



Discussion Guide for S1 E5 – Buzzing in My Head

Guests: Rabbi Dianne Cohler-Esses, Professor David Dow

Created by Joe Brophy, M.J Ed.

1. 10:20 - Rabbi Dianne Cohler-Esses, talking about what the episode of Invisibilia brought to mind:

“[I thought about]... the power of teshuva and specifically what came to mind was this prohibition against reminding a person who’s repented already about their past before they repented. And that felt to me, like once you’ve entered a new story, don’t remind someone of their past story because it’s actually over and don’t confine them. Don’t imprison them with their past story.”

- a. Rabbi Dianne uses the provocative term that a past story may “imprison” someone. In what way? Have you experienced this – either on the giving or the receiving end?
 - b. Jewish law prohibits reminding a person who has already repented about their previous sin. Is there a way that doing so can be done constructively? If so, should it be permitted? What’s the distinction – if at all – between recalling (or even mentioning to others) your *own* transgressions and bringing up another person’s?
 - c. Based on your own experience, what is involved in entering “a new story”?
2. 15:10 - Rabbi Leon and Rabbi Dianne reflect on the fluid interplay between one’s personality and their surroundings:

“There’s this kind of dissonance, which plays itself out very poetically between the prisoner, who she does not expect to be dancing ballet... this visual dissonance... it’s pointing to something deeper.”

“It was almost like the water or the dance promises us that we're something beyond the crime or beyond that kernel of, of shame. Like there's this fluidity that says to us: ... we're part of life and somehow bigger than that reified crime.”

- a. What are some of the dissonances in your life, the poles in tension between which you move?
- b. Can you isolate certain past acts of yours which you don't want to define you? What force(s) serve as water or dance in your life that can allow you to move beyond these acts?
- c. How much do you think your highest highs or your lowest lows define you as a person? How much weight do you ascribe to each? Is the situation different when you look at someone else? Does it matter if that person is a friend, a loved one, or a stranger?

3. 15:40 - Rabbi Leon:

“There's this powerful moment in the text itself where the Torah critiques itself, ... basically saying... that it [Torah] is only as good and as powerful as the people who are its carriers... Of course Rabbi Yochanan knew this Mishna that he's not supposed to remind a ba'al teshuva, of, of his past. So is the problem in the Mishna? Or is the problem Rabbi Yochanan's ability to live out that Mishna?”

- a. Why is the Torah “only as good... as the people that carry it”?
- b. What obstacles – either internal or external – make it difficult for you to take moral precepts that you have learned and implement them into your life?

4. 17:30 - Rabbi Dianne:

“I always reckon with and wrestle with, in myself and in others... these pieces that just don't fit. And I've come to believe that there's actually something liberating about not trying to make them fit..”

- a. Why is it challenging for us to believe both a good thing and a difficult thing about the same person at one time? Was it hard for you as a listener to know that Dan committed a violent rape, and that now he is described by NPR reporter Delia Cohen as charming, playful, poetic, and creative?
- b. What does Rabbi Dianne mean when she says: “There's actually something liberating about not trying to make them fit”? How does it free us to not try to

reconcile these pieces of information that seem to contradict each other? What would it take for you to “liberate” yourself from the desire to make these disparate parts of a person fit?

- c. In what ways might it be noble or redeeming to try and reconcile elements of a person that seem to be conflicting?

5. 24:31 - Rabbi Leon, reflecting on the human need for stability, especially in romantic partners or friends, in contrast with the belief that it is possible for a person to change:

“To what extent [does] the idea of teshuva threaten the ability to have a secure sense of who the other person is?”

- a. If people are capable of significant self-improvement and change, what elements of a person can offer a source of stability so that we can rely on them?
- b. If we sometimes hold on to a static sense of someone in order to allow ourselves to rely on them, how can we combat this inclination and allow them space to grow, change, and evolve?
- c. How can you know if you’ve achieved the proper balance between allowing people to change and ensuring that they remain reliable and recognizable?

6. 25:00 - Rabbi Leon and Rabbi Dianne discussing why *teshuva* is sometimes the hardest within our families.

Leon: *“My rabbi and teacher, David Hartman, of blessed memory, used to say that the hardest place to do teshuva is in your family.”*

Dianne: *“There's something about [claiming]... ‘You always do this!’ that kind of nails someone to a past, that maybe makes me feel secure, because I have the power of defining someone in a story, even if it's a negative story.”*

- a. Why do you think it is that Rabbi Hartman claims that the hardest place to do *teshuva* is in your family? Does this resonate with your experience?
- b. What do you think it is about “nail[ing] someone to a past” that makes another person feel more secure?

7. 29:54 - Rabbi Dianne:

“This is what I call the unbearable lightness of being ... we have so much anxiety because the world is genuinely terrifying... And the unknown is generally genuinely terrifying. So I think things like a religious tradition can tether us. Spiritual practices and connection and community, it's all tethering. And the challenge is, how can we be tethered and free?... That's a paradox that we somehow have to navigate.”

- a. Can you share one source of “tethering” in your life, alongside one unknown that is a source of anxiety?
- b. We presumably know what it is to be too anxiety-filled by the unknowns. But what might it mean to be too strongly tethered, such that we are not fully free?

8. 31:46 - Rabbi Dianne:

“There's this fantasy of autonomy and all power and individualism in which I can master anything... [But] that's so not true. We are not masters. We are born into a certain moment in history. We're born into a class, we're born into a culture. We are defined by all kinds of outside factors. And our freedom is limited. And, and yet I wouldn't deny that we are free to respond to all these factors at the same time being humbled before them.”

- a. How much weight, in shaping a person, do you put on the facts of where and when and to whom they were born, and how much do you put any character traits that they may possess?
- b. What outside factors have shaped your life? Which did you feel that you were free to respond to, and which do you feel that you were unable to change?

9. 34:02 - Rabbi Leon and Rabbi Dianne discussing the effects of acknowledging another's transformation, even when it challenges much of what you think you know about them.

Leon: “That moment as you're describing it requires a certain grace and a certain acceptance of the other person's transformation. And the fact that not only has the other person transformed, but our relationship as a result of that has also metamorphosized into something that it wasn't before.”

Dianne: “Yeah. I guess every transformation requires or asks of the people around that person, further transformation. Teshuva sort of invites teshuva.”

- a. Can you share an instance in which someone close to you has undergone a significant transformation, one that demanded agility and nimbleness on your part? What helped you – or made it difficult for you – to accept those changes?
- b. What does Rabbi Dianne mean when she says “*teshuva* sort of invites *teshuva*”? What do you do if your *teshuva*’s invitation to another to do *teshuva* is unanswered or rejected?

10. 58:39 - David Dow, talking about his work as a lawyer for death row inmates:

“When, when I meet somebody who’s 35, 40, 45 years old, who’s in prison for something that he did when he’s 22, I’m meeting somebody who is at some level, not even the same human being.”

- a. On a scale of 1 to 10, how much change do you think a person is capable of achieving in their lives? What factors catalyze or inhibit such change? In your experience, which has a greater impact in effectuating change, time that transpires or willful effort?
- b. Later in the episode of Invisibilia that plays at the start of this episode of Pod Drash, a neuroscientist spoke about the biological fact that every element of our body is impermanent, and fully refreshes itself several times over the course of a normal lifespan. For you, is thinking about a person at age 50 as a fundamentally different person than they were at 18 helpful or problematic?

11. 1:02:34 - Rabbi Leon:

“Both of our stories... begin with liminal places of movement - swimming in the river, or with the fluid movement of dance. That world of fluidity is frightening. It’s hard to inhabit. So we look for sources of stability, but instead of finding a momentary foothold, we all too often create cell blocks. Most often, perhaps we imprison the other person. We subjugate them to their past. We reify their deed and freeze them. They could only ever become who they once were.”

- a. What sources of comfort in your life allow you a sense of stability and ease amidst the constant flux of people and relationships in your life?
- b. What thoughts or beliefs can – or already do – help you prevent these sources of stability from becoming “cell blocks” that imprison you or the people around you?

- c. When we consider that the Hebrew root of the word *teshuva* means “return,” in light of this model of perpetual change, what might it mean to return? To what?