



Group Discussion Guide for S1 E4 – Buzzing in My Head

Guests: Rabbi Professor David Ellenson, Ariel Kaminer

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1. Introduction - Rabbi Joel responds to the following verse from Isaiah (45:7), where the prophet is relaying the words of God to the emperor Cyrus of Persia:

”יוצר אור ובורא חשך עשה שלום ובורא רע אני יהוה עשה כל־אלה.”

“I form light and create darkness, I make peace and create evil, I am Adonai who does all of these things.”

- a. What is your initial reaction to Isaiah stating that God creates evil? When you think of evil in the world, do you normally think of it as being created by God?
 - b. If God created both good and evil, what does that mean for humankind’s daily choices between good and evil?
2. 3:11-7:40 - The story of Mike and Ian
 - a. In the recounting of their story (of Ian leading Mike, with Mike reneging on his promise that he would let Ian win, and the long-term effects of the decision on both men), did you feel that you related to either Mike or Ian, either in terms of how they conducted themselves during the race, or in terms of the long-lasting feelings that each of them harbored in the years to come afterwards?
 - b. Did it surprise you to hear of the lengths to which Mike went to try and make things right? What do you make of it that he only called Ian after he had “hit rock bottom”?
 - c. Do you have a memory of a “near miss” (such as a close loss in a game or competition)? How has that experience affected you? How has its impact changed over time?

3. 15:40 - Rabbi Professor David Ellenson, reflecting on Isaiah 45:7:

“What does it mean that God is not only the maker of peace, but “the creator of evil”? In other words, what is it about who we are as human beings?... It made me think about how evil and good are just intermixed, [in] who we are as human beings.”

- a. Do you agree with Rabbi Ellenson’s assertion, following Isaiah, that evil and good are intermixed in human beings?
- b. Assuming you agree that we are some mixture of good and bad, what kind of balance do you seek to achieve between your own inclination to do good (*yetzer ha’tov*) and the temptation to act upon your negative impulses (*yetzer ha’ra*)?
- c. How do you know when these elements are out of balance and need re-aligning?

4. 17:30 - Rabbi Leon:

“You quoted the section in the Talmud, which mentions that if not for the yetzer ha’ra, the evil inclination, then the world wouldn't exist.”

- a. How can we understand the evil inclination, *yetzer ha’ra*, as a positive force in the world?
- b. In the context of competitive environments, might a *yetzer ha’ra* provide motivation in a way that the good inclination, *yetzer ha’tov*, is incapable of providing?
- c. Earlier, Rabbi Ellenson quotes a midrash (Bereishit Rabbah 9:7) that asserts that without the *yetzer ha’ra*, no man would build a home, take a wife, or have a family. What is it about these actions that you think leads the midrash to state this? Do you agree?

5. 19:11 - Rabbi Ellenson, reflecting on Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik’s understanding of the two different creation stories offered in the first and second chapter of Genesis in *The Lonely Man of Faith*:

“Adam Rishon, the first Adam... is one who goes out and attempts to conquer the world, that's that id, or the yetzer [inclination] that we have, right. Whereas Adam Sheni, the Adam in the second chapter of Genesis, is a much more passive being who accepts the world as it is and becomes the person of faith. But the key point is that these two Adams coexist, they're the yin and yang that each of us as human beings.”

- a. In what areas or times of your life do you feel that your “Adam Rishon,” that part of you that is inclined to conquer and accomplish is dominant?
- b. When do you feel that your “Adam Sheni,” that part of you that seeks to be at peace with the world and achieve a state of equanimity, dominates?
- c. In your view, what does a proper balance of these two aspects look like?

6. 23:55 - Rabbi Professor David Ellenson:

“Undoubtedly events that occur to us in life cause us to reflect in all sorts of ways, and lead us in directions that are just radically different than the ones we had moved in. They helped to put us on a better derech [path], but they percolate, they don't happen k'heref ayin [in the blink of an eye], and they just don't happen in a single... second.”

- a. Can you describe an event that changed your life significantly, but only in a way that you recognized much later, long after the event had transpired?
- b. In reflecting upon this significant turning point that you only managed to view in the rearview mirror, what factors allowed for this shift in perspective? Time? Additional events that fed off of that event? Personal changes that you underwent?
- c. If you were able to understand *while an event is transpiring* that it will be a transformative event years down the line, how might you harness this understanding in real time to better yourself?

7. 27:06 - Rabbi Leon:

“Even though he [Ian]... mentioned how he's still carrying this hurt for years and years and years, when Mike comes and rights it, what he's overwhelmed with is a sense of the, kind of the harmony that the, the fact that something has been corrected in this world...”

“Mike's teshuva then kind of immediately has not just the... moment of truth and powerful impact that Ian is able to accept it, but also that it kind of elicits in Ian, a reflectiveness and a desire and an aspiration to do that kind of good as well.”

- a. Have you ever experienced a similar situation in which someone wronged you and their remorse and process of *teshuva* so moved you past your sense of hurt such that you were actually inspired by them?

- b. Try to unpack the potential of everyday acts that inspire: why is it that someone else's good deed (such as an act of *teshuva*) can have such a profound effect on us?

8. 31:13 - Rabbi Leon:

“The default, the normal way of thinking is, well, I can never, as you said, I can never be a tzadik [righteous person]. Like it's better to be a tzadik, someone who's a truly righteous person who never sins, than to be someone who sins and then does teshuva. And the Rambam quotes the Talmud [Brachot 34b] that says actually, yeah, actually that's not true. Because there's something, that גְּמוּרִים צְדִיקִים עוֹמְדִין תְּשׁוּבָה שְׂבַעֲלֵי מְקוֹם עוֹמְדִין אֵינָם, that a person who does teshuva has a kind of certain standing that even a total tzadik, a righteous person, does not.”

- a. How can we understand this idea that it's better to make mistakes and do *teshuva* than to always be a perfectly righteous person who does not err?
- b. Do you agree with this idea? Can you think of a mistake in your life that you rectified and for which, on balance, you're glad that you went through that whole process?
- c. Is there a danger in eschewing the aspiration to refrain from sin entirely?

9. 50:36 - Rabbi Leon :

“Here's what I want to suggest: if pain can percolate so long over time, so too can teshuva. Sometimes we need time, and lots of it, to bring the process of teshuva to its tipping point. Sometimes time itself is enough to bring fruition, but more often than not it's time plus something else, something else that will allow to go back to the distinction from Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, that Rabbi Ellenson cited - the more reflective side of us to emerge, and to perform its powerful erosive work on the part of us that races and races hard to win. Sometimes that something else is retirement, a shifting of modes and a change of pace that grants dominance to that reflective self. Other times it's having hit rock bottom like Mike Friedman, or having been laid off like Ariel Kaminer.”

- a. Can you share a source of pain in your life that has percolated for a long period of time?
- b. Can you share a “slow-brew” *teshuva* that has been percolating for a long time in your life? What would (or did) it take for that process to reach its tipping point, such that you actively seek to rectify the wrong you did?

- c. What can serve as a force to keeping that process of *teshuva* percolating, on low flame, until then?