##

## Certainty in an Uncertain World



**Talmud Taanis 29a**

*When the month of Adar begins, we increase our joy.*

**#1**

**Oliver Burkeman, The Antidote: Happiness for People Who Can’t Stand Positive Thinking**

Consider any significant decision you’ve ever taken that you subsequently came to regret: a relationship you entered despite being dimly aware that it wasn’t for you, or a job you accepted even though, looking back, it’s clear that it was mismatched to your interests or abilities. If it felt like a difficult decision at the time, then it’s likely that, prior to taking it, you felt the gut-knotting ache of uncertainty; afterwards, having made a decision, did those feelings subside? If so, this points to the troubling possibility that your primary motivation in taking the decision wasn’t any rational consideration of its rightness for you, but simply the urgent need to get rid of your feelings of uncertainty.

**Martha Nussbaum, *Bill Moyer’s World of Ideas***

To be a good human is to have a kind of openness to the world, an ability to trust uncertain things beyond your own control, that can lead you to be shattered in very extreme circumstances for which you were not to blame. That says something very important about the ethical life: that it is based on a trust in the uncertainty, and on a willingness to be exposed.

**Questions:**

* **For Burkeman, true happiness entails learning to enjoy uncertainty and to embrace insecurity. The philosopher Martha Nussbaum goes even further, arguing that an openness to uncertainty is required to live a good life. What is your opinion about this?**
* **How would you feel after making a decision and not knowing if it was the right choice?**

**#2**

**Mishlei 15:30**

*The light of the eyes will gladden the heart.*

**Metzudas David, Mishlei 15:30**

*Lighting one’s eyes regarding a matter about which one was in doubt will bring happiness to one’s heart, because there is no happiness in the world like the resolution of doubt.*

**Questions:**

* **What is the connection between certainty and happiness?**
* **There are many ways a person can be happy. How is it possible that “*there is no happiness in the world like the resolution of doubt”*?**
* **Does this mean that someone who always has clarity about his decisions cannot experience the same level of happiness as someone who is first confused and later finds a solution? Explain!**
* **Does this mean that, for example, someone who was waiting for a long time to find out about a health issue, and is finally told that he is in fact very sick – is this person happier than someone who has everything - good family, health, financial stability etc? Explain!**

**#3**

**Based on Ramban on Torah Vayikra 5:15**

*The sacrifice “asham taluy”, which one brings in situations of doubt, is a more expensive sacrifice than the “chatas” sin offering, which one brings after committing certain violations unintentionally.*

*This implies that being unsure whether or not a sin was actually committed requires a more severe atonement than knowing for certain that one sinned.*

**Question: Why is being in doubt over whether one sinned or not worse than knowing for sure that one definitely sinned?**

**#4**

**Rabbi Akiva Tatz, Living Inspired**

The mystics call this world *"alma d'sfeika"* – a world of doubt. Intrinsically, the world is a confusing mixture of good and bad, true and false.

It is also called "*alma d'shikra*" – a world of falsehood; however, the deepest essence of that falsehood is that it contains an admixture of good: if not for the component of good, it could never exist, and therein lies the confusion. In fact, the most dangerous forms of falsehood are those which contain almost all truth – they are the most deceptive.

Nothing in the world is entirely good or bad – every choice, every decision has a cost, and in many ordeals the combination of factors on either side of the moral choice is so complex that we respond with paralysis ...

… What happens after man eats from the tree? He hides in the garden. Hides from God, Who is everywhere! How could Adam imagine that he could hide – he knew God as no human has ever since, knew deeply that God is all-seeing and all-knowing! How could he hope to escape by hiding? The answer is that he no longer sees reality clearly – on the one hand he knows God exists, that is why he is hiding. But on the other hand, he somehow thinks, incredibly, that he can hide! What a most deeply pathetic figure he has become, hiding from that which he knows is inescapable and yet fooling himself anyway. Is that not the description of our lives?

And far more shocking is God's response. God appears in the garden and calls to Adam, "Where are you?" The Creator of the Universe, Who sees all, knows all, asks, "Where are you?" As if He cannot see Adam! When man attempts to hide, to blur reality into a crazy, fractured version of itself, God responds in kind, and allows man to see the world that way, measure for measure exactly. You wish to escape My notice, to feel you are independent, hidden from My gaze? "Where are you?" Man is allowed to perceive falsely that he is alone – the greatest pain of all.

The Jewish people's arch-rival is the nation of Amalek. The numerical values for the Hebrew forms of the words Amalek and doubt are identical. The descendant of Amalek who tried to destroy the entire Jewish people was Haman (from the Purim story): the Talmud indicates his name in the Garden of Eden, at the time of Adam's sin; when God asks Adam that second question "Did you eat from the tree? – '*Hamin ha'etz'* the word "*hamin*" ("Did you?") is the name "Haman." That gap between reality and perception, the gap of doubt, opens with the sin. And that is our enemy.

**#5**

**Pirkei Avos 1:16**

*Rabban Gamliel said: Provide yourself with a teacher, and free yourself from doubt …*

**Questions:**

* **Is it possible to live a life without any doubts?**
* **What are some ways to gain clarity about small and big decisions? How do make decisions about your occupation, spouse, where to live, and how to spend your free time?**

**#6**

**Talmud Megillah 7b**

*Rava said: A person is obligated to drink on Purim until he does not know the difference between “cursed be Haman (evil man and vicious anti-semite)” and “blessed be Mordechai (one of the most righteous people of the Jewish nation).”*

**Question: Isn’t this an encouragement to get really confused? What could be a reason for this custom?**

**#7**

**Question: What is your takeaway from today’s discussion?**