

Erev Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5780

Puppet or Puppeteer?

The Godfather is one of the most memorable movies of all time. It is regularly included on the top of most lists for the best, or most influential movie. On its own it is a study in power, corruption, violence, family dynamics and life cycle events.

(I promise there is no horse's head under the pulpit)

It has quotes we love to spout off to one another jokingly: "I'm going to make him an offer he can't refuse."

OR

"Revenge is a dish best served cold."

Anyone have a spare horse's head?

But there is another quote, one that I want us to focus on:

"We are all men, who have refused to be fools, who have refused to be puppets dancing on a string pulled by men on high." (P.278, Godfather by Mario Puzo)

I will reread it:

We are all men, who have refused to be fools, who have refused to be puppets dancing on a string pulled by men on high.” (P.278, Godfather by Mario Puzo)

What a powerful idea. This is said by Vito Corleone in the book at the end of the civil war, after his son, Sonny was murdered and his other son, Michael is in Italy. It is the moment when he is addressing the heads of the other five families and allowing the past to be the past. But he is challenging the other Dons as well as his own assumption regarding himself. He wants to see himself as the puppeteer, as one of the men on high pulling the strings and not as a puppet. He wants to believe, as we all do, that we have control...the truth is most times we do not.

When I read this quote, I understood why the cover art for the book has a puppeteer's hand holding the top of a puppet with strings dangling down to an unseen puppet. One of the stories we tell ourselves, the story of control.

We read in the Bible:

You shall not place a stumbling block in front of a blind person; and you shall have fear of your God — I am the Lord.” (Leviticus 19:14)

Yet the reality is that most of us are blind to how we make decisions. We can not look behind our eyes and understand our thoughts. If we could, we would not need a therapist. We want to change, that is part of our nature, as is getting stuck and bogged down in the change.

Modern psychology teaches that there are at least four things we as human beings do that make it challenging to actually make a decision.

1. When we make decisions, there is a constant pull between our reflective side versus our emotional side of the brain. Our reflective side, for example would say - smoking and eating dessert is bad. While our emotional side acknowledges how yummy cheesecake is and how delightful a cigarette with a cup of coffee after a wonderful meal can feel. The emotional side of our being is spontaneous and acts without consideration to consequences. We want to believe our reflective side of the brain is in control, but the science teaches that our emotional side is the heavyweight inside when we make a decision.

A study was done in a supermarket, where French music was played as was German. At the end of the day, based on the type of music, people subconsciously bought more French or German wines. The customers said the music didn't influence them, yet the cash register spoke differently.¹

2. What is even more disturbing was the research done by Dr. Daniel Kahneman, Israeli Nobel Prize winner of economics in 2002, who coined the phrase "illusion of validity." He discovered, in his hallmark research, that we tend to think our judgments are valid, even when based on first impressions or relatively short observations. Not only are those impressions often wrong, but they are highly influenced by personal inclinations, language or circumstances. The best hope we have for arriving at the truth is to study objective data. But, we often make decisions on first impressions.

3. Decision making/ bias/ multitasking - We are only able to think of four things at any given time. We do not possess the ability to multitask, though many of us

¹<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/science-choice/201705/who-is-actually-in-charge-when-we-make-decisions>

believe we can. Neuroscience teaches that what we do instead is quickly jump from one task to another, forgetting what we were doing in the first task as we move on to the fourth. There is also something interesting in that we as human beings have only so much mental energy for decision-making. In other words after deciding between our outfit for the day, our breakfast order, How we want to respond to an email and what to make for dinner - we are already mentally fatigued.

There was a study done in 2010 by Jonathan Lebab and Shai Danziger which demonstrated that Israeli parole boards grant parole 70% of the time to prisoners who appear to them first thing in the morning versus less than 10% of the time for those who appear late in the day. As the day moves forward, we tend to look for shortcuts. In this case, the parole board chose to keep prisoners incarcerated rather than risk a relapse and recidivism.

The long and the short is that the more decisions we have to make over the course of the day, the less mental energy and willpower we have at the end. We can only hold onto so much information at any one time.

The fourth thing that makes it hard for us is that we are willfully blind to clear facts in front of us.

4. Willfully not seeing what is in front of you.² When we experience things that do not fit into our personal narrative we as human beings will perform phenomenal Mental gymnastics To make sense of what we are experiencing or seeing. We crave conformity. We desire to allow into our mind information which makes us feel good, While we conveniently let go of information which unsettles our fragile egos.³

At the end of the day, our brains are hardwired for evolutionary reasons to both make it so that we want to change and become our best selves, and yet get stuck in the mud.

² In her book entitled [Willful Blindness: Why We Ignore the Obvious at Our Peril](#), author Margaret Heffernan writes:

“Whether individual or collective, willful blindness doesn’t have a single driver, but many. It is a human phenomenon to which we all succumb in matters little and large. We can’t notice and know everything: the cognitive limits of our brain simply won’t let us. That means we have to filter or edit what we take in. So what we choose to let through and to leave out is crucial. We mostly admit the information that makes us feel great about ourselves, while conveniently filtering whatever unsettles our fragile egos and most vital beliefs. It’s a truism that love is blind; what’s less obvious is just how much evidence it can ignore. Ideology powerfully masks what, to the uncaptivated mind, is obvious, dangerous, or absurd and there’s much about how, and even where, we live that leaves us in the dark. Fear of conflict, fear of change keeps us that way. An unconscious (and much denied) impulse to obey and conform shields us from confrontation and crowds provide friendly alibis for our inertia. And money has the power to blind us, even to our better selves”.

³ Cognitive psychologist, **Albert Bandura**, argues “People are highly driven to do things that build self-worth; you can’t transgress and think of yourself as bad. So people transform harmful practices into worthy ones, coming up with social justification, distancing themselves with euphemisms and numbers, ignoring the long-term consequences of their actions.”

<https://medium.com/the-mission/margaret-heffernan-on-the-phenomenon-of-willful-blindness-why-we-ignore-the-obvious-95df1398c8bc>

Let's go back to the room where Don Corleone was speaking. In that room the Godfather says, to the other heads of the families, members of their families were other things like: professors, scientists, or musicians, but he could not be that. He was constrained by his belief that he had to be a mafia godfather in order to not only survive but thrive in this world.

Reading ourselves into this narrative, we can choose to see ourselves as puppets or puppeteers. The challenge of becoming a puppeteer is the depth of self knowledge that is required. The truth is that many of us are actually puppets. Of the many strings which bind us, the one I'm choosing to focus on tonight is the string of neuroscience and modern psychology aka, the string in our mind. Our ability to move the needle from being a puppet to being a puppeteer is self-awareness. The theme for the high holidays this year is "The stories we tell ourselves." One of the stories we tell ourselves is that we can really control things. As I have just shared with you, that control is more of an illusion than a reality.

The purpose of the Jewish New Year is an opportunity to reset who we are and start anew. We can move the needle from being a puppet to a puppeteer in our own life.

Making a change requires a conscious decision. It requires faith, that after so many years of struggling there may be a new way. It requires courage knowing that at the end you will finally arrive safely.

A beautiful image or metaphor about change or engaging in *teshuvah* and repenting is that it can be compared to a boat that is tied onto an island pier. Cutting the ties of the boat so that it floats out into the ocean is scary. But boats are meant to be sailed! Keeping them in the harbor will eventually lead to rot. Even if it is meant for the boat to return to the same port, it still must undertake at least one journey so that it can reach its potential. It needs to unfurl its sail and float.

Judaism offers us a pathway to untie the boat from the harbor, untie the strings that bind us into being puppets and spread our wings in flight toward freedom.

Judaism teaches us that doing one good deed leads to another. It says specifically in Perkei Avot:

שְׂמִימָה גּוֹרֶרֶת מִצְוָה, וְעִבְרָה גּוֹרֶרֶת עֵבֶרָה

Or:

One good deed will bring on another good deed, one transgression will bring on another transgression. (Perkei Avot 4:2)

The path of being able to live out the words of Don Corleone, to truly be the puppeteer and not a puppet of our own lives, is doing one good deed. In this case, the good deed would be making a conscious decision towards self-awareness. It is something that we must make the decision to do everyday to bring ourselves toward self-awareness.

By understanding how we make decisions, perhaps we can start to really understand what motivates the things that we do. Those motivations, once brought into light, can be molded so that we can make better decisions.⁴

Avodah Zarah 17a

⁴ Proverbs 12:18-23

(18) There is blunt talk like sword-thrusts, But the speech of the wise is healing. (19) Truthful speech abides forever, A lying tongue for but a moment. (20) Deceit is in the minds of those who plot evil; For those who plan peace there is joy. (21) No harm befalls the righteous, But the wicked have their fill of misfortune. (22) Lying speech is an abomination to the LORD, But those who act faithfully please Him. (23) A clever man conceals what he knows, But the mind of a dullard cries out folly

They say concerning Rabbi Elazar ben Dordia that he did not neglect a single prostitute in the world with whom he did not have sexual relations. One time he heard that there was a certain prostitute in one of the overseas towns, and her fee was a whole bag of dinars. He took a bag of dinars and went for her sake and crossed seven rivers. At the time that he was with her, she farted and saying, “Just as this fart will never return to its original place, so too, Elazar ben Dordia will never be able to repent.”

He went and sat himself down between two mountains and hills, and he said, “Mountains and hills, seek mercy on my behalf.” They said to him, “Before we seek mercy for you, we have to seek mercy for ourselves: ‘For the mountains shall depart and the hills be removed’ (Isa. 54:10).” He said, “Heaven and earth, seek mercy for me.” They said to him, “Before we seek mercy for you, we have to seek mercy for ourselves: ‘the Heavens shall vanish away like smoke, and the earth shall wax old like a garment’ (Isa. 51:6).” He said, “Sun and moon, seek mercy for me.” They said to him, “Before we seek mercy for you, we have to seek mercy for ourselves: ‘Then the moon shall be confounded and the sun ashamed’ (Isa. 24:23).” He said, “Stars and constellations, seek mercy for me.” They said to him, “Before we seek mercy for you, we

have to seek mercy for ourselves: 'All the hosts of Heaven shall molder away' (Isa. 34:4)." He said, "The matter depends only on me." He put his head between his knees and he wept a mighty weeping until his soul expired. A voice from heaven was heard proclaiming: "R. Eleazar ben Dordia is destined for life of the world to come."

NOTES NOT PART OF THE SERMON

To complicate our ability to bare witness as objective individuals to situations that occur around us and occur to us, we sometimes fail to see what is in front of us. In her TED talk in 2013, Margaret Heffernan discusses “willful blindness”.

It is this reason that we look back at certain moments and wonder why were we so blind in our own life. Why did we experience a specific personal tragedy *that way*? Why did the organization or the company we work for not acknowledge or solve the problem *before* they faced dire consequences.

As a whole we turn a blind eye to avoid conflict, protect our self and reduce our anxiety. We don't speak up or become a whistleblower either for the organization or more important in our private lives.

We allow ourselves the freedom of denial or in legalese “willful blindness.”

According to the Merriam Webster dictionary the Legal Definition of willful blindness: deliberate failure to make a reasonable inquiry of wrongdoing (as drug dealing in one's house) despite suspicion or an awareness of the high probability of its existence

NOTE: Willful blindness involves conscious avoidance of the truth and gives rise to an inference of knowledge of the crime in question⁵

In other words, we are the puppets as described by Mario Puzo, only we are constrained by our own thoughts.

In the movie The Godfather, Kay and Michael Corleone speak.

⁵ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/legal/willful%20blindness>

MICHAEL
My father's no different than any other powerful man.
(after Kay laughs)
Any man who's responsible for other people. Like a senator or a president.
KAY
You know how naive you sound?
MICHAEL
Why?
KAY
Senators and presidents don't have men
killed...
MICHAEL
Oh who's being naive, Kay?
(then)
Kay, my father's way of doing things is over...it's finished. Even he knows that
I mean in five years, the Corleone Family is going to be completely legitimate. Trust me. That's
all I can tell you about my business
Kay...⁶

We see Kay later fully integrated with the family, knowing what her husband does and not engaging. We see that Michael struggles for years to make the Corleone family business legitimate, but that he never quite succeeds. Who is naive? What is naivety if it is not seeing or seeing with the eyes of a child. As a reader we are challenged over the course of the books to really ask how much of Vito's message of being above translates into life.

⁶ <https://lolitadosmedia.files.wordpress.com/2014/07/godfather.pdf>