

Episode 12 Vayechi

“I think it moved.” [B1] The famous *Seinfeld* character, George Costanza, speaks these words to his friend Jerry, after getting a massage. The masseuse, however, is a man, and the “it” which George is referring to is his penis. While getting a massage from a man, George thinks he might have felt his penis move slightly. How does George react? He does not react calmly. Instead, he allows his thoughts to race out of control. He fears that this is an indication—*proof*—that he may be homosexual. Jerry says to George: “Okay, so what if it moved?” To which George responds: “That’s the sign! The test; if a man makes it move.” Throughout the remainder of the episode, George becomes obsessed with whether, deep down, he may be homosexual and not straight. He begins to interpret all of his interactions through one harrowing question: “Am I gay? Did I just find that man attractive? How can I be sure that I’m not gay?” Toward the end of the episode, he even makes the following remarks to his friends: “Men have been popping into my sexual fantasies. Suddenly, a guy will appear from out of nowhere. I say ‘Get out of here! What do you want? You don’t belong here.’”

What makes this story so humorous is that it is obvious to the audience that George is not a homosexual. Up to this point in his life, George has had dozens if not hundreds of dates with women. Yet, his penis might have slightly moved during a massage from a male masseuse. This somehow *nullifies* and *cancel*s out the thousands of times in George’s life where it was obvious that he was attracted to women and not men. The mere thought “what *if* I am gay and don’t know it?” is so overpowering that George begins to doubt his own sexuality. The thought, we might say, overtakes reality.

But there is another problem going on here. The thought, “What if I am gay, straight, bi, or any other sexual orientation,” is a question which can never be answered *absolutely*. There is no *test* one can take to find out his sexual orientation. You just kind of “know” if you’re gay or if you’re straight. But, in the case of George Costanza, suddenly, just “knowing” or “believing” or “trusting” that he was heterosexual was not sufficient. The 0.0001% doubt began to torment him.

[B2] Now, I would guess that most people who watched this episode probably thought: “Silly George. Always being neurotic. Too bad he can’t just chill out a bit and realize he’s not gay.” But actually, though they may not have realized it, Larry David and Jerry Seinfeld were asking a deep philosophical question here.

The truth is that our worldview is constantly at risk of being shaken and threatened by doubt. There is little in life that we can be absolutely certain about. Does your partner really love you? Really? How can you be sure? This was the problem for Othello and his wife Desdemona. At the beginning of Shakespeare’s play, Othello simply *trusted* and *believed* that Desdemona loved him. But, through the influence of his assistant Iago, Othello allowed doubt to creep in. He became paranoid. By the end of the play, he became fully convinced that Desdemona was cheating on him, even though it was all in his head. He then promptly strangled his wife to death, purely based on a thought he allowed to spiral out of control.

I myself once, now over a decade ago, wrote a novel dealing with this haunting question. In my book, *The Test*, a twenty-one-year old female university student named Marie Weltstern becomes obsessed with the fear that she might have AIDS. The problem for Marie is not that she is at any real risk of having this disease. Rather, her problem is that a person can never really know with absolute certainty if she has AIDS. In Marie’s case, she kisses a guy at a party. The next day, she awakes with the thought, “What if he had blood in his mouth? What if that blood

got into my mouth? What if the guy had AIDS?” She takes the long chain of “what if” thoughts to their most terrifying conclusion. So here you might tell Marie to just get an AIDS test, to “prove” you don’t have AIDS. But, sadly, even medical tests can sometimes give false results. For Marie, the question, “what if I have AIDS?” can never truly be answered. She becomes obsessed with eliminating the 0.001% doubt, instead of choosing to feel at ease with the 99.99% certainty.

Now, here you might think, George Costanza, Othello, Marie Weltstern: they were just batsh*t crazy. They’re just paranoid, neurotic messes. There, but for the grace of God, go I. But the truth is that, as we go throughout our day, we all grapple with similar thought patterns. These “doubting thoughts” are coming in all the time. But most of the time, and for most of us, these thoughts don’t hang around. They just come and go. Maybe I’m gay? Yeah, I guess it’s possible, but I’m not going to think about it for more than a second. Maybe my wife is cheating on me? Yeah, I guess it’s possible, but doesn’t seem very likely. Maybe I have AIDS? Yeah, I suppose there’s a chance, but, yeah, I’m hungry. The thoughts disappear within seconds, just like the waiter in episode 9 “forgot” Joseph as soon as he got out of the dungeon. The problem was not the “chance” or the “risk” that George was gay, that Desdemona was having an affair, or that Marie had AIDS. The problem was merely in the way these characters “thought” about it.

The creators of *Seinfeld* did not explore the full philosophical potential of George’s predicament over his sexuality. Yet, one writer who did masterfully unpack this question was Franz Kafka in his novel *The Trial*. Kafka was a Jewish writer from Prague in the early twentieth century. Because Prague was controlled by the Austrian Empire at the time, Kafka’s mother tongue was German. *The Trial* is considered by many to be one of the greatest novels ever written, certainly one of the greatest of the twentieth century. Yet, it is all-too-often misunderstood.

In *The Trial*, a thirty-year old businessman named Josef K. wakes up one morning to find himself arrested. Yet, this is a very strange and unusual arrest indeed. No crime is specified as to why K. is arrested. The guards who arrest Josef K. tell him that he is still free to live his life as he had been living it before. He is not punished, he is not put in prison. Josef K. even remarks to his guards, “then being arrested isn’t even that bad.” To which one of the guards respond: “We never said it was.” But for K., in fact, even though he can live his life exactly as he had been living it before, being arrested is bad. Actually, it is terrible. It is hell. Why? Not because K.’s reality has changed, but because his thoughts have changed.

Let’s return to the example of the mobster I used as an example in Episode 1 on distinguishing between guilt and shame. Imagine if a mobster were told by two policemen one morning that he was arrested, that he was on trial, but that he could keep living his life exactly as he had been doing so before and that he was not to be punished in any way. How would this Sicilian mobster respond? He would be indifferent. He would say, “As long as I can keep driving my Cadillac, eating fettuccini alfredo, and occasionally knocking off a wise guy, why should I give a f@#* if I’m arrested?”

Josef K., however, responds in the exact opposite way as the mobster. He becomes obsessed with his trial. He hires attorneys, he writes petitions, he appears regularly at court, in the hopes of being at last declared “innocent” by the court. For K., anything less than absolute innocence is insufficient. Even though he is more than welcome to simply go back to living his life, he *chooses* not to. He *chooses* to forego his life so that he can achieve certainty. Just like George, he decides that he would rather *disprove* a doubt which is gnawing at him, than live with the doubt.

This is a rather devastating situation for Josef K. In Episode 0, I talked about early German Romanticism. The early German Romantics struggled with the problem of salvation. That we spend our lives striving to achieve a certain completeness, but this completeness always remains just out of reach. The German Romantics theorized that striving, yearning, moving *is* where completion is to be found. Being *on the way* to salvation is, in itself, salvation.

But for Josef K., and George Costanza, and Marie Welstern, we are given a kind of mirror image of this inspirational and optimistic theory of the Jena Romantics. Josef K. is *also* striving, striving to achieve absolute Truth. But this is a myopic striving, this is a *downward* striving, this is a striving which is sickly rather than healthy. This is a striving which puts life on hold rather than engages fully with life. In Episode 8 and Episode 4, I talked about how, sometimes, opposites are rather closely related. It can be very tricky sometimes to tell the difference between devil and angel, between darkness and lightness, between optimism and nihilism. Josef K. is, then, a mirror image to Moses, he is the evil twin of Moses. Moses never reached his destination of Israel, but it didn't matter, as by always being on the way there, he made himself eternal. Josef K. never got the court's declaration of absolute innocence. In spending his life trying to get this absolution, he committed a kind of symbolic suicide. Josef K. chose to be in a continual state of *dying* while Moses chose to be in a continual state of *living*.

In *Vayechi*, we find Jacob on his death bed. He is speaking to his son Joseph. And Jacob tells Joseph where he would like to be buried. He must be buried in the cave where his fathers were buried, the cave which is in the field of Machpelah, facing Mamre, in the land of Canaan. Joseph responds by saying exactly what we would expect him to: "Of course I will bury you there." But Jacob becomes a bit doubting here. He needs some reassurance. So, he says to Joseph: "Swear to me." At which point Joseph dutifully swears. For Jacob, this is enough. After Joseph's oath, he *trusts* that he will be buried in the right place. But still, we need to ask ourselves: why did Jacob require Joseph to swear? Joseph already said that he would bury Jacob in Canaan. Why did Jacob need him to say it twice?

A similar example of a bit of paranoid uncertainty occurs a few scenes later. Jacob dies. By this point, Joseph has already forgiven his brothers, cried with his brothers, and given his brothers the best land in Egypt. Nevertheless, the brothers begin to get a little neurotic. They allow a "what if?" thought to enter their minds. Here we can directly quote the Torah: "*What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrong that we did him!*" What if I am gay, what if my wife is having an affair, what if I have AIDS? Joseph, of course, does his best to reassure them. The Torah literally says that he reassured them and spoke kindly to them, almost as one would speak to children. Most significantly, unlike with Jacob, the Torah gives no word that the brothers *accepted* Joseph's reassurance. For all we know, they remained *in doubt* and *obsessed* until the end of their days. In the Torah, we witness Jacob accepting the reassurance of Joseph. With the brothers, however, we never get that.

At what point do we choose to live with doubt? At what point do we accept reassurance? At what point do we say "enough!" or the very popular phrase in Hebrew: "maspik!" The "easy" answer to this question is: when it is *reasonable* to do so. When a reasonable person would decide that he or she has enough reassurance, that is the time to say "enough," "maspik." This is actually the fundamental concept of negligence law. Let's say you own a café. One day, it is raining outside, so people are coming into the café and getting the floor wet. As the owner of the café, you have a duty or an obligation to keep the floor dry so that your customers don't slip. Otherwise, you could get sued. At least, this is how it is in America. But the law doesn't require you to be OCD about keeping your café floor dry. You don't need to have a SWAT team of

employees ready to instantly dry up every drop of water that appears on the floor. You just need to take *reasonable* measures to do so. Dry the floor every fifteen minutes or so, do a decent job, that is *enough*, that is *maspik*. The law recognizes that it would be unfair and unworkable for the café owner to have to eliminate all risk down to 0%. The law accepts that, there will always be doubt, that 100% certainty can never be reached.

A similar state of affairs occurs in the Talmud. In Judaism, there are certain foods and food combinations which we are not allowed to eat. Jews are not allowed, for example, to eat milk with meat. Yet, what happens if, hypothetically, you have a giant pot of milk and accidentally a small piece of meat falls in. Do you need to throw out the entire pot of milk, just because this tiny piece of meat made its way in there? The answer is, *it depends*. The Talmud gives the magical ratio of 1 to 60. In Talmud tractate Chullin 98a, the issue of non-kosher eggs is discussed. For various reasons, not all eggs are kosher. What happens if you have sixty eggs and you know that one of them is not kosher? All sixty must be thrown out. But, according to Chullin 98a verse 9, this entire matter changes if you have 61 eggs. Then, the 60 to 1 threshold has been reached. Now, you are allowed to eat all of the 61 eggs, even though there is that one unlucky egg which is totally not kosher. The Talmud recognizes that, in this messy business of life, 100% certainty is not always possible. Sometimes we need to just say “good enough.” And when do we say “good enough”? When it’s *reasonable* to do so. And, for the Talmud, a 60 out of 61 chance is *maspik*.

Yet, you’ve probably already guessed the problem. As I’ve talked about in previous episodes, specifically episode 2 on utilitarianism, reasonableness is a tricky concept. The Talmud may be able to tell us when it is reasonable to eat an egg, but there are tons of other questions where we are left on our own to decide what is *reasonable* and what is not. This is a sad state of affairs for the human mind. How can we, mere humans, be expected to know when we have crossed over into unreasonableness, into being neurotic? Who decides what is reasonable? Moreover, returning to George, would it have helped him to tell him that his fear of being homosexual was not *reasonable*? That he already had *reasonable* reassurance that he was straight? Would it have helped Marie to be more *reasonable* in deciding whether she had enough evidence she didn’t have AIDS?

Sometimes, telling a person to be more reasonable is no more helpful than telling a dog to be more reasonable.

I think that to become more comfortable living with doubt, more strong in the face of doubt, we need to go deeper. We need to go into our emotions, into our bodies, into our mental and physical fitness.

Let’s return to the example of Jacob and his sons for a moment. Jacob was a patriarch, brave, vibrant, charismatic, noble. He wanted Joseph to bury him in Canaan. In this death bed scene, Jacob is depicted in the most heroic light. He speaks courageously, succinctly, and without fear. The only reassurance he needs is a simple oath from Joseph. In the next scene, even though he is on the verge of dying, the Torah tells us that Jacob summons his strength and sits upright in bed.

Contrast Jacob’s attitude with his sons. Whereas Jacob is depicted as a kind of sagacious old lion, the brothers are depicted as scared, weak, pathetic, childish. They ask their brother Joseph: “What if you still hate us? How can we know for sure you have really forgiven us?” Then the Torah describes their gestures, gestures which speak volumes. The Torah reads that the brothers “went to him, flung themselves before him, and said ‘We are prepared to be your slaves.’” The Torah literally uses the word slaves—*avadim*.

In episode four, I talked about Nietzsche's conception of master morality and slave morality. With these parallel scenes of reassurance, we see the attitude of a master in Jacob, and the attitude of slaves in his sons.

At the beginning of this episode, I said how we all have these doubting thoughts experienced by George Costanza, and Marie Weltstern, and even Othello. We all have these crazy "what if?" thoughts. Yet, thankfully, they don't seem to hang around—for most of us, most of the time. Why is it that George worried he was gay, but Jerry was able to laugh at him? Why is it that Othello doubted his wife's love, but Benedick never questioned Beatrice's? Here is a short answer for you: it has nothing to do with whom was being told more frequently to be more *reasonable*.

The reason why Jacob could say "enough" and could say "maspik" after Joseph swore to him to bury him in Canaan is because Jacob was mentally *stronger* and *healthier* than his sons. He is like Mirabeau, who I mentioned in Episode 8. Mirabeau, it is said, never had to forgive anyone because he *forgot* insults seconds after receiving them. Why? Because, as Nietzsche said, he was so overflowing with positive energy that he simply *forgot*. He simply forgot thoughts which, according to Nietzsche, would have eaten away at other, weaker men.

In *The Trial*, when Josef K. is first arrested, a very poignant moment occurs. Josef K. thinks to himself that maybe, maybe this arrest is just a joke. That maybe if he just laughed at the guards, they would laugh with him, and the whole trial would dissolve and disappear in an instant. Yet, Josef K. decides not to laugh. He decides that he should take his trial very seriously. Why doesn't Josef K. just laugh at his trial and laugh at his arrest and simply go on with his life? It is not because he *thinks too much* or because he wants to achieve salvation or because he is obsessed with his own original sin. Actually, the answer is much more simple. He doesn't laugh at his trial because he is too weak to do so. He doesn't have the flowing positive energy which allows him to laugh, to let go, to forget, to live with doubt.

In Western culture, we put far too much emphasis on our thoughts and not nearly enough importance on our emotions, our bodies, our energy. We think that we *feel* stressed because we have stressful *thoughts*. But actually, it is the other way round. We have stressful thoughts because deep in our core we are stressed and are carrying negative energy. Treating the thoughts is treating the symptom, not the cause.

Telling another person to "relax" or "chill out" or "not think so much" is often about as good as telling a dog to chill out.

Fortunately, there are thousands of ways that we can change the energy inside us, so that we can better accept doubt, so that we can view the world as masters rather than as slaves. One thing all of these activities have in common is increasing blood flow in the body. Exercise and yoga, for example, quite literally pump vast quantities of blood to all regions of your body. Acupuncture does the same. Anything that causes stress, by contrast, restricts blood flow and makes your body less able to be infused with positive energy. Stress is, we might say, the greatest accomplice of the slavish mindset.

Sometimes, I go to shake someone's hand and their hand is freezing cold. The blood isn't flowing there. I'm not a doctor, I don't even have my PhD yet. But I would imagine that if your hands are always cold, there's something your body is missing. Before I changed my diet and started doing meditation and yoga, my hands were always cold and my lips were always getting chapped in the winter. Now my hands are never cold and I haven't bought lip balm in years, and I'm in Warsaw as I record this.

Meditation is, of course, a great way to watch your thoughts and to see your doubts as silly and unfounded. But meditation goes much deeper than providing you distance from your thoughts. Meditation heals you on unconscious levels you are not even aware of. When I wake up in the morning and meditate, I am often cold, as I have spent the night sleeping and the blood is not flowing in my body. Yet, when I sit down to meditate, I don't bother putting on a jacket or a blanket. I know that the act of meditating will warm my body. Even though I am just sitting and doing absolutely nothing. Meditation calms the mind and relaxes the body such that all of the passageways in the body open up and allow blood to flow. The very act of sitting and breathing warms you. Bizarrely, just sitting and breathing may one of the best tools to get rid of nagging "what if?" thoughts. When you just sit and breathe, you give your mind the opportunity to think more like Mireabeau, and less like George Costanza.

At the end of Vayechi, Joseph, the seemingly forever young Joseph, dies at age 110. The Torah reads that Joseph "lived to see children of the third generation of Ephraim" and that "the children of Machir son of Manasseh were likewise born upon Joseph's knees." We do not know if Joseph goes to heaven or what will happen after he dies. Moreover, we also can presume that one day all of Joseph's children and grandchildren and great-great grandchildren will die. Yet, the Torah treats this continuation of life through the next generation as itself salvation, as equally good as living eternally in heaven. Joseph, the Torah's Übermensch, is comfortable dying even with *doubts* as to what will happen to him after he dies. He does not need promises. He only needs to see his life continuing on through his descendants. For Joseph, this is "enough."