

Episode 25 Shemini

When I was an undergraduate in college, I took an introduction to poetry course. The course was taught by a young professor, a young poet. Even though he was a young professor, perhaps in his mid to late thirties, he was already quite famous. I know this because during one of our seminars, members of the press came to photograph our professor while he was teaching.

With this particular professor, you got the feeling right away that you were dealing with someone exceptional, perhaps a genius. I don't know how exactly he gave off this vibe. Obviously, the fact that he was a famous professor helped. But it was more than that. He was eccentric in a way that geniuses tend to be. When other students read their poetry aloud in class, he would laugh at the most unexpected lines from the poem. It was not a cynical or mocking laugh, but rather a good-natured and encouraging laugh. This professor saw something humorous in the poem that no one else saw, perhaps not even the student who had written it. Before each class, the professor would bring exactly two cans of ice-cold Pepsi to class and place them side-by-side in front of him. Just before speaking, he would crack one open and take a long sip. [Pepsi can]. By the end of class, both cans would be finished.

Occasionally, he would read his own poetry in class. Even though he was very muscular and had a strong frame, when he read poetry, his voice became almost effeminate. He read like a kind of traveling bard, practically singing the words of his poems than reading them. It was clear, by the way he read, that he was intimately connected with poetry at a dimension that us undergraduate students could only dream of.

But one day, something strange happened. The professor didn't come to class. This was about halfway through the semester. Instead, one of his graduate students came to teach instead. This graduate student, by the way, was equally eccentric and gifted, although significantly less famous. I thought it was just a one-time thing, that our professor would be back the next week. But he didn't come back. In fact, he never came back. He just kind of disappeared. Instead, this poor graduate student had to teach us for the rest of the semester, although I will say she did a very good job.

No one ever explained to us what happened to our professor. The graduate student just picked up teaching the class where it left off. No one ever asked her, at least not publicly, what had happened to our professor.

Obviously, I couldn't help but ask myself where my professor had gone off to. But I didn't have enough information. I knew he probably didn't die, as that would be the kind of thing which would get announced. But that still left open hundreds of other possibilities. Perhaps he quit, maybe he was having marital problems, maybe he had been struck by the muse and had to move to an island somewhere to write his masterpiece, maybe he had been arrested—who knows? Who knew? But despite these endless hypotheses, I did have my own suspicion as to what had happened to him. I thought to myself: he probably went crazy. After all, he was obviously a kind of wild artistic genius, who saw deeply into the mysteries of life in a way few others could. And by this point in my college education, I had read about enough brilliant thinkers and artists who bordered on insanity and eventually lost their minds. So, this was my theory. It seemed to make the most sense.

Well, one day after poetry class had ended for the day, I walked out with another student. We were walking across the campus and talking about our intro to poetry course. Finally, I decided to bluntly ask her: "Do you have any idea what happened to our professor?" My friend

answered: “I’m not sure. But I think he might have gone insane.” “Really?” I asked. “Yeah,” she said. Well, that was all I needed to hear. For me, the case was closed. I decided that our professor had tragically gone insane, and that was the end of that.

A couple of years later, long after I had forgotten about this intro to poetry course, I decided to do a google search on the professor, to check up on him, as it were. Fortunately, I saw that he was back teaching poetry at the university. I was happy to see he had found his way back from wherever he had gone off to, and that I didn’t need to worry about him anymore. [Pepsi can].

We often say that humans are creatures of storytelling. That is, we like to hear and to tell stories. But, in fact, it actually goes much deeper than that. Not only do humans *like* stories, “stories” are how our minds process reality. Our brains are constantly on a kind of mission to connect the dots of our external experiences to create a narrative, a beginning, middle, and end, to the limited information we are given.

Objectively, all I knew was that one day my poetry professor stopped coming to class. I had no information as to what happened to him. Yet, my mind was not content to let the dots remain unconnected. My mind needed to give an ending to the story of my poetry professor. So, what did it do? It took the limited data it had—that he was eccentric, that he was a poet, that another student said she’d heard he’d gone crazy—and reached a conclusion. But the truth is that I really have no idea what happened to my poetry professor. All I can say with certainty is that one day he just never showed up for class again.

This example which I have given is a rather colorful and dramatic one. It may seem to be a kind of isolated incident. But, in fact, we are telling ourselves stories *all the time*. As I stated, our minds are absolutely *dying* to piece together limited information into a narrative fabric. Our minds are like the editor of a newspaper, screaming at her writers. Get me a story! We need a story! Our minds cannot help but behave this way.

There is a philosophical explanation for why our minds behave this way. Immanuel Kant was the philosopher to make the discovery that our minds are actively shaping the world rather than passively receiving it. This branch of philosophy is known as epistemology. Epistemology theorizes about what our minds can “know” about the world. Kant’s epistemology was responding to the epistemology of the Scottish philosopher David Hume. Hume was an empiricist. The empirical school of epistemology believed that all which could be known about the outside world is that which was directly experienced by the senses. This was also known as the “tabula rosa” or “blank slate” theory. Hume said that we essentially are born knowing *nothing* about the world, but that through trial-and-error and accumulated experience, we come to figure out how things work. Nevertheless, we can never state anything about the world with certainty; all we can say is that: each time we have experienced the world, it has behaved this way. Here is Hume in one of his most devastating and smart-ass moments. He said that we can’t know with certainty that when one billiard ball strikes another billiard ball, the first causes the second to move. All we can say is that every time we have seen one billiard ball strike another, the second has moved in the opposite direction. But it could be that one day, we strike one billiard ball against another and they both transform into chickens and do a little dance.

Kant was shaken by the idea that the *mind* cannot intrinsically *know* things about the world without experiencing them and seeing them. Kant *detested* the doubt and skepticism inherent in Hume’s empiricism. He *detested* this idea that the mind was in the dark about the world, and that the mind needed experience and input to hold its hand as it grasped in vain for definitive conclusions.

Yet, Kant had a kind of epiphany which would shatter Hume's theory of empiricism. Moreover, Kant's discovery would revolutionize not only philosophy, but also psychology, cognitive science, morality, and dozens of other fields. What was this epiphany? Kant would refer to it as his *Copernican Revolution*, alluding to the Polish astronomer Copernicus, who discovered that it was not the sun which revolved around the Earth, but the Earth which went around the sun.

What was this epiphany? Kant realized that the mind is not separated from the world, but rather that they are working continually in harmony with each other. Kant rejected the idea of the empiricists, that the mind is simply a blank slate to be filled with data. Kant saw that our mind is structured so as to take the input from the outside world and then process it and categorize it into absolute knowledge. That the mind is in a continual process of *synthesizing* and *mediating between* inner and outer worlds. If you think about it, this should be obvious. Imagine children running and jumping and climbing together on a playground. Their minds absorb the dimensions of the space, the length of the bars, the slope of the slide, the width of the see-saw, their individual and respective weights, even the pull of gravity. Children size up the playground, and then interact with it. They don't need to get out measuring tape and rulers and compasses to know where to place their hands, which bars to grab onto, how much to rock their legs on the swing set. Put another way, they *know things about the playground* intuitively or, as Kant would say, *a priori*—without having to experience it first. But it is the faculties of their minds which allows them to assess the playground. Their minds view the playground, and then *process* the playground for the children, so they can successfully romp and frolic around on it.

But our minds are doing this all the time, round-the-clock, as it were. Our minds are programmed to take the limited empirical data that we have and to form vast webs of connections and deductions from this knowledge. The mind and the world are in a kind of eternal elegant waltz with one another. The mind is like a painter and the world is like paint. The painter is being continually thrown paint and then transferring it onto a canvas to create a picture. The painter or the mind simply does this effortlessly and naturally. With mere paint and a paintbrush, vast and colorful canvases are created.

Kant would call his theory *transcendental idealism*. The mind and the world work together in *harmony* to *transcend* the limits of each individually. But Kant would acknowledge that *transcendental idealism* also has its downside. Our minds are given a *limited* set of data. And then, like master weavers or seamstresses, our minds spin and weave this data together for form a full picture or story. Yet even though the mind *transcends* the data it is given, that doesn't mean that this *transcendence* will give us an *objective* and *absolute* view of the external world. The picture the mind paints is *limited* to the mind's own subjectivity. It is *limited* and *constrained by* and *distorted by* the mind's own biases, the mind's own vantage point, the mind's own predilections. The picture the mind gives us is, then, only *subjectively* true. It is only true *for the beholder*.

You can see, then, that Kant's theory presents us with a double-edged sword. It is wonderful that the mind can *transcend* the empirical data it receives. It is wonderful that the mind can know *more* about the outside world without having to be spoon-fed every individual piece of data and fact. But the downside is that the mind, in rushing to make connections and tell itself stories, may—no, certainly *will*—construct a picture which is a distorted and pathetic imitation of the thing in itself, of reality as it *really* is. It is as though our minds are an incredible set of glasses, which can zoom in on the world to know more about it than the facts we are given. But these glasses are tinted. They are, say, tinted blue. Even though we can see more with the

glasses, we see everything through this *blue tint*. The world does not really have this *blue tint*, but it seems that way to us, because of our own biases and perspectives. Most frighteningly, we don't *know* that our glasses have this tint. To us, our glasses seem clear.

For activities like running around on the playground, it is great that our minds can actively connect the dots without checking each piece of data. And yet, in other areas of life, our brains' impulse to *transcend* the data we receive can, in fact, be quite unhealthy, even dangerous. Our brains usually get it right when it comes to matters of depth perception or cause-and-effect. But our brains can often be rather off-the-mark when it comes to matters of psychology and human interaction.

We are hardwired to *transcend* the information we are given and to weave it into a story. Now, at first glance, this would seem to be an endearing quality of the human animal. We are all like small children being tucked into bed as we gleefully squeal over our parents' bedtime story. But the truth is that there is usually very little which is *cute* or *endearing* when one tells oneself a story. The stories we tell ourselves are usually not sweet and childlike bedtime stories, but rather more like traumatic horror films.

Shakespeare's tragedy, *Othello*, for example, tells the story of the Moorish general Othello and his bride Desdemona. Othello is the general of the Venetian army and his wife, Desdemona, is a young, fair-skinned Venetian. Othello himself is a dark-skinned Moor and is therefore an outsider among this army of Italians, even though he is the general. It is not an accident that Shakespeare sets up the story so that Othello is a dark-skinned Moor, and Desdemona is a fair-skinned Italian. Othello's assistant is Iago, who is bitterly jealous over his master's success. But Iago senses an opportunity. He has a sixth sense that Othello is a bit insecure over whether his wife Desdemona really loves him. He senses that Othello feels insecure that he is an outsider, a Moor, dark-skinned. Iago decides that he will bring about Othello's downfall. Iago's plan is to convince Othello that Desdemona is having an affair with Cassio, Othello's loyal and devoted servant.

But Iago has just one problem in his scheme. None of this is true. Desdemona is not having an affair with Cassio. Desdemona loves Othello and doesn't care what his skin color is or where he is from. Yet, these obstacles do not stop Iago. He carefully places thoughts and tiny pieces of "evidence" in Othello's mind. Little by little, Othello becomes convinced that Desdemona is cheating on him with Cassio. Did you notice Cassio and Desdemona going for an afternoon stroll together yesterday? Did you notice Desdemona's handkerchief in Cassio's chambers? All of these doubts accumulate in Othello's evermore deranged mind. At the end of the play, Othello is so enraged, paranoid, and persuaded, that he strangles Desdemona to death. Shortly thereafter, Othello commits suicide.

Othello's mind, then, took this *neutral* data from the outside world and used it to construct a *story*. Othello's mind would not allow him to simply take the neutral data for what it was—just unimportant happenings, insignificant comings-and-goings. Instead, Othello's mind decided that it must connect the dots and form a narrative. But this was a terrifying and ultimately deadly narrative. Othello did not see Cassio and Desdemona walking together and think, "Oh, look at that, my beautiful wife and my captain are taking an afternoon stroll. Isn't that nice. I would bet they are talking about me and how loyal they are to me." No, instead Othello saw them walking and thought, "Is Desdemona having an affair? Is Cassio a traitor?" The reason Othello constructed the story in this way is because of his own insecurities, because of the *tinted* glasses with which he saw the world. But tragically, Othello didn't know his glasses were *tinted*. He truly believed that everything he *thought* to be true *was* true.

In the parsha for this week, we encounter once again Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu, whom I discussed in episode twenty on dramatic irony. In chapter ten of Leviticus, we read of how Nadab and Abihu offered to God "alien fire" / *aish zarah*, which God had not commanded them to do. The next verse reads that "fire came forth from God and consumed them, thus they died before God." Now, we do not know exactly what happened here. Our minds want to jump to conclusions. But, as usual, the Torah is minimalist in its details and clues. However, obviously they did something very bad, as God felt it necessary to execute them. Moreover, it seems that they were engaging in some kind of pagan worship inside the *Mishkan*, as evidenced by the phrase "strange fire" or "alien fire." And if one crime ensured your death sentence in the Torah it was pagan worship. The corpses of the two brothers must then be dragged out of the tent by their tunics.

Moses needs to comfort Aaron. He doesn't give Aaron the hackneyed line that mourners hear over and over again at funerals: "I'm sorry for your loss." Rather, Moses says something a bit different to his older brother. Moses, it seems, tries to put a positive spin on the bizarre deaths which have just occurred. He tries to cheer up his brother. He says to Aaron that "This is what God meant when He said: Through those near to Me I show Myself holy, and gain glory before all the people." In short, Moses says to Aaron, the death of your sons was somehow *worth it*, as it allowed God to demonstrate his holiness before the Israelite people. This seems to be a kind of "silver lining" consolation or "it all works out for the best" argument. Moses wishes to attach a judgment and a narrative to the events which have occurred. He wishes to make it into a *story*, to rationalize *why* it needed to happen.

Aaron's response to his younger brother's consolation is rather fascinating. In English, the text reads as follows: "And Aaron was silent." And Aaron was silent. Here, Aaron seems to take a stand against Moshe's attempt to *enlarge* and *aggrandize* the events. Aaron wishes to say, No. I'm not going to weave these events into a *story*. I am going to simply observe them, to process them *objectively*, without attaching a plotline or a moral to them.

Kant did a victory lap when he showed that Hume was wrong, that our brains can *know* more about reality than the mere empirical data we receive. But it may be that Hume was, in fact, the wiser of the two philosophers. Hume advocated a kind of relentless skepticism of the outside world, to refrain from too quickly drawing inferences, jumping to conclusions, forming judgments. Kant wished to say: look how wonderful it is that our minds are storytelling machines. Hume, by contrast, wanted to say: *don't* let your mind tell you stories. *Don't* be so quick to connect the dots. Drop your opinions, judgments, inferences. Because you could be wrong. Indeed, imagine how much better off Othello would have been, had he approached reality from a Humeian rather than Kantian perspective.

The quintessential teaching of mindfulness is to continually remind ourselves to *drop* the story. Mindfulness teaches us to continually resist the temptation to connect the random pieces of data. Instead, mindfulness teaches us to be *aware* of what we are perceiving, but to not label it as good or bad. Aaron's silence in the face of the death of his two sons indicates a kind of mindful approach. This set of facts could be interpreted from such an array of perspectives. Aaron could have viewed it as *just*; he could say, my sons were idol worshipers and necromancers, and therefore it is only fitting that God killed them. Or he could say, what a tragedy this is; I lost my two sons; how cruel it was for God to have killed them just for playing with "strange fire" in the temple. Then there are an array of ways in which Aaron could have viewed himself. He could see himself as a bad father, for raising two sons who would so defy God. But, he still has two other sons, Eleazar and Ithamar, who are seemingly perfectly-behaved. Aaron, then, has the

choice, as to which narrative he wishes to tell himself. But instead, Aaron seems to just remain silent, to mindfully observe the situation without turning it into an enticing story.

But in the original Hebrew, the text has an added meaning. In Hebrew, the text reads “Vayidom Aharon.” According to the great Jewish philosopher Maimonides, this verb “Vayidom” does not just mean “was silent.” It is better translated as “ceased” or “halted.” Maimonides interprets this to mean that Aaron had been crying, but that he then *became* silent. Under this interpretation, Moses can be said to have snapped Aaron out of his sadness and mourning.

This translation completely *changes* the story. If we read the text as saying “Aaron was silent,” then Aaron becomes a kind of mindful stoic, letting thoughts and emotions pass without attaching unnecessary importance to them. Yet, if we read the text as saying “Aaron became silent,” then Moshe’s strategy was effective. Aaron did not simply *drop* the story—rather, he told himself a *new* story, a story which would make himself feel better and would bring justice to the situation.

Shakespeare once had Hamlet bemuse that “nothing is in itself good or bad, but thinking makes it so.” In fact, this line of thinking is much more ancient than Shakespeare’s Renaissance England. The Stoics of Ancient Rome made this viewpoint the cornerstone of their philosophy. The philosopher Epictetus said, for example, that we take pride in so many aspects of our lives which we really should get no credit for. If we have a beautiful horse, for example, we feel proud. Epictetus says: it’s the horse that is beautiful, not you. Or if we have beautiful hair, we take credit for that. Epictetus would say: it’s your hair that’s beautiful, not you. It’s your genes which should get “credit” for the hair—not you. The one thing Epictetus said we should take credit ourselves for is how we interpret our “impressions” of the outside world. If we can form and shape impressions so that they strengthen us rather than make us weaker, then we have accomplished something which is all our own. For that, we can take credit. This philosophy of thought is more or less the exact *equivalent* of that preached by modern-day psychologists. These therapists advocate to their patients to relentlessly question their thoughts, to see how their mind *distorts* data, and to *shape* impressions so that the mind is not burdened by the horror stories we have a knack for telling ourselves.

This mantra is encapsulated in the writings of Epictetus. He discusses the “wand of Hermes” which “turns everything it touches into gold.” Epictetus writes, “I have a bad neighbor—bad, that is, for himself. For me, though, he is good: he exercises my powers of fairness and sociability ... The wand of Hermes promises that ‘whatever you touch will turn to gold.’ For my part, I can say, ‘bring what challenge you please and I will turn it to good account: bring illness, death, poverty, slander, a judgment of death: they will all be converted to advantage by my wand of Hermes.’ Everything you throw at me I will transform into a blessing, a boon—something dignified, even enviable.”

So, the question is: which perspective did Aaron adopt? Did he observe the death of his two sons passively and mindfully, refusing to judge it or emotionally react to it? Or did he, instead, tell himself a *new story*, turning this apparent “tragedy” into gold? Moreover, which approach should we embrace in our lives? Telling ourselves the stories we wish to hear, or dropping the story altogether?

While these two translations “Aaron was silent” and “Aaron *became* silent” seem to be at odds with each other, I would argue that, in fact, they are one and the same. When we refrain from telling ourselves a *story*, we are, in a sense, guaranteeing that we are living in the present moment. Stories inevitably imply, as Aristotle would say, a beginning, middle, and end. And

beginning, middle, and end, all dissipate when we live in the present and refuse to allow our minds to jump back and forth over segments of time.

As I discussed earlier, when we leave our minds to their own devices to connect events of the outside world, we don't get a heartwarming children's bedtime story, but instead a kind of nightmarish horror film, in which our deepest insecurities and fears are brought to the surface. This is what happened to Othello when he tried to tell *himself* a story. By contrast, if we can let reality be as it is, not judging it, not presuming to weave it together, a strange and paradoxical phenomenon occurs. A story will *emerge*. But it will be the story we want to tell ourselves, it will be the story Moses tells Aaron, it will be the story turned into gold by the wand of Hermes. In short, and put somewhat crudely, if we stop thinking, we will think the way we want to think.. If we read carefully Moshe's words to Aaron, we see that, in fact, they are not at all trying to put a pathetic silver lining on the death of his sons or trying to impatiently shake Aaron out of his doldrums. Instead, they serve as a kind of poetic paradox which fuse together a recasting of the story along with a *letting go* and *letting be* of the events. These cryptic lines, "Through those near to Me I show Myself holy, And gain glory before all the people," seem to hover on the edge between *attaching* a positive narrative to the events *and to* allowing the events to be so *mysterious* and *unknowable* that the only appropriate response is to stand back and observe mindfully. This is not a contradiction but rather a synthesis. When we mindfully observe, the positive narrative arises organically. This is how Aaron, paradoxically, "was silent" and "*became* silent" in the same breath.