

## Episode 20 Tetsaveh

Woody Allen's 1975 film, *Love and Death*, begins with the following opening monologue. Try to imagine me reading this, with a Woody Allen accent.

"How I got into this predicament, I'll never know. Absolutely incredible. To be executed for a crime I never committed. Of course, isn't all mankind in the same boat? Isn't all mankind ultimately executed for a crime it never committed? The difference is that all men go eventually, but I go at six o'clock tomorrow morning. I was supposed to go at five o'clock, but I have a smart lawyer. Got leniency."

I've always been a bit fascinated by these lines. Woody Allen draws a distinction between knowing that we will die "one day," and knowing that we will die tomorrow morning at 6 a.m. Sure, we all know that we will die one day, but that's something we have just learned to live with. But if we know that we'll die tomorrow morning at six, well, that's a little more difficult to stomach.

But then the question becomes: at what point does our awareness of dying switch from "sure, I'll go eventually," to, "man, I'm gonna go soon." One day away, one week away, one year away, one decade away? Fortunately, for most of our lives, we take comfort in the fact that it's just "eventually" and not "soon." But it depends who you ask. You can be in your early twenties and be more tormented your "eventual" death than someone who is in his nineties. I would even imagine that there are people who, say, know they're going to die "tomorrow" and are less bothered by it than a teenager who knows he will die sometime in the next century. It depends less on the interval of the closing window of time than on the perspective and thought pattern of the person on "death row," if you will. After all, Woody Allen has made his fear of death a perennial theme in all of his films, going back to when he was a young man in his thirties. Now he's in his late eighties, and, at least from his films, he seems to be much less concerned with death than he was when he was decades younger.

In episode 16, I discussed irony, specifically verbal irony and situational irony. But there is a third category of irony which I didn't go into. That would be *dramatic irony*. Dramatic irony occurs when an audience is aware of something about a character which the character himself does not know. Dramatic irony is used, of course, all the time in film, literature, drama, and so forth. When, for example, we read the story of Joseph and his brothers, and Joseph's brothers came to Egypt to find food. They met Joseph, their brother, but they didn't recognize him. Yet, *we* as the readers knew something that the *brothers* didn't know. That would be dramatic irony. Or when, for example, in *Little Red Riding Hood*, Little Red goes to her grandmother's house, but it is not her grandmother but the wolf lying in bed. *We* as the audience know it's the wolf, but Little Red doesn't know that yet. This is dramatic irony. Dramatic irony is, of course, also used all the time in horror films. Whenever you feel yourself screaming at the character, "don't go into that dark alleyway! Don't open up that door!" you are falling under the sway of dramatic irony. And it can be used just as easily in comedies. For example, in the film *There's Something about Mary*, all of the characters who date Mary, played by Cameron Diaz, are hiding who they really are. One is a kind of lowlife undercover detective, but he pretends to be an architect to impress Mary. The other is a pizza delivery boy, who also pretends to be an architect to impress Mary. The audience laughs because we know who these characters *really* are, but Mary does not, and is fooled by them.

What is the effect of dramatic irony on the audience? This literary tool, essentially, sends audiences through a roller coaster of emotions. It makes us tense, afraid, frustrated, excited. Dramatic irony is what makes us squirm in our seats, cover our eyes, scream at the characters, laugh uncontrollably, sob uncontrollably. This all comes from the fact that we, as the audience, know something *crucial* that the characters don't know. But the tension and the fear and the laughter come almost from a fear or a premonition or a prediction as to what will befall the characters in the future. When we see Little Red entering the Wolf's bedroom, we are not afraid just because we know something that Little Red does not. We are afraid because we know that, at any moment, the Wolf could jump out of bed and gobble up Little Red. In a sense, what we do is impose our emotions on the ignorant character we are viewing. Little Red *should* be afraid, but she is not. She thinks it's her grandma in the bed. So, instead, we usurp the emotions which Little Red *should be* having. We feel afraid *for her*. Yet, we also feel tense and even frustrated, because we know that we are just in the audience. We ultimately can't do anything to save Little Red or protect her.

When we project our lives into the future and try to imagine our future death, we are now viewing our *own* lives through the lens of dramatic irony. We are viewing ourselves in the present, and lamenting the fact that, one day, something will happen, which we can't change. It is as though our minds know something about our lives, which we, in the present, are unaware of. And we allow ourselves to be filled with all kinds of emotions, to bring all kinds of drama into our lives, as we predict how our lives will turn out and yet remain incapable of changing our fates. We also do this with other people's lives. When we meet someone, perhaps an old person, we don't always see them in the present and for who they really are in this moment. Instead, we tell ourselves, man, they're getting pretty close to death's door. And we take on the emotions that we think *they* should be experiencing because of what we know that they don't know, or which they haven't internalized enough.

Perhaps the most famous piece of German literature ever written was Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, written in 1912 and published in 1916. This story begins with one of the most legendary sentences in all of literature: "As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from unpleasant dreams, he found himself, in his bed, transformed into a monstrous bug." Gregor Samsa had been, for all of his life, a human. Yet, on this morning, he awakes to find himself transformed into a bug. And yet, even though he is a bug, a kind of beetle or cockroach, he continues to *think* like a human. He continues to think, I need to get out of bed, I need to catch the train, I need to get to work. But he can't go to work. He can't talk anymore, because he is a bug. He can't shake someone's hand anymore, because he no longer has hands, but rather thousands of tentacle-like legs. Gregor's fate is obvious to the reader. We more or less know that this is *not* going to end well for him. After all, how can a bug subsist in society? It can't. But Gregor Samsa himself never seems to acknowledge his doomed fate. Nowhere in the story does he express the thought: "I am now a cockroach. My life as I once knew it is over. I need to accept my new situation, my new fate." Instead, he lives in a kind of denial that he is still the same Gregor Samsa, the traveling salesman, he once was. He will not let go of the illusion that his life is somehow the same.

But *we*, as readers, are all too aware of how screwed Gregor Samsa now is. We watch in horror as Gregor *tries* to pretend that he is still a human, that his life can pick up where it left off. We, in short, *know* something crucial about Gregor that he himself doesn't know—namely, that he is a cockroach, and that a cockroach simply cannot get on acting and thinking like a human. This dynamic makes *The Metamorphosis*, then, another example of dramatic irony.

With this story, we can see how devastating dramatic irony can be on an audience. Gregor, in a way, remains almost protected by his *stubborn ignorance*. He deludes himself into thinking that he is still the same Gregor Samsa, and that all will be okay, and this allows him to avoid despair. We, as the audience, however, almost take on Gregor's burden. We experience the sadness, the frustration, the shame, which we think Gregor *should be experiencing*. The dramatic irony of the story *transfers* all of these negative emotions *away* from Gregor and *onto* the reader. In a way, we, as readers, almost sacrifice *ourselves* for Gregor's sake.

Is this healthy? We could just as easily read *The Metamorphosis* and avoid the dramatic irony. We need not take on Gregor's burden. We could, instead, adopt Gregor's willful ignorance. We could refuse to acknowledge to ourselves how screwed Gregor now is, and instead fight and rebel with Gregor. We could adopt Gregor's thought pattern: I refuse to acknowledge that *I* am a bug. I refuse to acknowledge that I am *doomed*. I am just going to tune out all of the evidence to the contrary. But we as readers do *not* do this. We can't refrain from taking on the role of *fortune tellers* as to Gregor's future. We therefore fill ourselves with the *hopelessness* which Gregor *should* acknowledge, but which he does not.

As humans, we seem to have a predisposition to eagerly bring dramatic irony into our worldview. We simply love to view characters, other people, and ourselves not *in the moment* but as little specks on the spectrum of time. We view ourselves and others not as we are in that moment, but rather as we are relative to our entire lifespan, our beginning, middle, and end. I don't think this is always very healthy. I will give an example from my personal life. I once had a dog I very much loved named Zoe. She lived for ten years and died of cancer, as many dogs sadly do. Yet, for the vast majority of her life, she was a happy and healthy dog. It was only this tiny fraction of her life in which she was unhealthy and presumably less happy. Yet, when I look back on her life, her inevitable death now seems to hang over and cloud all of those great years. Moreover, even when she was alive and healthy, I always worried about her, that one day she would get cancer and die. But for Zoe, she was always living in the moment. She never saw life through the perspective of dramatic irony. In this way, she was spared. But *I* was not. During her life, I feared how it would *end*. Now her life is over, at least her life on Earth—I am still hoping that she is in doggy heaven somewhere. But, when I look back on her life, I allow her death to cloud and distort the nine years of her life which were fun and healthy. I say nine and not ten because, from what I know, she actually had a pretty rough time as a street dog puppy.

But, as humans, we don't limit this perspective just to our own lives or the lives of others. Most chillingly, we also do it with history. The other day, I was at the Jewish Cemetery in Berlin. This was the "new" Jewish cemetery of Berlin, so it had thousands of graves from the nineteenth century. Until the nineteenth century, Berlin was a rather small town, as it were. It was not until the nineteenth century that Berlin became a world capital and millions of people, including hundreds of thousands of Jews, fled to Berlin from the countryside to get a job in industry. For a time, Berlin was the third-largest city in the world and the most densely populated in Europe. So here, in this cemetery, you saw graves of Berlin Jews who lived in the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

One particular grave stands out to me in my mind's eye. This was Leopold Ullstein, born on September 6, 1826, died on December 4, 1890. He presumably had a good, healthy life of sixty-four years. Not bad, for those times. If you had mentioned the word "Nazis" to him, he would have said: "huh?" If you had mentioned the name "Adolf," he would have said, "nice name. I think I'll name my son that." (Adolf was an extremely popular name in that era, for both Jews and Christians. I have a great-great grandfather named Adolf.) If you had said, "You know,

Leopold, you're Jewish. Berlin might not be the best city for you," he would have looked at you like you were crazy. "Berlin? Not good for Jews? Why, it's our new Jerusalem!" And he would have been correct. Compared to other European countries, it was Germany that, in the nineteenth century, was by far the most welcoming to Jews. After the revolutions of 1848, Germany granted full equality to Jews under the law. Germans and Jews intermarried. Jews served proudly in the army. Jews were thriving in society as scientists, writers, artists, and, well, it must be said, as financiers. Now, obviously there was still tons of anti-Semitism. But for Jews, life was safer, more pleasant, more tolerant than in anywhere they had previously resided in recent memory. And things seemed to be moving in the right direction.

Now, I don't need to take you through a European History 101 course for you to know what would eventually happen to the Jews in Europe. And so, as I looked at Leopold Ullstein's grave, a feeling of intense foreboding and sadness and horror overtook me. I couldn't help but thinking: *if only he knew what would happen to the Jews, to his people, to his descendants, to his grandchildren*. In effect, I was looking at his life, and the lives of all of these optimistic nineteenth-century German Jews, through the lens of dramatic irony. *I* knew what would happen to them, but they didn't. *They* couldn't *mourn* for themselves, so I had to take on the burden of mourning for them.

A similar example occurred when I was in Krakow. I was at a former synagogue, now a museum, and I saw one photograph which has long since haunted me. It was of a Purim party in 1930. You saw these seemingly kind, well-meaning, innocent Jews, celebrating Purim in their festive costumes, smiling at the camera, totally and blissfully ignorant of what was to come nine years later or so. But *I*, as the viewer, knew. And so, while these Krakow Jews were simply enjoying their Purim party in 1930, I couldn't enjoy it with them. I had to mourn their future deaths.

But then I thought to myself: hold on. Is this really *fair* to Herr Ullstein, to Gregor Samsa, to Zoe? Is this fair to the Krakow Jews celebrating Purim? Why can't I just look at the photograph and say, *good* for them. They were having a great time that day. Let's let that day be for what it was—a happy day—and then let the future be for what it would be—a total nightmare. Moreover, I don't even know what happened to those Purim partiers. Maybe they moved to America in 1931. Maybe they died of natural causes in the thirties. But even if they didn't, why can't we see 1930 in Poland on its own terms. After all, these people saw 1930 that way. Why must we extend the nightmare of 1939 to 1945 into 1930 or even 1830, too? I mean, seriously: aren't those six years enough?

Do we, as moderns, have the right to cast a black cloud over history, because we know something about the future which these people did not? Is it fair for us to sum up the lives of other eras with bite-sized snap judgments, simply because we know what fate had in store for them? And even more importantly, *why* do we do this?

Actually, the reason we, as humans, see history and our lives and the lives of others, in this way, is not so admirable. Because what we are doing is taking on pain which we need not, making dark that which could be bright, choosing to adopt negative emotions when we could take on positive emotions instead. Why do we, as humans, have this tendency? One reason I would posit has to do with the Puritan mindset which continues to plague our culture. I have discussed this concept in episodes four and eight of *The Schrift*. We have this rather silly, sickly attitude that, if we *suffer* in this world, we will be compensated for it in the future, or as Christianity would say, in the next world. Well, this is, in my opinion, quite a gamble to make. This is the attitude of slave morality, a concept developed by Nietzsche, which I discussed in

episodes four, eight, twelve, and seventeen. This mindset teaches us that, the worse we feel, the better our future will be. This is how Puritan Christians thought. But, for those people living before Christianity and before Socrates, this way of thinking would have seemed to epitomize lunacy. Why should I make myself feel bad, when I can feel good? Why should I suffer, when I can instead be happy? Only the human animal is capable of taking that which is the most natural instinct of a living being—to not suffer, and to be happy—and to turn it on its head.

But there is a second reason, related to the first, which is even more interesting. This reason comes from Sigmund Freud's 1920 book, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, which I briefly discussed in episode eight. As I just mentioned, the natural drive of all beings is toward pleasure and well-being. It is only because of modern, perverted theories, that we have come to somehow see pleasure as bad and pain and suffering as good. But we can't put all of the blame on the theories. In fact, there may be something within our minds that gleefully moves toward the dark, the negative, the sinister. If this seems surprising to you, don't feel bad. It was surprising to Freud, too, and that's why he wrote this book. Until 1920, Freud had thought that pleasure is what guides human motivation. Yet, Freud worked with veterans who had been injured—shell shocked—in World War I. And Freud observed that, even though the war was over, these veteran soldiers continued to relive their terrible experiences in the war. They didn't want to accept that the war was over. They *wanted* to prolong the suffering and misery of the war, even into peacetime. Freud concluded that we have two drives within us which compete with each other. One drive he called *eros*. This is the drive toward pleasure, sex, love, happiness, and joy. But we also have, built within us, a competitive drive toward *death*. And this Freud would call, appropriately enough, our *death drive*.

I would argue that, when we fast forward our lives into the future, and see our lives through the perspective of our eventual death, what we are doing is thinking with our *death drive*. Or, when we look into the past, and lament what *would* eventually happen in the future, we are thinking with our death drive. Instead of simply embracing the joy of the moment, we are bringing negativity and darkness into our lives. In this sense, I would argue, dramatic irony and the death drive are intimately related. But, of course, we can hardly be blamed for this. We, as humans, have the ability to see deep into the past and deep into the future. We so naturally latch on to dramatic irony. When we see what Gregor Samsa cannot see—that he is a bug, doomed to die—it would take a lot of mental strength to not feel sorry for him. When we go to a nineteenth century German-Jewish cemetery, it takes a lot of mental strength to see these people as just normal, happy people, going about their lives, blissfully ignorant of the apocalypse which was to come. But nevertheless, the extent to which we think with our death drive or with our drive toward *eros*, remains *our* choice. Because, in fact, when we choose to suffer for others who were happily ignorant of their fates, we are, in a sense, making ourselves into *superfluous martyrs*. We are “dying” for a cause, but we are late to the party, as it were. Our martyrdom is not going to save the people or animals we feel sorry for. It's only going to needlessly lacerate ourselves.

In the parsha for this week, Tetsaveh, we find the Torah playing with the concept of dramatic irony. The parsha for the week is not the most sexy of the parashot in the Torah. It begins by explaining that *olive* oil should be used to light and kindle the lamps in the Temple. By the way, note that it does not say *canola* oil, or *sunflower* oil, or *soy* oil, or *vegetable* oil. It says *olive* oil. Here is, then, a life tip for you. If you are cooking, use olive oil. Those other oils—*canola*, *sunflower*, and *soy*—are products of industrialization, and are terrible for your body. There is a reason why no one in Moshe's era had ever heard of them, but yet knew about olive oil quite well.

But the parsha is not just about olive oil. It is mainly about how the priests of the Mishkan or, later, the Temple, should dress. Like last week, the instructions on how they should dress is highly specific. Moreover, like last week, the *attire* for the priests was to be beautiful, sumptuous, and ceremonial. Here is, for example, how the “hem” of the priest’s robe was to be designed: “On its hem make pomegranates of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, all around the hem, with bells of gold between them all around: a golden bell and a pomegranate, all around the hem of the robe.”

So, who were to be these priests? That is an easy question. The first priest or, in Hebrew, *Cohen*, ever in Judaism was Aaron—Aharon. Aaron was, of course, Moshe’s older brother by about three years. But it would not *just be* Aaron who would be a *Cohen*. It would also be all of his descendants, through the male line. So, in the parsha, the Torah mentions over and over again that these customs for the *Cohanim* would apply to Aaron and *his sons*. But the Torah does not simply say *Aaron and his sons*. Rather, the Torah specifies these sons by name. Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar. Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar. These are the sons of Aaron. But interestingly, the Torah lists the sons as follows: Nadab *and* Abihu (pause); Eleazar *and* Ithamar. Nadab and Abihu are grouped together, and Eleazar and Ithamar are grouped together. *Why* does the Torah do this? Well, it is because, if we fast forward to the Book of Leviticus, we know that something very, very bad will happen involving Nadab and Abihu. Nadab and Abihu will later be caught inside the Mishkan, quite literally playing with fire. But they are not just playing with fire. The implication is that they are praying to idols and desecrating the Mishkan. When God sees Nadab and Abihu doing this, there can only be one appropriate response. God consumes them with fire, so that they die, and so that their corpses need to be quite literally dragged out of the temple.

Because the Torah is read every year, this particular parsha is rich in dramatic irony. We, as readers, know what will happen to Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu. We read this passage and think to ourselves: these two sons, Nadab and Abihu. Now, they are the apples of their father Aaron’s eye, they are among the most privileged and blessed of the Hebrews, all is well in Aaron’s family. But we as readers know something that Aaron and his family do *not* know. We know that tragedy and betrayal await this family. And the Torah, in continually mentioning the phrase “Aaron and his sons,” “Aaron and his sons,” over and over again, brings the dramatic irony of this section to a fever pitch.

Yet, unlike a life span or a historical period, the Torah has no beginning, middle, or end. As I discussed in Episode 0, the Torah never really begins or ends, it is always in motion. So, the question becomes, how should we view Nadab and Abihu in this moment? Should we take on the burden of their eventual betrayal? Or should we, instead, let them *be* in this moment? If the tragedy has yet to befall Aaron’s family, why should we “jump the gun,” as it were, and impose tragedy on this family, *before* anything bad has even happened yet? Can we view Nadab and Abihu through Aaron’s eyes in Aaron’s present moment rather than through our own eyes?

Yet, here you might ask, isn’t the Torah *promoting* the outlook of dramatic irony here? Isn’t the Torah, by continually repeating the phrase “Aaron and his sons,” almost encouraging us to view their story through the lens of *dramatic irony*? And in fact, come to think of it, isn’t the Torah just one giant book of dramatic irony *par excellence*? We read the same stories every year. We know how they will end. Thus, the ending of each story hangs over and clouds each beginning and middle. And didn’t you, Steve, say earlier that viewing life with the lens of dramatic irony is akin to adopting the outlook of the *death drive* as opposed to the drive toward *life*?

Yes, I did say that. But here is the problem. As humans, we cannot so easily escape our ability to see across vast expanses of time. We try to live in the moment, but we are continually pulled back and forth between future and past. The Torah is all-too aware of this human tendency and predisposition. The Torah knows that we cannot simply read the story of Nadab and Abihu anew, and completely forget what would happen to them. I cannot just erase from my mind my eventual death, my dog's eventual death, the fate of the Jews of Germany, the fate of Gregor Samsa, the fate of Moses. But what the Torah wants us to do, I think, is to try.

Last week, there was a special Torah reading called Shabbat Zachor. This is read every year on the Shabbat before Purim. Yet, every three years this special Torah reading falls on the same Shabbat as this week's parsha, Parsha Tetzaveh. So, I feel like it's fair game to use this Shabbat Zachor reading in my interpretation of Tetzaveh this week. This special reading comes from Deuteronomy 25, verses 17 to 19. Moses, speaking through God, tells the Hebrews to remember when the king Amalek attacked the Hebrews during their wandering in the desert. Amalek mounted a kind of rearguard attack on the Hebrews while they were wandering. He left them devastated. Moses tells the Hebrews *remember what Amalek did to you*. But then, something very strange occurs. Moses says that, when the Hebrews get to Israel, they must *blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven*. And then, strangest of all, Moses concludes with the exhortation: "Do not forget!"

Moses, then, is giving the Hebrews a kind of paradox. First, he says that you must remember what Amalek did to you. Then he says that you must *destroy* the memory. It is as if he is saying, *remember to forget*, or *don't forget to forget*.

This is the fine line, it seems, that we must walk. And, as the Torah indicates, it is not going to be easy. How do we remember and forget at the same time? How do we throw ourselves again and again into the moment, while still remaining inevitably cognizant of future and past? The answer, I think, is mindfulness. When we meditate, we try to dwell in the present moment. But our mind is continually pulling us back and forth, like a ship on a stormy sea, into future and past. The mind continually bombards us with questions, memories, predictions. They are sometimes about the future like "what if *this* happens." Or they are about the past like "what if this *would have* happened." Very rarely are they about the present moment. And these past and future thoughts are the vast majority of the time negatively framed, framed with fear, regret, shame, death. Mindfulness does not teach us to simply block out these thoughts and pretend like they're not there. Mindfulness knows that our minds will inevitably wander away from the present into future and past and become fearful, sad, remorseful, bitter. The solution is to be *aware* of this "rewinding" and "fast forwarding" but not to stay there. Rather, mindfulness teaches us to *label* these thoughts for what they are, and to then bring your attention back into the present moment. So, you can label and identify your thoughts: that is a *thought* about the future. That is a *thought* about the past. And then bring your attention back into the present moment, over and over again. This is how we can remember and forget simultaneously.

This type of outlook accepts the inevitable lens of dramatic irony with which we see the world. But it also encourages us to *try* to balance out this dramatic irony with the peace and calmness which comes from staying in the present. This is the Torah's transcendental message: that we must never forget to ... forget.