Harry Potter and The Sacred Text 2.19- Special Edition: Owl Post and Rabbi Scott Perlo

(intro music starts)

Assorted voices:

Hi, Vanessa and Casper.

Hi Casper, hi Vanessa.

Hi Casper and Vanessa!

Hi Vanessa and Casper.

Hi Vanessa, Casper, and everyone over at the Sacred Text team.

Casper- I’m Casper ter Kuile

Vanessa- And I’m Vanessa Zoltan

Casper- And this is Harry Potter and the Sacred Text

Both- THE OWL POST EDITION!

Casper- Hee hee hee!

Vanessa- Welcome, everybody, to our seasonal Owl Post episode. Casper, do we have any business at the top of the show?

Casper- We DO! Our crowdfunder is one week old today, and we have got off to a great start. Thank you so, so much to everyone who’s already donated and pitched in. It’s amazing to, like, see that people care about this project, so I’m really grateful. And for those of you who haven’t yet been able to visit harrypottersacredtext.com, let me tempt you with some of the very exciting rewards that we’ve got lined up. You know, we can give you, for fifteen bucks, we’ll give you the theme tune MP3. We can send you stickers. You can have a personalized feminist rant for fifty bucks from Vanessa—

Vanessa- Happily.

Casper- Or if you’d like me to do a personalized message in my Hagrid voice—

Vanessa- And who wouldn’t? I’m going to buy five of those.

Casper- And this is also a great way to get T-shirts, beanies, all sorts of goodies here at Harry Potter and the Sacred Text.

Vanessa- And one of our goals is to have a thousand donations, and the reason for that is there are obviously times in all of our lives in which we can only make small contributions. But we just
want you to know that any donation you make helps us reach our goal, and we’re just happy to have you along. And so, help us reach our goal of having a thousand donations.

Casper- It’s going to take a big team effort to make this happen, and thank you so much for joining us. We’re so glad to have you with us.

Now—Vanessa! This episode is going to feature a number of our wonderful listeners sending us Owl Post, and also one of our good friends, Rabbi Scott Perlo, who is going to introduce a practice called ‘pardes’, which, if we can get that thirty grand together, we’ll be able to use in Series Three. So stay tuned, and here we go!

This first voicemail is from Christina Richardson.

(beep)

Hi, Vanessa and Casper. My name is Chrissie Richardson, and I am originally from Baltimore, Maryland, but I am currently living in Lincoln, Nebraska, for a Ph.D. program in counseling psychology. But I just listened to your podcast about chapter 16, through the lens of grace, and I was thinking about and kind of wanted to get your opinion on how grace differs from privilege. So I, personally, am an atheist, and I’m very passionate about and strongly driven by values of social justice and compassion and sort of connection and caring for other people, so I’ve always struggled with the idea of a god sort of being who dispenses out grace to some people and allows other people to suffer sort of arbitrarily. And in the episode, you both describe sort of various examples of grace where I think the word “privilege” could have been substituted for a very different take on the example. So, like, Harry and Ron being essentially let off the hook as an example of privilege maybe less quote-unquote “special” students wouldn’t get, or the privilege of having the support of sort of an entrenched system like Hogwarts for the students that maybe other children in the Wizarding world don’t have. And then Casper, you talked about the privilege of having gay rights activists before you fight for the rights that you have now, and that’s something I really resonate with as a woman because there are so many women who came before me to fight for my rights and that’s a privilege that I didn’t earn, that I was lucky enough and privileged enough—or, um, to use the word grace, received grace, I suppose—to be born when I was. I just wanted to propose to you and kind of find out what you think about how the concept of grace differs from the concept of privilege.

Thank you so much for your podcast. I love it. It makes me think and connects me to something that matters so much to me. I look forward to hearing your answer! Thanks.

Casper- Christina, I think you ask a really important question, to try to differentiate between privilege and grace. I mean, in some ways I actually think they’re not that different from one another, in the sense that if grace is something that is unearned, so is privilege, you know? Privilege is real. If grace is unearned and privilege is unearned, the only appropriate response is one of gratitude, as we talked about in the show, which should lead to a response to be about responsibility. If you’re given that privilege, and haven’t earned it in any way, you have a duty to respond to ensure others are lifted up in the way that you have been lifted up. John
O’Donahugh, who I’ve talked about before on the podcast, has this wonderful quote where he says, ‘We are privileged and the duty of privilege is absolute integrity.’ And I think there is something very powerful about that, once you’ve realized, ‘Actually, I am privileged in these ways, or have received grace, perhaps, in these unexpected ways,’ the only response is one of absolute integrity. Does that make sense for you, Vanessa?

Vanessa- Yeah, that makes a lot of sense to me, but what’s also interesting to me is the difference between grace and privilege. And privilege, to me, is about recognizable social structures, so you’re privileged to be a white person in America, right? That is a structural privilege, whereas grace can come into your life in very different ways. And grace seems situational to me, and relational, rather than systemic. So in the middle of a really horrendous day, someone just being kind to you, someone reaching out and helping you up. That is grace. That has nothing to do with your privilege, that is somebody, you know, a stranger reaching out their hand if you slip and fall. And I think that these two ideas can overlap. I think as a person of privilege that somebody who as I’ve said before, is white and a woman and very nonthreatening-looking, I think that perhaps I am more predisposed for grace, right? People are more likely to help me up because of how I look. But that being said, I think to some extent, grace is in most of our lives. There are moments of kindness. There are moments of love. There are moments of beauty in all of our lives.

Casper- And it doesn’t even always have to come from another. I mean, another moment of grace can be when suddenly, inside yourself, there is a capacity to be kind or to forgive. So I do think you’re right, there is some distinction there as well. Yeah. Gosh. Thanks Christina, really appreciate that voicemail.

Our second voicemail is from Margaret.

(beep)

Hi Vanessa and Casper, my name is Margaret and I love your podcast. I’m calling in to talk about the Deathday Party episode, which I know was a while ago. I’m a new listener, so I’m furiously trying to catch up. When we imagined ourselves as Ron in the scene where Harry hears the basilisk, I actually interpreted that by instead imagining Ron’s upbringing in the wizarding world as well as the context of the wizarding world as it has to do as mental illness. Because as I was imagining myself as Ron—really, imagining myself as myself—I was so scared to see Harry’s eyes rolling around wildly, and seeing him stretch his ears up to the walls and the ceilings and especially so scared to see him running with such urgency up the stairs. And I was scared because the lens through which I was seeing Harry was that of mental illness, and I felt concerned for his mental well-being and his feeling of safety, which was clearly lacking. So to me, when Ron says, you know, ‘What on earth are you doing, what is causing this?’ you know, I didn’t see it as a trusting action, though Ron is a very trusting and loyal person. Rather, I saw it as evidence of the fact that mental illness really isn’t something that wizards talk about or consider, ever.
The most obvious example for me is in the fifth book, because there is no mention of Harry’s PTSD by the wizards in his company. And I think that readers do the exact same thing. Where I am reading the fifth book, myself a person with PTSD, I recognize Harry right away. I see him. I completely understand his outbursts, and his anxiety, and his maximum irritability when he feels that he has no control, and later in the fact that he is just so sick of doing the work to make himself feel better and to make the world a safer place for him that he would rather not do the work anymore. But my friends who do not have PTSD just hate the fifth book because they think there’s no earthly reason for Harry to behave that way and they find him really annoying. And I think that is also the curse of the wizarding world, because they too are looking for those earthly reasons for someone to behave in a non-normative way. Just the way that Ron is asking, ‘What on earth is going on?’ you know, he’s looking for those tangible reasons, because I think that wizards don’t ever really deal with mental illness, they only deal with tangible, fightable people and objects and spells. And I think that they’re a little bit behind the times in that way.

I was wondering what you thought about the wizarding world and mental illness. So that’s my take on that chapter. I look forward to catching up! Thanks.

Casper- Thank you so much, Margaret. You know, I’m really struck by what you’re bringing to our attention, of this of this absence of mental health as a conversation in the books. You know, I think in some ways that’s very reflective of where we are still in society at large today: that there is still a stigma around mental health, and that’s something we really want to change. You know, Vanessa, do you see elements of mental health show up in the book somehow?

Vanessa- Yeah, and I think the way we see it, to Margaret’s point, is exactly how we see it in the world, which is it pops up in the periphery but isn’t explicitly spoken about. Hermione does this beautiful description in book five of why Cho might be kissing Harry and crying about it, and she says, ‘Well, Cho obviously is very upset about Cedric’s death.’ She goes through all of the different feelings that Cho might be feeling due to the, like, PTSD of having been in love with somebody who was killed suddenly. And we see, you know, the Longbottoms in Saint Mungo’s in one of the later books who were victims of torture and have suffered mentally because of that. But none of these things are explicitly discussed as mental health. And they’re whispered about, and there’s some, like, shame and confusion around them, and I think the books overall—I think the dementors are really a great symbol of what it feels like to go through a depression, and I think that there are a lot of metaphors for mental health issues, but I agree that there doesn’t seem to be any evidence that the Wizarding world tackles the conversation of mental health in a direct way.

Casper- I mean, it's also interesting to think about you know, what would it be like to have the power of magic and yet be depressed, for example? So often magic is the quick solution to a sticky problem, you know, like doing the dishes. But I would be not surprised if the powers of magic can actually not deal with these big questions that come up. Right? It doesn't change love and fear, so why would it change the experience of mental illness?
Vanessa- Right. I mean, something that we’ll have the opportunity to talk about more in Prisoner of Azkaban is Lupin. You know, a lot of people say that the metaphor of Lupin as a werewolf is a metaphor for the AIDS crisis, but I think that there’s also a way to absolutely read mental health problems onto Lupin. But again, it’s only through metaphor. It is not through seeing wizards have conversations in any sort of way that we can deduce how the Wizarding world deals with mental health.

I guess we do know that there’s some shame around it. Neville—for whatever reason, and maybe I’m projecting shame, but Neville does not feel comfortable telling people that his parents are sick. And it could be because he wants to respect their privacy—for any number of reasons, but there does seem to be a desire to keep mental health issues a secret.

Casper- Yeah. Thanks, Vanessa. And thanks, Margaret.

Vanessa- Thank you, Margaret.

Megan- Hey, Casper and Vanessa. My name is Megan, and I was fascinated by this idea that going through heartbreak allows us to better understand our own capacity to break someone else’s heart. But I think there’s more to that as well. Like, there’s this thing that happens when our hearts are broken that, automatically, we’re able to, like, love deeper the next time. I don’t know what’s making me think of this, but, um, there’s this Jenny Lewis song that talks about how, with every broken heart, we should become more adventurous. And I think there’s something to that: Like, when your heart is broken and you heal, you’re able to, like, dive in deeper the next time, you know? And maybe that’s not the healthiest way to look at heartbreak, you know, and maybe it’s not the most rational way. But I think there is some sort of empowerment that happens when you are able to get through heartbreak and look back and be like, ‘Hey! I did that. Now I’m in this new relationship, and if I can get through that, that means I can—no matter what happens in this relationship, I will get through that as well.’ I don’t know. So, just a thought, and something I want to hear you guys talk about a little bit. Thanks! Bye.

Vanessa- Megan, I love your voicemail. I completely disagree with you! In my experience, the more heartbreak that someone endures, the more guarded they become. Casper, what do you think?

Casper- I love Megan’s point! And you know, what it reminded me of was the car. I mean, I’m getting a little metaphorical here, but like, the car in this book, it is slammed and rammed all through the sky, it bashes into the tree, but into the forest it goes, and then, like, it just grows stronger and more powerful as it rescues the boys as they come out of the lair of Aragog. And so there’s a trust in our resilience, which I think Megan is pointing to, that I think is beautiful.

Vanessa- Oh, I love the idea. It’s just not anything that I’ve witnessed in the world. I mean, a platitude that means a lot to me is ‘This too shall pass,’ and I think that when I’m in a tough position, I’m like, ‘Oh, I’ve gotten through this before, and this too shall pass.’ But at the
So I always found the beginning of school semesters to be very stressful: figuring out which classes, running around, all of that transition is really stressful. And never was I like, 'It’s okay! I got through it last semester.' I hate it every time, and to some extent, my resources started diminishing. It was like, ‘I don’t know how many more times I can do this. I don’t know how many more times I can go through this.’ And I love this, like, offer of reframing it, of instead being like, ‘Look, I survived last semester. I’m going to try again this one.’ That just has not been my natural response to things.

There are moments where I am knocked down and I just see it as an opportunity to get up stronger than ever. I just, like, that is not my natural reaction to disappointment. My natural reaction to disappointment is, ‘Oh my god, I just got smacked down. Maybe I should think before standing back up again.’

Casper- Which totally makes sense. I hear you, absolutely. So maybe, you know, what Megan is pointing to is kind of aspirational, of once we’ve felt that pain or tiredness or disappointment, to hope again when the time is right. But really, I love that voicemail. Thank you, Megan.

Vanessa- Yeah, Megan is calling me to be aspirational to be Megan. (Casper laughs.) Megan sounds awesome.

Casper, before we listen to our next voicemail, is there time for us to make a quick announcement, do you think?

Casper- I think there is, yeah.

Vanessa- Okay! So! We are really excited to do a Facebook Live event on Tuesday, March 7—so next Tuesday—and we are going to be doing this as part of our crowdfunder.

Casper- Yeah. It’ll be at 5 p.m. Eastern time, so that’s 2 p.m. Pacific or 10 p.m. in the U.K. And we’ll be answering your questions, we’ll be doing a couple of challenges to see if anyone’s willing to donate. I’m sure there’s all sorts of good ideas we’ll come up with. And we may even have one or two extra bonus rewards that we’ll release that day also. So please join us on Facebook Live! Just go to our Facebook page, Harry Potter and the Sacred Text, and there’ll be a link right there at 5 p.m. Eastern time on Tuesday.

Vanessa- Nine a.m. in Australia.

Casper- Well, that’s good to know. Where in Australia?

Vanessa- Sydney.

Casper- That’s very important.

So come hang out with us! We’ll do a little Lectio, we’ll answer your questions—

Vanessa- Casper, I already have a question.
Casper- Ohh.

Vanessa- If you could borrow any of Lockhart’s robes, which ones would you want to borrow?

Casper- I mean, that’s exactly the kind of high-value information we’ll be sharing on that Facebook Live. So come to our Facebook page, Harry Potter and the Sacred Text. There’ll be a link right there. You can watch and join the conversation. We’d love to have you with us.

Our final voicemail this week comes from Abigail Morris.

(beep)

Abigail- Hi, Vanessa and Casper. I was thinking about the episode on Chapter 14, Cornelius Fudge, and loyalty, and how you discussed using the books as a guide to examine our own government for signs of corruption and when we would want to fight against it. It made me think about reading the Harry Potter books with my eight-year-old twins, Eleanor and Matilda. They have loved reading the first two books, and I assumed they were just getting a general love of books and Harry Potter from them. But in the fall, their school music teacher fell ill during their classtime. He told their class he was fine. Eleanor later told us that she could tell he was very sick because he looked putrid, like Ron in book two. So while Matilda and a classmate worked to keep the room calm, Eleanor sent the fastest runner to the nurse for help, and she sat with the music teacher. The nurse quickly arrived, called an ambulance, and they took the teacher to the hospital. A few days later, his wife called to tell the principal that the teacher had had a massive stroke, and that the doctors felt that the children acting quickly probably saved his life. When I talked to my daughters about what happened, they said that they knew that Harry Potter would have done the right thing and not listened to his teachers, and they knew that the right thing was getting help.

I was originally shocked that my daughters stayed calm in this stressful situation, and also maybe helped save their teacher’s life. Afterwards, I was even more impressed that they learned a tricky lesson of when to listen to authority and when not to listen to authority at the age of eight, from Harry Potter. This makes me hopeful that as we continue with the series, they will learn more valuable lessons and maybe learn to be a little more rebellious against power structures that aren’t in their best interest. And just think: maybe children all around the world who are reading these books are getting that same message and will work to help make the world a better place. Thanks, and I love your podcast.

Casper- Abigail, that is such a beautiful story. Oh my gosh. A blessing for your two little girls. What an amazing—just an amazing feat of competence and love and thoughtfulness and rebellion—

Vanessa- And courage!

Casper- And courage! Wow. That’s beautiful!
Vanessa- I literally just wiped a tear from my eye. It’s fine. I’m not embarrassed.

Casper- And you know what, I will say that there are eight-year-olds reading these stories right now, learning these lessons, but there are also 28-year-old and 38-year-old people who, you know, so many of us who read these stories who want to live like that, and who are living like that. And—and—yeah. Ahh! I’m so grateful for the books and for this community who read it together and for you, for sharing this story. It’s extraordinary.

Vanessa- Your little girls are going to make amazing co-presidents one day.

Casper- That is what the real goal is. Yes.

Vanessa- And now on with the show.

Casper- So we are so lucky to be joined by Rabbi Scott Perlo, a rabbi at Sixth & I Historic Synagogue in Washington, D.C., who is a great friend and has generously joined us here at Harry Potter and the Sacred Text. Scott, welcome.

Scott- Thank you. And let’s be clear about who’s lucky to be here. You two may’ve just made me, like, a minor celebrity in my own family—who are obsessed with the podcast, by the way. Not obsessed with Judaism, but the podcast matters to them.

Casper- Hopefully this will bridge the two.

Scott- I hope so! (laughing)

Casper- Now Scott, one of the questions I always have for people who enter in some form of ordained leadership, which is: Why did you become a rabbi?

Scott- You know, I think that actually it began in a physical room that is much like the digital one that we’re in right now. Unfortunately we’re not seeing each other face to face, but I’m sort of imagining us in like this digital beith midrash, like, place where people study.

So my dad was raised what we’d call ‘modern Orthodox’ of the Lithuanian tradition, which was like a very rigorous, harsh, difficult kind of pedagogy and education and spiritual practice. There’s a lot of beauty in its austerity, but it’s not known for having, like, soft corners, and the minute he got to college he left it all. I mean, he went to Brandeis and that was it for his connection to observing Judaism, until much later.

And when I was thirteen years old—or, actually, about twelve years old—and I started training for my bar mitzvah, my dad started asking me questions about the person who was training me and about what it was like. And he was just so upset, because it was a very workmanlike process. And he yanked me from it and sort of, like, returned to being Orthodox again just to torture me for the next year and a half or so. But what he did was he brought me—very unwillingly—up the street to this rabbi whose name is Eli ____, and we would study on Saturday
afternoons, something called Pirkei Avot, which means, like, ‘Teachings of the Fathers.’ It’s the great aphorisms of the great rabbis of the Talmud. And I found freedom in that room.

I was the youngest person by far. The median age was, like, 75, and I lowered the average by a good 40 years. But what I realized is that it was this incredibly, radically free place. What mattered wasn’t who are, where you came from or what your background was, or what your social life was or what your religious practice was. The question was: Could you ask a good question? Could you search for truth? And something about me—little thirteen-year-old me—realized that. And it was eight years later when I was speaking to that same rabbi on the phone, Rabbi ___, and he just said to me, ‘Go to the seminary and get it over with already.’

(Casper and Vanessa start laughing)

Casper- And that was that.

Scott- And that was that! I’d never thought of it before, and when he said it I just sort of had this moment. I think my Christian colleagues would call that ‘the call,’ and I was like, ‘That’s what I’m going to do.’ And that’s what I did.

Vanessa- And you’ve regretted it… only half of the days since—?

Scott- Ever since. (They all laugh.)

Scott- I love what I do. You know, it challenges me on a daily basis, both sort of mind, body, and soul. And so the question for me at this time is not ‘Why did I go into it?’ It’s ‘Why do I stay?’ Because basically—This might be an apocryphal story, but Hilary Clinton, when she was being grilled on healthcare the first time around, when she was First Lady, apparently a journalist asked her, ‘How do you put up with the stress and the pressure and the corrosive comments?’ And she looked at that person and she said, ‘Have you ever sat on the board of your local church or synagogue?’ She was like, ‘This is nothing.’ So, like, when you put human beings together, we get really intense about not always really important things. And so the reason I stay is because I actually am incredibly blessed with the job that I have right now, and one of the things that we get to do is to try to get people together to yearn to be something greater, to overcome some of our own limitations, to reach something higher, to connect to something bigger. And as long as I get to do that, more days than not, I stay as a rabbi.

Vanessa- Can I ask you a really annoying question? It’s like the Hillel question of: If you had to explain Judaism to someone who knew little to nothing about it, what is the one thing that you love most about it that you would want to share with them?

Scott- Hm. I think that, like, the message is that your job as a human being is to be of use to other humans and to God, and it’s going to take time to learn how to do that.

Casper- Mm. That’s beautiful.
Scott- And then the other piece of it is, like—so, you don’t just live for yourself in Jewish life, you live for others, and then it takes a long time to learn how to be of use. And that’s where the study component comes in. That’s where we’re always learning.

Vanessa- That’s something that Ariana said to me once, that I care a lot about training, and that I care a lot about being ceremonially approved to do something. And I do just think that it’s a Jewish thing in me. It’s like, ‘Well, did you learn? Did you work hard? Did you study? Did you sit over a book?’

Scott- Right.

Vanessa- And it’s not the ordainment of it, or the authority of it, but I want people to have put in the studying.

Scott- Yeah. And I feel the same way. I mean, I think that, like, I’ve gained so much through the process of just sort of cutting my teeth on hard text and also learning about how to be a rabbi, how to help, how to serve through situations. It just feels like there’s always a book open in front of me, and you never stop being a student. You know, that’s when I hear the voices of my Lithuanian—just to go back to my dad—when I hear the voices of my Lithuanian ancestors whispering to me in a positive sense, what they’re whispering is, like, ‘Did you learn, did you learn, did you learn?’ Like, ‘There’s no time to stop. Keep studying. Keep studying life.’ And that’s something that there’s a certain kind of pressure to living that way, but I also think a lot of beauty.

Vanessa- Amen.

Casper- Amen. So Scott, you know—

Scott- Yes!

Casper- —you talked earlier about this focus on learning and the love in Judaism of study—and even this question of the listening pose, there’s something about sitting over a book together, which for us, with this project around Harry Potter, there’s so many people sitting bent over that book and just delving into this text and the stories and the echoes between different parts of the books. But I’m curious, for you, what role has kind of studying text played in your own spiritual life? I mean, obviously it’s part of your job, so that line is maybe sometimes difficult to find, but how, if at all, has studying text supported you?

Scott- I think that, like, the way that I understand the connection between text and life is that everything is opaque until you break beneath the surface to understand it. I mean, I’m sure there are parts of life that present themselves as obvious, but most things in the world I consider to be non-obvious. Right? If you see a person and you label that person as ‘evil,’ clearly you’ve missed the complexity of the human being in front of you. People do evil things all the time, and you can’t separate yourself from how people act, but there’s not a human being out there that isn’t just sort of a mess of complexity and anxieties and good emotions and bad emotions. You
know what I mean? So I guess the thing that text gives me is the idea that life is non-obvious, and that if you’re patient, and you’re willing to sort of sit it out a little bit and listen and learn and ask, you almost always get to the good stuff beneath the surface.

I mean, this may sound a little controversial, but I sort of distrust when people tell me their morality comes—that it’s an intuition, that they feel right and wrong inside them. I know that they do, but I’ve met people who feel—like over abortion, for example—just as strongly with the same moral intuition. So how is it possible that two people can have the same amount of moral intuition about the exact same problem, but in opposite ways? My god, that’s mindblowing. So the idea there that if you create a set of tools to pierce what doesn’t seem to be easily understandable, and then you go beneath the surface and you sort of start to get those pieces, all of a sudden life becomes not less full of confusion, but much more full of meaning. And in fact the word that we use in Hebrew to talk about piercing that surface, ‘lidrosh’ or ‘drashat’ either means ‘to pierce’ or ‘to inquire,’ or to even ‘require.’ There’s an urgency about it. So, like, a ‘drash’ is something that inquires or seeks deeply into what’s in front of it, and makes what’s opaque or not understandable intelligible.

Casper- Mm. So is drash related at all to ‘midrash’?

Vanessa- Yes.

Scott- Yes, it is indeed. ‘Midrash’ is the body of literature that uses that tool called drash, yeah.

Casper- I'M SO GOOD AT HEBREW!

(everyone laughs)

Scott- I’m glad that’s your takeaway, Casper.

Vanessa- (laughing) I know! That is always Casper’s takeaway.

Casper- Self affirmation! But I mean, I think this is really important. What I loved—and this is coming from a Christian context, but may translate as well in a Jewish one—we don’t read the Bible just for kind of obvious, you know, what you were saying, we’re looking for the non-obvious. And in some ways, having that text as a resource for a community, and the generations of readers who have read these texts in community—yeah, it’s just like a helpful, not a check-and-balance per se, but the text has something to say to us in a way.

Scott- Yeah, that’s exactly right. I mean, drash is the way that we keep Torah eternal, we keep it eternally fresh. Without drash, I don’t know how we would do it. And one of the stories that the Talmud even tells about this process of inquiry, of sort of textual seeking and the tools, is that, like— the story it tells about itself is there was once a king who had two servants, and was going out of town, and gave each of them a sack of flour. I know that sounds crazy, but that’s the way the story is. And one of the servants was like, ‘Oh, I’ve got this sack of flour here, I’ve got this sack of’—grain, actually, is what it was—‘I have this sack of grain, you know, the pieces of
seeds of wheat, and my king gave it to me, my master gave it to me, so what I’m going to do is I’m going to keep it safe.’ So he put it under his pillow and he just kept it safe at night.

But the other person, the other servant, what that servant did is he took the grain and he milled it into flour, and then he took the flour and baked it into bread. And when the king came back, he said, ‘Here is the finished product. Here is the bread.’ And the other guy said, ‘No, here is the flour, the grain! I was just looking after it, like you told me to do.’ And the Talmud is not a shy document, so it basically said to the first servant who saved the grain, it said, like, ‘Idiot! Do you think that’s what I gave you grain for?’

And so one of the things that drash presumes is that the literal text in front of us is the raw material for meaning, not meaning itself. It’s the seed that grows the tree. It isn’t yet a fully grown organism.

Casper- That is so cool. So Scott, one way to dig into the text and see if it will withstand the kind of inquiry that we’re giving it is the different spiritual practices we’ve been using. And we’re hoping you can tell us a little bit about ‘pardeis,’ which is another textual practice from the Jewish tradition.

Scott- Yes, I’d be happy to. ‘Pardeis’ is an acronym in Hebrew. The word itself means ‘orchard,’ and talented rabbis love to do this. They were really masters of language. They cared deeply, deeply, deeply about even the structures of individual words. So when they would come up with their acronyms, that it resonated that the pardeis is an orchard where INSERT TREE’S NAME the tree of life lives, was important to the person who apparently came up with this phrase. His name was Moshe De Leon, and rabbi Moshe De Leon, he’s a medieval rabbi, and amongst other things he’s credited with composing a major book of Kabbalan, the Zohar, ‘The Book of Mystical Light.’

So ‘pardeis’ means ‘orchard,’ but if you separate all of the words out in Hebrew, what you get is ‘shot,’ which is the undressed or literal meaning of the text; ‘remez’—and there’s some disagreement about what ‘remez’ means. The word in Hebrew means ‘hint,’ and it either means what letters are in the word and what letters are out of the word, sort of a hypertextual way of reading it, or actually just like, ‘What does this episode in the Torah hint to you about other episodes in the Torah?’

‘Drash,’ which is the most sophisticated and has the biggest guns of them all, which is a series of techniques for pushing through the obvious parts of the text, making deeper and unseen and unexpected connections with other parts of the text, comparing similarities in words and roots and juxtaposition, and it’s the major tool by which the Talmud and the midrash operate to actually make Jewish law and come up with Jewish philosophy.

And the last one is ‘sode,’ the hidden meaning. To quote a rabbi I was reading about this online, he was like, ‘I have no idea what “sode” means.’
Casper- (laughing)

Scott- And that’s the point of it, is ‘sode’ is only revealed. And by the way, I love the idea of the podcast, so I actually thought up Harry Potter examples for all of these.

Casper- Oh, awesome!

Scott- If I possibly can. So I’ll give you ‘sode.’ But ‘sode’—the great teacher Mimonides, probably the smartest Jew who ever lived, said that the—

Vanessa- Hey!

Scott- (verbally stumbles in surprise which Casper cackles, then starts laughing too)

Vanessa- Just kidding.

Scott- I’m so sorry.

Vanessa- Yeah, wow, that’s fine. I guess I respect Mimonides.

Scott- He said that ‘sode’ is actually built into the Torah, and that the Torah is actually a purposeful enigma. And the way it’s built is like a golden apple that’s held within a silver casing that has little holes in it. So if you look, you can see the gold inside, but only certain people can compose the true picture of what it was intending to say. The Torah is purposefully difficult.

So, ‘pardes’ as according to Harry Potter. Shall we do it?

Casper- Yes!

Vanessa- Yes, please!

Scott- Okay! So I just saw, the last one I saw was Chamber of Secrets, so that’s the one that was on my mind.

Casper- Well, that’s just the one we’ve been reading.

Scott- Oh, fantastic! Alright. So, you know, clearly this is fate. It’s intended. So what I was thinking about the fact that Harry is a Parselmouth…Parseltongue? Parselmouth, Parseltongue?

Vanessa- He is a Parselmouth and speaks Parseltongue.

Scott- Thank you very much. I’m sorry for forgetting the distinction, I know it’s important. So he is a Parselmouth and speaks Parseltongue.

So one of the things I’ve been thinking about is the way that actually Parseltongue winds its way through the books, and that makes it a great example to use it pardes system. So if you were looking for the ‘shot,’ the undressed meaning of Harry being a Parselmouth and being able to
speak Parseltongue, what would you say? What’s like the literal stuff about Harry being able to speak snake, essentially?

Vanessa- Just that he can communicate to snakes. (Sounds very uncertain while Casper laughs)

Scott- Right! So the most basic level is that he’s got this thing and he can talk to snakes, and that’s crazy. But part of the literal meaning of it is also that people, other people in the Wizarding community, think that Parselmouths are evil. Right? That’s a SHOT thing. It’s not particularly hidden or difficult, so the SHOT meaning is that Harry’s ability to speak Parseltongue brings suspicion upon him. That’s the ‘shot’ of the text, that’s the undressed meaning of the text. Okay?

So going to the stage of ‘remez,’ of the hint, what we would do is look at the other instances in the story where Harry uses Parseltongue—and a lot of them, by the way, are even though it’s a sign of evil wizards, we notice that Harry uses them actually almost always for good. Right? The Chamber of Secrets couldn’t have been opened if Harry wasn’t a Parselmouth, and he could not have opened Salazar Slytherin’s locket unless he was a Parselmouth, right? So the ‘remez’ side of it would be just sort of to see the way the idea courses itself through all of the books in the story.

Vanessa- Do you mind just reminding us what ‘remez’ means?

Scott- ‘Remez’ means hint; I’m so sorry. So this is the stuff that’s hinted at, like, where you can see it, the way it plays out in the rest of the story. There’s Biblical examples of this too, in which there’s basically people sort of get what they give the thing or give what they get, sort of ideas like that. But Harry’s Parseltongue, or the fact that Harry’s a Parselmouth, is the thing that ultimately allows him to fulfill his destiny.

Casper- Mmm Beautiful. That makes sense.

Scott- Now the ‘drash’ is where we go even deeper, and we’d be listing all of the examples in which Harry speaks Parseltongue. So this is where I wish I had more expertise in the book, but one of the words that gets used in Harry’s multiple experiences with Parseltongue is the word ‘open.’ So one of the things we can sort of get in here is that when we’re getting to this idea of ‘drash,’ the deeper meaning, the sort of metaphorical meaning, is that Harry is always actually opening up evil things in order to do good.

Casper- WhoooaAAAAAAA MIND BLOWN!

Vanessa- Oh, man, that’s dangerous. I do not know how I feel about that.

Scott- I know! I know! Right! That’s how you know it’s a good ‘drash,’ that you’re like, ‘OH.’

Vanessa- *(makes a frustrated sound)*
Scott- Right, so, one of the things we think of Harry, the obvious version of Harry is that he means good and does good. But the non-obvious version of Harry is that Harry actually could not have accomplished anything without his access to things that are evil.

Casper- Mm. Gosh, this is making me think about just the world of politics, and the dark arts of spin and playing the media and—gosh, yeah. That’s really interesting.

Scott- Right, and so all of the sudden life got more complex for Harry.

Casper- Right. Right.

Vanessa- Yeah. And making sure that you use those tools for good. I mean, he even—in the moment that you’re talking about, when he opens the locket by telling it to open in Parseltongue, he hands the sword to Ron to destroy it. And so it’s like you even sometimes need an ally to destroy it for you. Like, to keep you in check.

Casper- Right, because when he’s wearing the locket, his mood goes sour, becomes selfish and bitter, and so you literally can’t carry that on your own. Kind of like the Ring in Lord of the Rings.

Scott- Right.

Casper- Wow.

Scott- So the way that we do that is by looking, like, making those lists, and we actually have a bunch of tools in Judaism that have to do with, like I said, with juxtaposition and logical inferences. What we just did was called ‘gazerah shava’ where you compare the appearance of the same words in multiple settings to derive meaning.

Casper- Okay. So now we get to the really mystical level, which is ‘sode.’ This is the mystery. What do we do now, Scott?

Scott- So, there is one person in the Harry Potter books that understands the ‘sode.’ There’s, like, a kabbalast in Harry Potter who always seems to understand the higher story, and it’s of course Dumbledore who knows the SODE, which is that Harry is the Horcrux. Right? The ‘sode’ of it is not just that Harry can speak Parseltongue or that he is a Parseltongue, but what that means is that he’s actually part Voldemort. And only Dumbledore knows that SODE, that secret. It has to be kept from Harry, right? Because the SODE can be dangerous. Imagine, like, Harry gets to school the first day of the first book, they’re like, ‘Welcome, Harry Potter, here’s the Sorting Hat. By the way, you’re part Voldemort.’

*(giggling)*

Casper- Have a nice freshman year!

Vanessa- Fix your hair! And you’re part Voldemort.
Scott- The ‘sode’ is never benign. The ‘sode’ is always kind of risky.

Vanessa- Scott, I just reread one of my favorite essays, which is Freud’s ‘On Melancholia,’ and he has this great section where he talks about melancholics, as he calls them—people with depression. And he says what’s so interesting about them is that they tend to predict the future better, they tend to have a better understanding of the world around them, and yet there’s clearly something wrong with them. Like, even in psychology, Freud is noticing this thing of seeing too much of the truth is clinically unhealthy.

Scott- It’s really difficult. And one of the things I want to say is that one of the things I think this means is that we have to see the truth with each other in order to protect each other.

Vanessa- Hear, hear.

Casper- Scott, thank you so much. This is just such a gift. A gift from the tradition. (laughing)

Scott- I was so—like I said, thank you for increasing my status in my own family.

Casper- Well, listen, speaking of your family, I just want to say a blessing for your father who got you sitting down over those books at age 12-13.

Scott- Amen.

Casper- Because you’ve given us a real beautiful insight to this beautiful practice of ‘pardes’ and to the work you do. So thank you. Thanks to your dad as well.

Scott- Vanessa, Casper, thanks so much.

(Outro music begins)

Vanessa- You’ve been listening to Harry Potter and the Sacred Text. Next week we’re going to do a whole book review, which we’re really excited to do. Please make sure to go to our website, HarryPotterSacredText.com, and go to our crowdfunding campaign. We really appreciate all of your support, and for those of you who haven’t had a chance yet, make your donation today.

Casper- This episode of Harry Potter and the Sacred Text is produced by Ariana Neddleman, me, Casper ter Kuile, and Vanessa Zoltan. Our social media coordinator is Jen Stark, our music is by Ivan Pyzow and Nick Bole, and Harry Potter and the Sacred Text is part of the Panoply Network. You’ll find ours and other great shows at Panoply.fm.

Vanessa- We’d like to offer a special thanks to __ Shapiro and the Panoply studio in Washington, D.C., for hosting Scott today.

Casper- A big thanks to Christina Richardson, Margaret, Megan Crowley and Abigail Morris for their fabulous voicemails; Rebecca and Charlie Ledley; Stephanie Paulsell; and of course the
wonderful Scott Perlo for joining us on this episode. Thanks, all, for listening. We’ll see you next week.

(outro music ends)

Vanessa- Can I just say that, like, stories about these rabbis is like—it’s like some of my favorite stories and I feel like Westerns are based on this, right? Like, four guys getting together and—sorry.

Scott- See their dusty leather clothes as they cross the street at high noon kind of thing—

Vanessa- And a student came to them and asked—I love it. Please continue. I’m so happy.

Scott- You’re so right. It’s like the Jewish, really anxious version of a Western.