

Episode 33 Shilach Lecha

The American humorist Jack Handey is well-known for his absurd, surrealist one-liners, known as “Deep Thoughts by Jack Handey.” These one-liners were featured on SNL throughout the nineties, with Jack Handey himself reading them.

Here are a few of my favorites. “Before you criticize someone, you should walk a mile in their shoes. That way, when you criticize them, you are a mile away from them and you have their shoes.” Or: “I can picture in my mind a world without war, a world without hate. And I can picture us attacking that world, because they’d never expect it.” Or: “Do you know what happens when you slice a golf ball in half? Someone gets mad at you. I found this out the hard way.”

Hopefully you found some of those at least mildly funny.

I will give you one more of Handey’s deep thoughts. He says: “Dad always thought laughter was the best medicine. Which I guess is why several of us died of tuberculosis.”

Yet, could it be that in this instance, “Dad” was *right*?

Could laughter be the best medicine? Well, let’s not get carried away. If I had tuberculosis, there is a long list of medical treatments I would want to go through before trying out laughter. Obviously, laughter doesn’t cure diseases or illnesses as well as scientific medicine can.

Yet, having said that, Western medicine has become so fixated on treating illnesses through science that other remedies have been lost. Not only have they been lost, but they are now mocked. If you tell a doctor that laughter is good for your health, they will likely laugh at you, which is no small irony.

But let’s think about what actually happens when you *laugh*. Your body releases stress. Pleasant and warm feelings rush through into your face. You smile. You let go. In short, a major physiological change inside of you occurs. Now, let’s say we have two people, let’s call them Karl and Georg. Karl is named after Karl Marx, who actually was known for letting out uproarious, jolly laughter rather often. Georg is named after Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who, so far as I can surmise, was kind of a stiff—and who also died young. Karl is experiencing this physiological change of laughter regularly, over the course of years. Georg, meanwhile, can’t remember the last time he laughed—it was months ago. I would wager that Karl’s body and health will be much rewarded for this daily laughter, in contrast to Georg, who never laughs. Perhaps after enough years of not laughing, Georg will find himself with tuberculosis. Laughter would have been for him the best medicine. Meanwhile, Karl will have the last laugh.

For most of my life, I have had regular access to dogs. My family always had a dog or I had my own dog. Yet, since living in Berlin, I haven’t had a dog. I am convinced that as a result, my emotional health has suffered. How do I know this? Because when I see a dog on the street—particularly a pit bull, which is my favorite kind of dog—my entire emotional state changes. I smile, my face softens, feelings of love and warmth bubble up within me. Imagine, I think to myself, if I had my own pit bull. I would be enjoying those feelings all the time. Certainly, that would be good for my health, even if no scientific study has proved this, even if Western medicine would scoff at this notion.

In the parsha for this week, *Shelach*, Moses and the Hebrews are on the edge of Israel—the promised land. Moses sends twelve spies into Israel to scope out the land. Forty days later they come back with their report. First, they say that Israel is, indeed, a land of milk and honey. It is overflowing with figs, grapes, pomegranates and all sorts of plant life. But second, they say,

there is no way in hell we are going to invade this land. We have seen the current occupants. They are massive, intimidating, formidable. If we try to attack we will get destroyed. Our women and children will be taken captive and the men will be slaughtered. The spies spread this message throughout the Hebrew camp. When the other Hebrews hear this report, they begin to cry. Let us go back to Egypt. It would have been better to die there, they say.

The Torah notes that there are two exceptions to this whining. Joshua and Caleb, two of Moshe's officers, react differently. They say: "We have God on our side. If we invade, we will win. God will lead us to victory." When the other Hebrews hear Joshua and Caleb talk this way, they murmur among each other and debate stoning Joshua and Caleb to death. Fortunately, this doesn't happen.

Well, when Moshe tells God how terrified the Hebrews are, God reacts as we might expect. He freaks out and tells Moshe he is going to destroy the Hebrews and give Moshe a new people to lead. Moshe, as usual, persuades God not to do this. Nevertheless, God says that because of the lack of faith of the Hebrews, they will never enter the Promised Land of Israel. Instead, they will have to wander in the desert for forty years. Only their children, currently under the age of twenty, will be allowed to enter. God says: You have seen how I brought you out of Egypt with miracles and wonders. You saw how I fed you with manna from heaven. You've seen all the miraculous deeds I have done for you. And now you continue to doubt me?

When the Hebrews hear that they will have to wander for forty years in the desert, they backpedal. Give us another chance, God, they say. Let us attack and conquer this land. We believe in you now. But it is too little, too late. Moshe tells them, *don't* invade. God will not be with you. You will get clobbered. But the Hebrews, stubborn as usual, don't listen to Moshe. They decide to invade the land anyway. And, as Moshe warned them, they are routed. The Torah tells us that God was not with them. Therefore, they had no strength before their enemies, and were routed.

It's an interesting story. I remember reading a commentary on this parsha. The rabbi was Orthodox but also open to secular interpretations. This was the former chief rabbi of England, actually, Rabbi Joseph Hertz. Hertz wrote that the reason why the Israelites needed to wander in the desert for forty years was not because, or at least not just because, God wanted to punish them. Rather, this was the time the Israelites needed to build up an army to defeat the current inhabitants of Canaan. According to Rabbi Hertz, the Israelites suffered a terrible defeat the first time they tried to attack the local Canaanites. They decided to give themselves forty years to build up a new army so they would be sure to achieve victory. This explanation obviously takes some of the credibility away from the Torah's narrative. It takes away the theological story which the Torah gives us, in which God is behind every outcome. Instead, it gives a historical and political explanation, in which God plays no role. The forty years of wandering was just military strategy—not divine punishment.

A few years ago, I found myself at a Shabbat dinner in Be'er Sheva with a very religious family. I was doing volunteer work for the family by serving as a kind of "big brother" to their ten-year old son. Once a week, I would go to their home and hang out with the kid. Sometimes, I would take him to the park or to the museum. I tried to teach him a bit of English. And so forth. They were a very kind, traditional, orthodox family. Well, the father was kind enough to invite me to Shabbat dinner that Friday evening.

It just so happened that the Parsha for that week none other than *Shilach*—this week's parsha. The conversation was getting a bit stale so I decided to bring up the parsha for this week. I brought up the story I just told you all. In between bites of challah, I asked: how about what

happened to the Israelites in the desert this week? The father responded: yes, they doubted God. That's why they had to wander in the desert the next forty years. If they only had believed in God's power, they would have won the initial battle. They would have gone into Israel straightaway. I nodded. But then I mentioned that I had heard another explanation. I felt comfortable asking him about this other explanation as I had learned it, after all, from the former Chief Rabbi of England Joseph Hertz. I said to the father: I read once that the Israelites needed forty years to wander in order to build up their army. It was a strategic military decision. After they had been routed the first time, they retreated in order to rebuild their strength.

At this point, the father of the household raised his voice a little. He said to me: No, that is not the reason. The reason the Hebrews had to wander for forty years is because it was the will of God. They doubted his power. They doubted his strength. God only wanted people to enter Israel who believed fully in his miraculous power. It had nothing to do with military strategy.

I nodded and went back to humbly eating my Moroccan fish.

What did I think about my host's explanation? You can probably imagine. I thought, this guy is a little *too* into God. Does everything always have to be about God? Wouldn't it make more sense that the Hebrews lost the first battle because their army was too weak? And then forty years later, they conquered the land of Israel because they had built up their military? But no, the father of the household refused to read outside the lines or between the lines of the Torah.

Yet, now several years later, I think that my Israeli host was correct, and I was the stubborn one. I don't necessarily think that the Hebrews lost because God, watching from the sky, decreed that they should lose because they hurt his feelings by doubting him. However, if we look at this story more symbolically and less literally, then the entire analysis changes. The truth is that, if you doubt yourself, if you expect failure, if you see yourself as weak, then, well, you're going to lose the battle. By contrast, if you have positive feelings running through you, if you have faith in yourself, if you believe that fate is on your side, you will have a far greater chance of being victorious.

Now, I know this is a cliché. Believe in yourself. Self-fulfilling prophecy. You just gotta have faith. And so forth. But actually, there is much truth behind this cliché, and science as well. What has always distinguished the greatest athletes from their competitors is their unshakeable belief in themselves. If you ever watch Michael Jordan play basketball, you can see in his eyes his supreme confidence that he is going to make the game-winning shot. He simply *expected* to win. He never doubted himself. Nearly all sports historians agree that this is what made Michael Jordan the greatest basketball player, and athlete, to ever play. It was his belief, so to speak, that God was on his side.

If we look at the Israeli defeat this way, then the Israelites really *did* lose because they doubted God. Perhaps when my Israeli dinner host said that they lost because it was God's will, this is what he meant.

Hundreds of scientific studies also reach similar conclusions. In science, we would call this the *placebo* effect. Countless studies have shown the power of placebos to heal people. Placebos are not just placebos; they can be cures. When you *think* the medicine is working, when you believe you are getting *healthier*, you actually do get healthier. By contrast, when you doubt the treatment, when you think of yourself as sick, this scientifically makes you sicker.

This is why, as I discussed earlier, *laughter* scientifically is a kind of medicine. So are relaxation, feelings of joy, feelings of love and warmth, feelings of belonging and connectedness. When you sit and meditate, you send a signal to your body that you are safe and relaxed. Maybe you're not safe and you're not relaxed. But by simply sitting and breathing for fifteen minutes,

you “trick” your body. Your body thinks: well, if this guy is sitting and breathing and doing nothing else for fifteen full minutes, he must be in pretty good shape. I am going to respond to mirror these feelings. Bringing these feelings into your life sends clear messages to the cells in your body. These feelings tell your cells: you are healthy, you are ready to reproduce, you are strong. The more you regularly cultivate these feelings within yourself, the healthier and stronger you will become. Or, put another way, you will be living life with “God” on your side rather than with “God” working against you. This is why it’s important to surround yourself with things you like: with dogs, with your favorite music, your favorite smells, your favorite people, and so forth. These all “trick” your body and mind into believing it is healthy and happy. And by thinking that it is, it actually becomes so. This is why, in short, we all need to go out and get ourselves a dog.

We can apply this same teaching not just to ourselves as individuals but also to the community as a whole. Today, we live in societies which are, for the most part, strong and secure. Although this does seem to be changing. We trust that laws will be enforced, taxes will be paid, citizenship will be respected, and so forth. But it took a very long time for human societies to reach this point. And just as our own health and happiness become threatened when we no longer doubt ourselves, societies at large become very precarious and dangerous places when the “citizens” stop believing in them.

In this week’s parsha, we have not one but two examples of public stonings. One of these stonings goes forward; the other is abruptly aborted. As I mentioned earlier, Joshua and Caleb are almost stoned to death by the Israelite people when they say they want to invade Canaan. Luckily, God and Moshe intervene, and the stoning is aborted. But the point is, this society is ready to *stone* those who fall out of line. The second stoning occurs at the end of the parsha, after God has decreed that the Israelites must wander for forty years in the desert due to their lack of faith.

What happens in this second stoning? The Israelites discover a man from their tribe gathering wood on the sabbath, on Shabbat. This was a violation and desecration of the Shabbat. And if you read the Torah, you see how breaking Shabbat is perhaps the gravest sin imaginable. In the Torah, breaking Shabbat is one-thousand times worse than not eating Kosher food or not eating bread on Passover.

The Israelites take the sabbath-breaker into custody, as they don’t know how to punish him. God makes the punishment very clear: stone him to death. And so, the Israelites do just that. They take him outside the camp, and stone him to death.

What is going on here? What is the Torah trying to tell us? Just: don’t break Shabbat? Yes. But we already knew that. There is something much more profound going on here.

Let’s take a step back and consider the current situation of the Hebrews in the desert. It is, to say the least, not good. The Hebrews are on the verge of mutiny. They no longer trust Moshe, they no longer trust God, they want to go back to Egypt. They have just been dealt a devastating military defeat by the Amalekites and the Canaanites. In short, this is a society on the brink of collapse, on the brink of anarchy.

It is difficult for us moderns who have grown up in liberal democracies to understand these types of societies. We have only known societies with rule of law, with courts of justice, with the right to an attorney. We have never walked outside and thought, hmm, what if the government were to suddenly lose all its power? What if there were no police? No judges? No faith in the state in which we live. We simply expect that criminals will be punished, and we can just go on with our lives.

Yet, I would like to stress that these are all just modern conveniences, modern blessings, which are by no means guaranteed in a society. Moreover, go back a few centuries or millennia, and you will see how rare it was to find a society with rule of law. When there is tenuous, shaky faith in the system, the entire method of punishment changes.

The more stable a society becomes, the more people “buy into” the system, the less urgent it becomes to punish the society’s criminals. The fact is that, today, most of us are law-abiding citizens not out of fear of punishment but just because we can’t imagine any other way of living. Our governments are so stable, laws are so institutionalized, that we follow all the laws without thinking about it. Sure, criminals get punished. But it’s not like I see a man go to jail for, say, stealing a car and then think to myself: “You know, I was going to steal a car today. But now I see what could happen to me if I steal a car. Better go on foot instead.” For this reason, we generally don’t hear too much about criminals being punished in our day-to-day. For this reason, criminals are generally no longer tortured. The government doesn’t need to constantly remind us: this is what could happen to you if you break the law.

It was, sadly, not always this way. Nor will it necessarily always remain this way. In unstable societies, in which the leadership is not trusted, punishment for crimes strives to become the glue which keeps a failing society together. Punishments no longer occur behind closed doors, but rather are public affairs which everyone must know about. Punishments are not designed to *reform* the criminal, to keep him away from everybody else, or even to bring about justice. No. In these failing, fragile societies, punishment becomes the means with which to keep everybody else *in line*. To suppress dissident voices. To keep everyone in a state of fear and obedience. For this reason, punishments must not only be public. They must also be gruesome.

Put another way, this sort of punishment often goes hand-in-hand when a government feels desperate and vulnerable.

Nietzsche would develop this argument in his 1887 work *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Nietzsche writes: “If the power and the self-confidence of a community keeps growing, the criminal law also grows constantly milder. Every weakening and deeper jeopardizing of the community brings its harsher forms of criminal law to light once again.” Nietzsche then writes that it may be possible to one day imagine a society so conscious of its own power and strength that it lets its criminals *go without punishment*. This, for Nietzsche, is “the most privileged luxury a society can have.”

Well, let’s go back now to the Hebrews in the desert. They have just stoned a man to death for breaking Shabbat. But we must look at this stoning within its larger context. The Hebrews, as mentioned, are on the brink of collapse and mutiny. Remember, too, that the Hebrews were ready to stone the military leaders, Joshua and Caleb, before Moshe intervened. These two stonings, one aborted, and one implemented, are obviously parallel stories. There is a sense in which, had *this* man not been stoned, it would not be long before Joshua, Caleb, and even Moshe themselves were stoned.

The Torah is by no means condoning stoning as an adequate punishment for breaking the Shabbat. Indeed, in the very next paragraph after the stoning, we get a lovely and heartwarming passage about how to make sure we don’t forget to keep commandments in the future. We are to wear tefillin, a kind of ribbon around our finger, to remind us. This is how the Torah *would like* us to remember to keep Shabbat. The Torah wishes that we will know not to break Shabbat by looking at a piece of string on our clothes, not by remembering that our neighbor had just been stoned to death. But, the Torah says, the ribbon around our finger just doesn’t cut it when your entire tribe is ready to mutiny.

Say what you will about the Torah, it is, if anything, a book which cannot be accused of being naïve. The stoning of the man gathering wood is not there to show us that we shouldn't break Shabbat. Rather, quite apparently, it is a cautionary tale as to how a society will begin to punish its criminals when people lose faith in the system.

At the beginning of this lecture, I talked about how we as individuals can become healthier by believing in our health, by spreading joy throughout our bodies. The same applies in the aggregate—for communities as a whole. It is, therefore, important that we cultivate confidence regarding the societies in which we live. To prosper as individuals, we must believe in ourselves. And to prosper as a group, we must believe in the purpose and legitimacy of the group as a whole. How do we make our groups healthier, more legitimate places? It means becoming active citizens, forming relationships with other citizens, and educating ourselves on the law and history of our society. This makes the society more robust and legitimate.

Now, here you might think: what if my government sucks? I don't want to strengthen my society, I want to revolutionize it, to metaphorically blow it up and create a new one. I would be the last one to tell you that there is never a time for revolution. The Hebrews themselves, after all, rebelled when they left Egypt. When should we become traitors and when should we stay as patriots? I can't answer this question for you, nor can the Torah. I can't tell you when the time is to shatter your group's or your government's legitimacy in order to found a new one. But what the Torah does tell you is this: if you're going to destroy the system, be ready for the consequences. The aftermath might not be so pretty. In short, if you want to undermine legitimacy, don't be surprised if you start to see public stonings.

Is laughter sometimes really the best medicine? Perhaps we should more often make joy our goal rather than science or politics. If you are having health problems, maybe consider turning to joy as medicine rather than the latest health fad. If you are dissatisfied with your community, maybe consider cultivating joy in that community rather than railing against it.

One person who struggled with belief in himself throughout his life was Beethoven. Aside from suffering long periods of depression and heartache, Beethoven also began to go deaf in 1800, around the age of thirty. As a composer, deafness was, for Beethoven, existence-threatening. The deafness got progressively worse with each year. At first it was just a mild hearing loss, but twenty-five years later, he could hear nothing at all. Beethoven strongly considered suicide around 1802. He wrote a famous letter, the Heiligenstadt Testament, in which he discusses his despair and his longing for suicide. But Beethoven instead decided he would not succumb to despair. He decided that he would triumph over his deafness. He vowed he would fight against it and conquer it. This *heroic* mission Beethoven undertook can be heard in his famous fifth symphony. In this symphony, Beethoven shows how he pulled himself out of the depths of gloom to be triumphant. The symphony begins in the depths of despair. It begins like this This is how Beethoven viewed his deafness initially. As his enemy, as that which could destroy him, as the ultimate *bête noir*. The symphony ends, however, in triumph. Light has defeated darkness. Strength has defeated adversity. I am unstoppable. You can hear all of these sentiments in the symphony's final movement. Indeed, Beethoven's attitude toward his deafness was so pronounced in his music of this period, that the period received its own name. It is called Beethoven's *heroic* period—when his music would be the *hero* and his deafness would be the enemy.

However, toward the end of his life, Beethoven dropped this heroic, militant, me-against-the-world style of music. He stopped creating music which battles and fights and emerges victorious. His final symphony was the ninth. This is by far Beethoven's greatest symphony and

probably the greatest piece of music ever written. And it is sadly a symphony which Beethoven, now fully deaf, could never hear—except, of course, in his mind.

The symphony concludes by putting to music a famous 1785 poem by the German writer Friedrich Schiller. This poem was entitled “Ode to Joy” or “An die Freude” in German. The most famous line from this poem is “Alle Menschen werden Brüder”—all people will become *brothers*. This was Beethoven’s swan song. And we tend to think that Beethoven’s final message was that we should love our fellow citizens and live harmoniously with one another. Beethoven stages a large choir to sing this poem. The general feeling is that Beethoven wished his parting words to be: feel yourself a part of a larger whole, cultivate friendship, love your neighbor. Indeed, Beethoven did wish to impart all of these messages. But we often forget the title of the poem itself: Ode to Joy. Ode to Joy. This is a poem most of all about the importance of being joyful. It is, after all, an *ode to joy*. Beethoven had struggled with deafness for twenty-five years. He had railed against it, he had tried all sorts of medications to combat it, he had written music about subduing it. Now, at the end of his life, he dedicated his final symphony to the concept of *joy*. *Joy*, it seems, was the one thing he had never tried, until now, as medicine. It took him his entire life to finally see that it was *joy* which would save him. With the ninth symphony, it is as though Beethoven wishes to say: don’t make the same mistakes I made. Don’t wait your entire life to finally sing an ode to joy.