longing for God. Everything is completely mundane and utilitarian. God lies outside our existence. And therefore all of us suffer a universal paralysis of conscience" (Conversations with Kafka, p. 51).

But the Jews faced greater insecurity and self-doubt than others. "Their insecure position, insecure within themselves, insecure among people, would above all explain why Jews believe they possess only whatever they hold in their hands or grip between their teeth, that furthermore only tangible possessions give them a right to live, and that finally they will never again acquire what they once have lost—which swims happily away from them, gone forever. Jews are threatened by dangers from the most improbably sides, or, to be more precise, let's leave the dangers aside and say: 'They are threatened by threats'" (Letters to Milena, p. 20).

Kafka's first-hand experience with anti-Semitism led him to wonder about the Jewish future. Writing in Prague (November 8, 1920), he made his concerns clear: "I've been spending every afternoon outside on the streets, wallowing in anti-Semitic hate.…Isn't it natural to leave a place where one is so hated?...I just looked out the window: mounted police, gendarmes with fixed bayonets, a screaming mob dispersing, and up here in the window the unsavory shame of living under constant protection" (Ibid., p. 219). Like K. in The Trial, Kafka stood accused by people he did not even know, and who did not know him. He was oppressed, without knowing why, and without any satisfactory recourse to justice.

Zionism was a logical answer for Jews who were in search of a safe space of their own, a place where they could shape their own lives and destinies. "The Jews today are no longer satisfied with history, with an heroic home in time. They yearn for a modest ordinary home in space. More and more young Jews are returning to Palestine. That is a return to oneself, to one's roots, to growth. The national home in Palestine is for the Jews a necessary goal" (Conversations with Kafka, p. 105).

His beloved Milena Jesenska wrote words of remembrance about Kafka as a posthumous tribute. "He was shy, anxious, meek, and kind, yet the books he wrote are gruesome and painful. He saw the world as full of invisible demons, tearing apart and destroying defenseless humans. He was too clairvoyant, too intelligent to be capable of living, and too weak to fight.…He understood people as only someone of great and nervous sensitivity can, someone who is alone, someone who can recognize others in a flash, almost like a prophet" (Letters to Milena, pp. 273-74).

* * *

I first read Kafka in our freshman English class at Yeshiva College. We were assigned to read “Metamorphosis,” and I was vaguely intrigued and repelled by the story. I went on a “Kafka binge,” reading one book after the other; and then I stopped reading Kafka for many years.

For college age students, Kafka has a particular appeal. He is original, surprising; he doesn’t follow conventional patterns. His loneliness and alienation, his frustration with the “establishment,” his desire for personal greatness—these qualities resonate in the minds and souls of young aspiring thinkers and writers.

But then I came back to Kafka’s books much later in life, when I was well into “middle age.” Surprisingly, I found that Kafka still spoke to me clearly, powerfully, cogently. When I read his novels, I found myself laughing out loud at some of the absurd scenes; but I also found myself shaking within at the pathos, the dread.

And now, as a man in my late 70s, I still read Kafka and find him powerful and pertinent. The world hasn’t improved much, if at all, from the time that Kafka was writing his ominous stories. He continues to be a prophetic voice. If only humanity would listen!

References

Amerika, Schocken Books, New York, 2008.

The Castle, Schocken Books, New York, 1974

The Diaries of Franz Kafka, 1910-1913, ed. Max Brod, Schocken Books, New York, 1965.

The Diaries of Franz Kafka, 1914-1923, ed. Max Brod, Schocken Books, New York, 1965.

Franz Kafka, Letters to Felice, ed. Erich Heller and Jurgen, Schocken Books, New York, 2016.

Franz Kafka, Letters to Milena, ed. Philip Boehm, Schocken Books, New York, 1990.

The Great Wall of China, Schocken Books, New York, 1970.

The Trial, Schocken Books, News York, 1998.

Balint, Benjamin, Kafka’s Last Trial, W. W. Norton Company, New York, 2019.

Brod, Max, Franz Kafka, A Biography, Da Capo Press, New York, 1995.

Janouch, Gustav, Conversations with Kafka, New Directions Books, New York, 2012.