

## Episode 6 Toldot

What do you do when you have a toothache? There can be only one answer to that question. You go to the dentist, or perhaps you take ibuprofen, to ease your pain. That would be the only rational thing to do: reduce pain, increase pleasure. But in Dostoevsky's novella, *Notes from Underground*, or in Russian, *Записки из подполья*, the unnamed protagonist has another opinion. He says, "even in toothache, there is enjoyment. I had a toothache for a whole month, and I know there is." He says, imagine there is an educated and cultured person. For the first day of the toothache, he will simply groan about his toothache. But by the second or third day, he will groan louder so that he keeps everyone in his house awake. He will know that he is causing pain to himself and to his family, yet he will continue on. Why does he continue to endure this pain? Because, according to Dostoevsky's Underground Man, "In this disgrace there lies a *voluptuous pleasure*." He will think: "I am worrying you. I am keeping you awake. Stay awake. Feel every minute that I have a toothache."

What is Dostoevsky trying to say here? We like to think that we, as humans, always behave in our rational interest, attempting to increase our overall pleasure and decrease our overall pain. But, in fact, Dostoevsky says that we sometimes choose to bring pain upon ourselves, simply to enjoy the *freedom* of rebelling against rationality. Symbolically, we actively seek out and enjoy a toothache rather than run from it.

Have you ever had moments where said something, or did something, and a few moments later you thought: "Why the \$&%\* did I say that?" "What the \*\$%# was I thinking?" Me too.

The unnamed protagonist in Dostoevsky's 1848 novella is, to be sure, a weird dude. He has no name in the novel, so let's call him the Underground Man. If we met the Underground Man today, we would probably say he is a "loser," an introvert, a recluse with low self-esteem. Preceding Kafka by about sixty-five years, he describes himself as an insect. The novel begins with the lines: "I am a sick man, I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man." Yet, despite the fact that he would probably never get a job in PR, he manages to get a beautiful woman to fall in love with him—or, at least, to kind of fall in love with him. In one scene, he visits a prostitute—and what would a Dostoevsky novel be without a visit to a prostitute? The Underground Man works himself into a kind of frenzy, giving a longwinded philosophical discourse to the prostitute on the cruelty of life and so forth. Yet, without realizing it, he seduces the young girl, named Liza. When he leaves, he gives Liza his address and tells her to come visit him, thinking she never will. But, a few days later, she appears at his apartment. The Underground Man is terrified, and yet also overjoyed, to see her. Here is finally someone ready to love him for who he is. But what does the Underground Man do? He sabotages the encounter. Instead of greeting Liza with the love he feels for her, he, fatefully, screams at her to leave. And, hurling the ultimate insult at her, he then presses a five-ruble note into her hand. Crushed, Liza runs out of the apartment into a snowy St. Petersburg evening. The Underground Man immediately regrets his decision, and runs after her, crying her name. But he is too late. He emerges outside to only find snow blowing at him from all directions. He knows that, through his own self-sabotage, he basically screwed up his only chance at finding companionship. Most significantly, he cannot explain to himself his behavior. He says, "I don't know, to this day I cannot decide, what I was feeling. I cannot get on without domineering and tyrannizing over someone, but, there is no explaining anything by reasoning and so it is useless to reason."

Now, here you might be thinking, isn't this podcast supposed to be about German literature? Why are you talking about a Russian? Well, fair enough. But Nietzsche, who rarely praised anyone, wrote admiringly about Dostoevsky. He said that Dostoevsky was "the only person who ever taught me anything about psychology." The other great writer of German, Franz Kafka, wrote in his diary that Dostoevsky was one of his "blood brothers" with whom he has more in common than his own family members.

What did Nietzsche mean when he said that Dostoevsky was the only person who ever taught him anything about psychology? Nietzsche meant that Dostoevsky was tuned into the irrationality and even madness of human behavior. The crux of Nietzsche's philosophy was that humans tend not to behave in order to increase their own well-being and happiness. In fact, humans often act against their self-interest. They have deep-seated psychological drives which determine their actions which have little to do with rationality or happiness.

Sigmund Freud took this tenet of Nietzsche's philosophy and ran with it. He essentially turned this philosophical idea of Nietzsche's and Dostoevsky's and made it into the "scientific"—and here I put "scientific" in quotes—practice of psychoanalysis. Indeed, Freud was so indebted to Nietzsche, that he once remarked that "I had to stop reading Nietzsche, or else I would discover that there was nothing new left for me to say." This idea, that we have forces and drives inside us which determine how we behave, Freud would call the "unconscious"—a word which, now, is simply part of everyday speech. We have now lived for over a century since Freud's writings, and so the idea of the "unconscious" may not seem earth-shattering to us. But at the time, it was a kind of revolution in thought.

Imagine a world in which the Earth is at the center of the universe, and all the heavenly bodies orbit around the Earth. Now imagine that all of the science which states that humans are descendants from apes and chimpanzees does not exist. Now, finally, imagine that you are master of your thoughts and emotions, that everything you think or do is because you "want" to do so. This imaginary world is now a lost world. Yet, just a handful of centuries ago, this was our conception of the world. Indeed, this conception was quite fitting and flattering to the human ego, which is probably why it lasted for so long. Yet, these three premises have since been undermined and destroyed. Now, quite frankly, I look at an ape and can see quite clearly the distinct resemblance monkeys have with humans. But, for whatever reason, humans were not clued into this until rather recently.

Freud said that the human ego has suffered three cruel blows in the modern period. The first came from Copernicus, who showed that it was not the Earth, but the sun, which was the center of the universe. The second came from Darwin, who showed that humans were not the intended pinnacle of creation, but just another animal among thousands of species. And the third, Freud said, came from himself. Freud showed that we are not even masters of our own house. We are driven by deep unconscious forces which we have no control over.

The parsha for this week, Toldot, has one scene which will cause the reader to scratch his head in absolute bewilderment. In this scene, Isaac travels with his wife Rebecca to the town of Garar where the Philistine king Abimelech is the ruler. Isaac and Rebecca leave Israel because there was a terrible famine. And before arriving to Garar, Isaac tells Rebecca, make sure you tell everyone you are not my wife but rather my *sister*. Otherwise, when they see how beautiful you are, they will kill me and take you. Does this story sound familiar? Isaac's father, Abraham, concocted the exact same plan, not once, but twice. And both times, it failed. Abraham was caught in his lie. Moreover, it *almost* occurred that Sarah was forced to have sex with somebody else. And yet, now Isaac decides to adopt the same plan. Of course, Isaac, like his father, gets

caught. How? Even though he is pretending as though Rebecca is his sister and not his wife, he decides to flirtatiously play and laugh and joke around with her one day in the king's courtyard. The king sees them frolicking around together, and is outraged. He says to Isaac: why did you lie to me and say she was your sister? Someone could have had sex with her.

Here, Isaac is behaving a bit like the man who has a toothache and refuses to go to the dentist. His actions defy rational explanation. He is putting himself and his wife at risk and almost asking to get caught. Why does he do this? We can't know. *He* can't know. The motives lie deep in his unconscious. Maybe, deep down, he wants Rebecca to sleep with another man. Maybe, he wants to show that he could pull off a scheme which his father could not. Maybe he feels like danger is missing from his life. We will never know the real explanation, but whatever the explanation is, it probably has little to do with Isaac's "best interests" and "maximal happiness."

Now, here I would like to say something which might seem to be a contradiction. I have made it seem as though the unconscious is a kind of devious scoundrel deep inside you, which disrupts your hard-wrought *conscious* plans to achieve a happy, balanced, meaningful life. In Dostoevsky's novella, the Underground Man was on the verge of at last finding love and companionship, and yet his unconscious intervened and destroyed this opportunity. Instead of telling Liza he loved her, he basically said, "get the hell out of my apartment, you whore." Yet, in fact, the unconscious, these hidden forces within us, are also trying to *help* us and to *guide* us. Not only that, but often these thoughts and feelings below the surface have far more wisdom than our rational minds.

Let's return again, for a moment, to Dostoevsky's Underground Man. Why did a force inside of him revolt when he was on the cusp of happiness? Or put another way, what is our internal logic behind self-sabotage and self-harm? Often, these forces are trying to protect us from the "risk" of being happy, that is, of being vulnerable, of overstepping our boundaries, of becoming too comfortable. Now, bear in mind, these are deep, deep psychological forces in us, which originated during a time in human, or even ape, history, in which priorities were rather different than they are today. If I may, I would like to give a somewhat crude example. When a person is feeling unconfident and weak, his body posture will reflect this. He will slump his shoulders, stoop, cross his arms. Now, here you might wonder, why would the mind instruct the body to adopt this weak and vulnerable posture? It makes a person appear unattractive, frail, and even undesirable. Yet, and admittedly this is largely my own speculation, there was probably a time in which, a person—or perhaps, an ape—would be making a grave mistake if he took on strong body language. If he or she tried to assert himself to a more powerful ape or person through strong body language, he or she would have been pummeled to the ground, put in his place, as it were. So, through evolution, our mind and bodies decided that it is actually to our benefit to *look weak* when we *feel weak*. Yet today, there is rarely a situation in which bad, weak posture works to our benefit in society. So it is on us, as it were, to overcome our anciently formed urges which, thousands of years ago, worked to protect us, but which now do us harm. The Underground Man, for example, ought to have challenged his impulse to self-sabotage rather than succumbed to it.

But sometimes, as already mentioned, these ancient, unconscious forces are those which continue to guide us in the proper direction. Today we may call this "emotional intelligence," or having a "gut feeling." Above, I asked how often we have said things or done things which caused us to look back and ask, what the hell was I thinking? But I would imagine there are other times in which the opposite occurred. Where you said something or did something without

“intending to” and then looked back and said, thank God something inside of me unconsciously drove me to that behavior.

This idea was, of course, central to Freud’s philosophy. It was in his 1901 work, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, which expounded Freud’s theory that unconscious forces determine our everyday behavior. This was also, moreover, the book which propelled Freud to international stardom. Freud argued that, throughout the course of our day, we are constantly making mistakes which we cannot explain to ourselves. This phenomenon occurs most famously in the “Freudian slip,” in which we are in conversation, and we mean to say a particular word, and yet another word comes out instead. This seems, on the surface, to be an accident, but it is actually revealing of our innermost thoughts which we try to suppress. These “Freudian slips” are not limited to speech. Sometimes, we may be walking or driving somewhere and get lost and end up somewhere completely different from where we intended. Typically, we would think: how stupid of me to get lost like this. But actually, according to Freud, your mind simply made a decision about where you really wanted to go without alerting you that the decision had been made.

Toward the end of this week’s parsha, Toldot, we see in the figure of Isaac how he lets his unconscious guide his decision-making. More importantly, Isaac actually makes the right decision by letting his unconscious mind do the work for him. Isaac, of course, has two sons— Jacob and Esau. They are twins, but Esau came out of the womb first, making him the older of the two. Accordingly, he has the right to inherit his father’s legacy and to become the founder of the Hebrew nation. In terms of fitness for this mighty task, however, Jacob far outshines his brother Esau. If Esau were around today, he would be a jock, or a gym rat, or a meathead. He is a bit clueless, and his favorite things to do are hunt and eat. Jacob, by contrast, is, well, he is Jacob. He is intelligent, sensitive, brave, sophisticated, and responsible. One day, when Esau is out hunting, Rebecca tells Jacob to disguise himself as Esau so that he, Jacob, can get Isaac to give him his blessing and his legacy. Rebecca knows the superiority of Jacob to Esau, and wants to ensure that the succession falls into the right hands. Isaac, by now an old man, is blind, so he cannot see the son to whom he will give his blessing. The wily Rebecca instructs her son Jacob to put on Esau’s jacket and to put fur on his hands and his neck so that he will feel “hairy” to Isaac. Esau, it goes without saying, was by far the more *hairy* of the two brothers.

What follows is a kind of tragic-comic scene in which Jacob enters his father Isaac’s quarters and Isaac, unable to see, feels his son with his hands to determine whether it is really Jacob or Esau. Jacob lies and says he is Esau. But Isaac remains skeptical. He says, “come closer, my son, and let me see if you are really Esau.” Isaac then says, “well, you have Jacob’s voice, but you have Esau’s hairy hands.” Isaac ponders for a moment, then asks again, are you *really* Esau? *Really*? Yes, yes, Jacob replies. I am Esau. Good enough for me, Isaac concludes. He then gives Jacob his blessing promising him that he will be the heir to the Hebrew nation. In the next scene, Esau comes in, late to the party as it were, and asks Isaac for his blessing. Isaac is shocked. But I thought I just gave you my blessing? Oh, that was Jacob, *whoops*, sorry, Esau. No Hebrew nation for you.

All of this is, of course, done with a nod and a wink. The Torah is written such that it is obvious that, unconsciously, or perhaps even consciously, Isaac *knew all along* that he was giving his legacy over to Jacob and not to Esau. Are you really Esau? Really? Come on. Yet, he had to *pretend* to himself that he was blessing the first-born, Esau. Otherwise, he would be breaking with protocol, so to speak. But in the end, his unconscious knowledge that it must be Jacob and not Esau who would inherit the nation, is what determined his decision-making.

Isaac's blindness is also, I believe, rather symbolic. We are all a bit blind as to how we behave, what choices we make, what forces determine our decisions. We like to believe that we can just use deductive reasoning and critical thinking to come to the right conclusion. But often our emotions and unconscious can better guide us. I do not think there is a simple answer as to which "voice" we should listen to. Sometimes we should heed our gut feeling, but sometimes our emotions are grounded in superstition and irrational fears which we should work to conquer. It's important, however, to add as many internal advisers to our psyche as possible, rather than to just obey our immediate thoughts. One way to accomplish this is through meditation.

It is no secret that Americans have a tendency to overeat. This drive to "stuff oneself" is not just the way things are, but rather a deeply-rooted part of American culture. It has to do with the American, capitalistic ethos, to maximize pleasure. More food equals more utility equals more pleasure, so continue until the pleasure ends. It also has to do with the American ethos of working relentlessly to complete a task. To leave a plate with food still on it is unamerican. You failed to achieve your goal and with more work—i.e., more eating—you could have gotten there. Finally, and this may be the most malignant, the American ethos is hyper-rationalistic. We are taught to think only with our minds and thoughts and not with, say, our bodies and emotions. American culture is, obviously, highly capitalistic. The part of ourselves which knows how to *maximize* is not our bodies or our emotions, but instead our minds. In a highly capitalistic culture, the mind and rationality are prized far above the body or the emotions.

Before I began meditating, when I would eat, eventually I would reach a point in which I probably should have stopped. But the mind was still shouting, please send me more deliciousness, more pleasure, more completeness, and I would always dutifully heed this command. Yet, I noticed that the more I meditated and did yoga, the more I began to hear from other "internal advisers," if you will, when I would eat. Through meditation, I was awakening my unconscious, my emotions, my inner wisdom. Now, when I am deciding whether to take another bite, or slice, or portion, my thoughts may say "eat," but then my body decides to weigh in. My body tells me, my body insists, please don't put any more food into me, I've had enough.

It is so critical that we cultivate in ourselves the ability to hear this "other voice," this other beneath-the-surface influence. It will guide you, not only with eating, but with all decisions. Our capitalistic and Westernized culture has trained us to suppress this voice so thoroughly that we simply ignore it and tune it out unthinkingly. But this ability cannot be cultivated by simply telling yourself to listen to your body and emotions more. Your rational mind and the wisdom of your body and emotions speak different languages. You cannot your mind to talk to your body. The body must speak for itself. How do you cultivate these other internal advisers? Through yoga and meditation, not through reason. Through yoga and meditation, you will slowly and gradually bring these profound internal guides out of their long cultural slumber to the forefront of your consciousness.