

Episode 36

Balak

There is a holiday in Judaism known as Yom Kippur. This translates into English as Day of Atonement or Day of Forgiveness. This holiday is most famous for its being a fast day. On this holiday, Jews are forbidden to eat or drink from sunset until darkness the next evening—a time span encompassing about twenty-five hours.

I have been observing this holiday since I was thirteen years old, long before I was a *Schrift* host, but was instead an adolescent bar-mitzvah boy. Yet, every year, the same phenomenon occurs. As the day goes on, and I become more and more hungry, I begin to think about *food*. Thoughts and images of food waltz into my mind, with greater and greater frequency. I will be, for example, standing in synagogue around 3 p.m., and the image of a grilled cheese sandwich will appear. I will see the golden-brown bread, the perfectly crusted edges, and the gooey, yellow, stretchy cheese. A few minutes later, another food item will appear. This time it is a baguette with butter smeared onto the cut-open top. I can practically feel in my fingertips the flour dust sprinkled on the bread. I can smell the warm, fresh dough straight out of the oven. And on my tongue dissolves the cool, creamy, lightly salted butter.

When I was younger, my response to these thoughts of food used to be simply: Man, I guess I am hungry. But once I began regularly meditating, I had a different reaction. I used to think, rather ignorantly, that the hunger *caused* the thoughts. I thought that, because I am hungry, thoughts of food arise, just as a kind of byproduct of the hunger.

Now, I know better. The reason we have thoughts of food when we are extremely hungry is because our brains want to nudge us, remind us *to eat*. The reason I fantasize about food is not just an accidental byproduct of being hungry. Rather, it is an ancient cognitive mechanism to ensure that we make eating a priority, that we become motivated to get out there and find food, that we never forget to eat, nor forget how delicious food can be.

I used to find these thoughts *annoying*. Who wants to think about grilled cheese or a baguette when one is trying to fast? It just adds to the torture. But now, I find these thoughts rather fascinating. I see them for what they really are. My brain is attempting to help me, to help me survive. However pathetic and unhelpful this attempt might be, the brain's intentions are good. The thoughts are there to serve you, not to torment you.

This example represents a classic instance of a *mismatch* between the way our brains evolved and the world in which we now live. Millions of years ago, these fantasies about food were enormously helpful to pre-humans. Those animals or apes or pre-humans which didn't have the gene to make them fantasize about food would not have survived and passed on their genes nearly as successfully as those animals who did have "food fantasies" when hungry. But today, "food fantasies" are not as important, or at least not always as important. It would be nice, for example, if our brains somehow *knew* it was a fast day, and didn't think send us "food thoughts" until the fast day was over. The brain, overdeveloped and stuck in ancient times, always *wants* to help us, but its strategies are often counter-productive due to this *mismatch*. This is why people go to therapists: to figure out how to challenge and subdue their brain's ancient tendencies.

The food example I have just given is rather cute and charming. But, unfortunately, the brain also can go rather wild in its attempts to help us. Phobias, panic attacks, insecurities, jealousies, violent impulses, addictions—all of these are just like the lusting after a grilled cheese sandwich. The brain has evolved to serve us, but its strategies are often terrible. Panic attacks, for example, would have been extraordinarily useful and productive in hunter-gatherer times. They

would have reminded people to be alert to dangers, to stay put when faced with threats, to take the outside world very seriously. But in our era, panic attacks don't do us much good. They have the potential to ruin a perfectly enjoyable cocktail party or a pleasant transatlantic flight. Panic attacks, phobias, insecurities, worrying are all, in their own twisted way, the brain's strategy to make us feel *consoled*. But they have the exact opposite effect. They are, in short, terrible strategies.

The fact is that, if you look deep enough, you would be hard-pressed to find a thought which doesn't in some way wish to help you and to console you. Some may relax you, but many others will just make you more stressed. In the winter of 1917-18, Franz Kafka moved to the Bohemian village of Zürau, where he worked on a farm alongside his sister and brother-in-law. Kafka described this period as one of the best of his life, where he had no responsibilities to work, parents, or women. Kafka wrote a series of aphorisms during this time, known as the Zürau Aphorisms.

We unfortunately don't have time to go into detail on all of the aphorisms. They are extremely cryptic and paradoxical. One famous aphorism reads, for example: "A cage went in search of a bird." Another reads: "Leopards break into the temple and drink all the sacrificial vessels dry; it keeps happening; in the end, it can be calculated in advance and is incorporated into the ritual."

Much ink has been spilled and hours of sleep lost trying to puzzle over these aphorisms.

Kafka has a few aphorisms about consolation. One of them, paraphrased, reads as follows: "True consolation does not exist." *True consolation does not exist*. Another reads: "He feels captive on this earth ... No consolation can console him because it is all mere consolation, delicate, head-aching consolation in face of the crude fact of his captivity. But if you ask him what he really wants he is unable to answer, for he has no idea of what freedom looks like."

This second aphorism is similar to the first. Consolation does not exist, so consolation cannot help console one even if he is in "captivity." Moreover, the aphorism reads that he doesn't know what he wants, because he has no idea of what freedom looks like. Consolation, then, is at odds with freedom, with, we might say, enlightenment. When we are faced with problems, our strategy is always to console ourselves. Yet, consolation is never really *consolation*. Moreover, consolation prevents us from being free.

What is Kafka saying here?

The Yale professor Paul North has a fascinating theory on this aphorism. North theorizes that Kafka is saying that all of our thoughts, everything we think, is, in one way or another, a form of consolation. North goes so far as to say that even the thought, "all thoughts are just consolation," is still another *consoling* thought. Even scary thoughts like, "I am going to die," or "we can't reverse climate change," are, in their own strange ways, still trying to console us.

If, in fact, all consolation are just thoughts, then it is never true consolation.

Paul North observes that "Consolation has been the center of the Western intellectual project ... thoughts cover up or distract from situations which cannot be resolved through acts. *Thoughts give momentary asylum in a world of suffering.*

If we take this idea to its logical conclusion, it means that, in our brain's desire to continually comfort us, to help us, it prevents us from every accessing true *reality*. Our brains are so wired to console, that it is almost as though a demon, the demon of consolation, is continually haunting us. To be sure, it is also *comforting* us and *consoling* us. But it is not true consolation; it is just the brain's ancient, often feeble attempts, to make us feel better. The brain is a bit like a

friend who always means well, but often says the exact wrong thing, causing us to suffer more rather than feel comforted.

According to North, Kafka, with his aphorisms, wished to do nothing less than herald an entire new way of thinking which would pull us out of this downward spiral of consolatory thoughts.

Kafka's project is intimately connected with our access to God. North writes: "Through consolation, God comes to sit at man's feet." *Through consolation, God comes to sit at man's feet*. Our thoughts, always trying to make us feel better, do not give us the "real God"—they just give us the God who will serve our needs and calm our fears. In order to truly understand God, we must think of Him in a way that he no longer sits at our feet, but rather dwells everywhere, or something else entirely.

Kafka hit upon the idea that *thinking* will trick us into believing we are moving closer toward Truth, when in fact we are moving further and further away. We deceive ourselves into believing that we can separate thinking from consolation, when, in fact, they are one and the same. To understand Truth, to understand God, we need to revolutionize the way we think, or better yet, we need to stop thinking entirely.

In a famous conversation between Kafka and his best friend Max Brod, Kafka once made the following remark: "Our world is only a bad mood of God, a bad day of his." Brod replied: Then there is hope outside this manifestation of the world that we know." Kafka's legendary answer was: "Oh, plenty of hope an infinite amount of hope—but not for us."

Kafka seems to be saying here that hope exists to connect with God, but not for *us*. That is, not for those of *us*—like Kafka—who *think*, who *console*.

The German-Jewish intellectual, Walter Benjamin, would become fascinated with this cryptic quote from Kafka. In 1934, Benjamin wrote one of the first essays to analyze Kafka's literature—since then, to be sure, thousands more have been written. Kafka had died ten years before in 1924, and Benjamin would title his essay, "On the Tenth Anniversary of Kafka's Death."

There is plenty of hope, an infinite amount of hope—but not for us. What does Benjamin do with this quote from Kafka? Benjamin interprets it to mean that *only fools* are able to think outside themselves, *only fools* are able to access the transcendental, hopeful world, which Kafka hypothesizes. Put another way, there is plenty of hope, an infinite amount of hope, not for us, but for *fools*. And Benjamin argues that the many "fools" which appear in Kafka's literature evidences that only *they* can transcend their reality.

I see a connection between Paul North's argument, regarding Kafka, about how we need to escape thinking in order to transcend our reality, and Walter Benjamin's argument that it is Kafka's *fools* which are the most privileged of Kafka's characters. *Fools*, by definition, do not *think*, or at least not in any kind of "constructive" way.

This interpretation may help us to shed light on the many mysteries of this week's Parsha. This week, the Torah gives us one of its strangest, most mysterious *Parashot*. It is largely about two men, Balak and Balam. Balak is the king of the Moabites and Balam is a famous sorcerer in the region. King Balak sees how powerful the Israelites are becoming, and he becomes afraid that the Israelites will defeat his Moabite kingdom in the upcoming battle. King Balak strategizes and decides that he needs the magician Balam to *curse* the Israelites. When King Balak requests Balam the Sorcerer to curse the Israelites, Balam agrees.

Yet, each time Balam gets ready to curse the Israelites, God speaks to Balam. He tells Balam that he cannot curse the Israelites because they are already blessed—blessed by Him, by

God. King Balak becomes extremely frustrated with Balam the Sorcerer. Balak says, essentially, what am I paying you for? You are supposed to be this great sorcerer. And instead of cursing the Israelites, you turn around and tell me that they are blessed. Interestingly, King Balak takes Balam the Sorcerer all over his kingdom to try to find different spots where he might be able to curse the Israelites. First, he takes Balam to *this* mountain and says: curse the Israelites. Balam says: I wish I could, but God has spoken to me, and he won't let me. Then King Balak, failing to take sight of the larger picture, says to Balam: well, if it didn't work on this mountain, let's try another mountain. Yet, the change of scenery makes no difference. Each time, Balam, when he tries to curse them, ends up blessing them instead.

In fact, it is not just that God *won't let* Balam curse the Hebrews. God actually *speaks* through Balam. Balam opens his mouth to speak, and God's words come out. This is partially why King Balak gets so angry at Balam. When Balam opens his mouth, King Balak expects some awesome curse to come out. But instead, Balam utters out like this: "God brought us out of Egypt ... how beautiful are your tents, Israel, how beautiful are your dwellings ... the tribes which threaten you will be destroyed ..." and so forth. Balam speaks this way, not because he *wants* to—he would much rather heap disastrous curses upon Israel—but because God has momentarily abducted his mouth.

To understand what the Torah, in my interpretation, seems to be getting at here, we need to take ourselves back into the mindset of the ancient world. Judaism was the first monotheistic religion, the first religion to say that there was not a bunch of different gods doing different things, but rather just one God who was all-powerful, omniscient, and who was responsible for everyone and everything. Today, monotheism is ubiquitous. Christianity and Islam are both monotheistic religions. But, in the ancient world, monotheism was new on the scene. And actually, if you read the Torah carefully, you can quite clearly see that the monotheistic conception of God that we know today isn't one-hundred percent developed. Earlier on in the Torah, there is a sense in which God is the God of the Hebrews, and that other nations have their own separate gods. The Hebrew God is obviously more powerful than these other gods, but there nevertheless seems to be a kind of acknowledgement that these other gods have some standing. The Ten Commandments reads, for example, that you should have no other gods *before* me, suggesting that God is the supreme god, but that there are other gods behind him in the hierarchy. Moses often speaks to God and tells Him that, if he leads the Israelites to the Promised Land, the Egyptians will be impressed by God. This once more suggests that God is the God of the Hebrews, and the Egyptians have their own god or gods.

Now, the Torah is unquestionably a book which establishes the theology of monotheism. God is not *just* the God of the Hebrews, but the God of everyone and everything, the Supreme Being who is even greater than the universe itself. This vision of God is also established constantly in the Torah, most notably, perhaps, in the beginning of Genesis, with the creation of the world—*In the beginning, God created the Heavens and the Earth*. But, I think, the Torah wants to distinguish between true monotheism—the kind of monotheism we know today—and what is known as *monolatry*—the idea that there is a supreme God, and then lower gods.

Remember: the Torah was written during a time in which monotheism would have been a radical, even unacceptable, idea. It couldn't just come out and advocate for *pure monotheism* without gradually leaning into it. It needed to whet people's appetites, we might say, first with this *monolatry*, and then introduce pure monotheism.

I believe that this is what is going on this week. King Balak is waking up to a rude new reality. God doesn't just work for the Hebrews. He works for everyone. A magician like Balam

can't just curse him, because God himself controls the magician. God controls everything, in fact. This is why the Torah has Balam and Balak run up to all these different mountains of various heights. They still believe, foolishly, that on some mountains God has no power, no dominion, no jurisdiction. But the parsha makes clear that monolatry is dead. The idea that God has power on some mountains but not on others, is made to look ridiculous.

So, that seems to explain why Balam keeps failing to curse the Hebrews and why Balak gets to flabbergasted after each failed attempt. But a second question remains: why are Balam and Balak depicted as such bumbling fools? And more importantly, why is God speaking so directly to one of these fools, to this sorcerer Balam? After all, as you'll remember from some of the previous *parshot*, God doesn't speak with everybody. What makes Moses so special, so chosen, is that God speaks to him directly, face-to-face and mouth-to-mouth. It goes without saying that Moses is not a fool, and is worthy of this privilege to speak to God. But now God is speaking to Balam, a fool, a sorcerer, and just kind of a jerk. Why?

You'll notice that God isn't exactly *speaking* to Balam. Rather, he is momentarily emptying out Balam's brain and overtaking his consciousness. He is abducting his faculties and his mouth. Here, we return again to Kafka and the Zürau Aphorisms. What Balam is doing to speak to God is to utterly reverse his way of thinking. But even that is not the most correct way to put it. To communicate with God, it is as though Balam needs to empty out his brain entirely, to turn it into an empty vessel in which God can enter. Moreover, to understand this radical new idea which was *monotheism*, one needed, in the ancient world, to stop being so *analytical*. To *experience* the universe's Oneness the Torah indicates that one needed to *empty out* one's brain, to *cease* thinking. This blank state would allow for this revolutionary, counter-intuitive idea of monotheism, to enter.

Kafka had said that it is impossible to think a thought which does not, in some way, try to console us. The parsha, then, seems to indicate, that the only way to connect with the infinite is to totally come outside of ourselves, to remove the ego, to fully let go.

This is why Balam had to be a kind of *fool*. Walter Benjamin tried to interpret Kafka's famous words that "there is plenty of hope, an infinite amount of hope, but not for us." When Kafka said "us," he was referring to himself and his *milieu* of intellectuals. People who are intelligent, analytical, logical. You'll notice that, by definition, a fool is none of these things. Fools are unintelligent, impulsive, and irrational. Fools at least have a chance of breaking out of cyclical patterns of thinking, whereas the intelligent will remain stuck inside their overdeveloped brains, never quite figuring out how to, for a moment, stop consoling themselves, so that the Infinite can enter.

Consolation is an unfortunate word, because it has such a positive connotation. Who doesn't want to be consoled? What's so bad about consolation? Isn't God and the Infinite the supreme form of consolation? Yes, of course. But remember, the vast majority of the time, the consolatory strategies of our thinking minds are like quicksand. Though well-intentioned, the consolatory patterns of our minds bring us more stress and more fear. They bring us *away* from Truth and away from Hope, while tricking us into believing they are taking us closer. Usually thinking is just *worrying*. *Worrying* is a well-intentioned cognitive strategy, but we all know that it's only counter-productive, often debilitating. Jesus knew this, once astutely asking his disciples: "Will *worrying* add a single hour to your life?"

This is why Kafka said: "No consolation can console him because it is all mere consolation." I would phrase this another way and say: you can't think yourself out of thinking. No thought will bring you to any place other than just another thought.

Since the Enlightenment, our society has worshiped thinking, logic, and reason. Words like intelligence, brainpower, and intellectual have supremely positive connotations. By contrast, foolishness, irrationality, and obtuseness, have terribly negative connotations. Yet, we shouldn't be so quick to dismiss the mental activity—or lack thereof—of fools. We might all do well to allow ourselves to learn from the fools. Foolishness is not just a path to grasping the eternal or to making room for monotheism. It may also just be a way to, ironically, bring more relaxation, joy, and wellness to our lives. There is something beautiful, liberating, and enlightening in *stupidity*, that is, in letting go of thinking. Because it is only when we stop thinking, when we make ourselves a bit more stupid, a bit more airheaded, that true and genuine consolation, will enter our minds.