

ESCAPING DOSTOEVSKY'S POLAR BEAR

"Try to pose for yourself this task: not to think of a polar bear, and you will see that the cursed thing will come to mind every minute."

Fyodor Dostoevsky wrote that in 1863. Daniel Wegner (1948-2013), a psychology professor at Harvard University, tested it out over a century later with a simple experiment: He asked participants to verbalize their stream of consciousness for five minutes, while trying not to think of a white bear. If a white bear came to mind, he told them, they should ring a bell. Despite the explicit instructions to avoid it, the participants thought of a white bear more than once per minute, on average.

Over the next decade, Wegner developed his theory of "ironic processes" to explain why it's so hard to tamp down unwanted thoughts. He found evidence that when we try not to think of something, one part of our mind does avoid the forbidden thought, but another part "checks in" every so often to make sure the thought is not coming up—ironically, bringing it to mind.

A significant portion of Parshat Shoftim is concerned with matters of national importance to the Jews once they have entered the land. There are various civil laws, guidelines for the future monarchy, and among other things, instructions for waging war. One detail is about the "Kohen Appointed for War," whose role was to give a rousing, motivational speech, rallying the troops psychologically and spiritually preparing them for battle. The Torah instructs him to proclaim the following: "Hear, O Israel, today you are approaching the battle against your enemies. Let your hearts not be faint; you shall not be afraid, and you shall not be alarmed, and you shall not be terrified because of them."

Try to picture a Bronze Age battlefield: clashing swords, clanging shields, flying spears, thunderous hoof beats. Imagine the blood and the gore, the battle cries, and the screams of the vanquished and dying. War was (and still is!) a terrible, terrifying thing. Thinking about it that way, this pre-battle pep talk doesn't make much sense. "Don't be afraid!" Is that really all he had to say? How could he brazenly get up there and wave his magic wand over the people and say, "Fear not!" Fear, especially in the face of a terrifying war, is a natural emotion; you can't just magically turn it on or off. So what is the Torah expecting from

these hapless soldiers quaking in their boots?

If the Torah told us that soldiers should fight despite feeling afraid, that would be understandable. But to expect someone not to feel fear at all—how is that even possible?

Rabbi Shlomo Freides was a renowned Chabad Chasid during the first half of the 19th century. In the late 1820s, he sent a letter to the third Chabad Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneersohn, known as the Tzemach Tzedek, expressing worry about his declining health. He related that he felt powerless, his only resort to pray that G-d remove his mental anguish. The Tzemach Tzedek wrote a fascinating response, first criticizing Rabbi Shlomo's sole reliance on prayer, and then providing practical techniques to overcome his mental struggles.

Here's what the Rebbe explained.

The Kabbalistic masters explain that every human soul comprises 10 unique attributes, or functions, which we use to explore and interact with the world around us. The functions are broadly divided into two categories—cognitive facilities and emotional capacities. The soul expresses her cognitive and mental capacity in the human mind, whereas her breadth and depth of emotion is realized in the heart. By default, the soul operates in a linear way—consciousness flows from the intellect into the emotions. In simple words, how we understand something shapes the way we feel about it. The mind develops an idea, understands it, and then gauges how it feels about it. The heart comes marching in closely thereafter, developing a corresponding emotional response. You first hear about the wonders of a certain person, you get to know them, you start realizing how terrific they are, and before you know it, you develop feelings for them. You now like them. Or, you hear about a social ill, you start reading about how rampant it has become, you begin to understand how devastating it is, and before long, you're repulsed and angry about the situation. You just went through the process of mind to heart, cognition to emotion.

Being aware of the process that produces your negative feelings provides a method of taming them, and that is to simply pull the rug out from under those feelings. If thought is the fuel that both generates and maintains your feelings, the best thing to do is to stop the flow—stop thinking about it!

To those soldiers frightened at the clashing cymbals and clanging swords of war, the first and most basic instruction was: don't think about it. But as Dostoevsky so keenly observed, it's virtually impossible to stop thinking about something. So what was a terrified soldier supposed to do? What are we supposed to do when besieged with thoughts of anxiety and fear?

Here's where we introduce something called the "Blue Dolphin." If it's impossible to not think about a white polar bear, why not try thinking about a blue dolphin instead? In other words, forget about not thinking about something; that will never work. But you can try to think about something else, and set the entire emotional process in a different direction. This is what the Rebbe explained in that letter to his anxious chassid, and it's something me, you, and everyone else can trot out in our lives right now.

Who doesn't experience fear, anxiety, anger, hurt, pain, jealousy, frustration, or some other negative feeling I missed out? We all do. It's part of the human experience. Now, you can spend your entire life trying to root out the cause of all those negative feelings, and there's definitely merit to that. Some matters do require excavation, whether it's on your own or with professional help. There's a time and place for that. But it's not the prescribed method for every negative feeling you may have. Sometimes, you can whip out your blue dolphin, pink cow, or even your toddler-on-a-scooter-juggling-three-balls-and-eating-avocado-toast (if that's your thing). Whatever works for you. If you have a Torah thought, something you know by heart that you can easily pull up—even better. As you can probably guess, that's what the Rebbe prescribed to his follower—and it's not a bad idea for you either.

Remember: you're in the driver's seat of your feelings. Grab onto the steering wheel and choose which direction you want to go.

PARSHAT SHOFTIM

9 – 15 August

26 Av – 2 Elul

Torah Reading:

Shoftim: Deuteronomy 16:18 - 21:9

Haftarah: Isaiah 51:12 - 52:12

Calendars

We have Jewish Calendars. If you would like one, please send us a letter and we will send you one, or ask the Rabbi/Chaplain to contact us.

Family Programs

Do you have family on the outside struggling? Please contact or have them contact our office to learn more about our family programs. You and they are not alone, we are here to help.

Grape Juice & Matzah

We offer free Grape Juice and Matzah for you to be able to make the blessings every Shabbos. Please have your chaplain / Rabbi contact us to enroll (available to all prisons).

Sacred material please do not desecrate

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By Aharon Loschak

ARE YOU OBJECTIVE?

There was once a king who was very fond of target shooting. He practiced daily and arranged competitions. With time he felt that he had gotten pretty good at the sport, yet he continued trying to improve.

One day, as he was traveling through the countryside, the king noticed several target boards near a small peasant hut. Looking closely, he was astonished to see that every one of the many darts on the boards was precisely in the center! This simple peasant was apparently an expert; he had hit a bull's-eye with every try!

Curious to learn how the man had done it, the king knocked on the door of the hut. The peasant who answered laughed heartily at the king's question. "Why, it's very simple," he replied naively. "Instead of drawing the target and aiming towards it, I throw the darts, and then draw the circles around them. It works every time . . ."

Often we may be swayed by bribes—personal concerns, interests and feelings

The Torah portion of Shoftim (Deuteronomy 16:18–21:9) includes a prohibition for judges to take bribes. The Torah then explains the reason for this commandment: "For bribery blinds the eyes of the wise."

Now, you're probably thinking, "No kidding, that's the definition of a bribe! What kind of reason is that?"

Good point. But, actually, the Torah is not trying to explain what's wrong with paying off a judge; it's obvious that corrupting fair judgment is immoral. Rather, the Torah seeks to clarify a fact. Often, people say, "I can be objective in this case, despite my connection to it." Recognizing the difficulty of proper judgment when personal concerns are involved, we may nonetheless convince ourselves that we are immune to bribery, intellectually and emotionally capable of separating fact from feeling.

Yet the Torah cautions us that the danger of bribery is not merely a possibility, nor even a probability. It is an automatic effect. Bribery—monetary or otherwise—skews one's perception, literally "blinding" him to reality. No one is immune.

We are all judges, all of the time. There are important decisions to be made constantly, and these require clear thinking and examination of facts. But often, we may be swayed by bribes—personal concerns, interests and feelings. We may have the best of intentions, yet the possibility of a purely objective decision is technically out of our reach, "for bribery blinds the eyes of the wise."

For this reason, it is crucial that every one of us have a mentor, an objective individual upon whom we rely to help us make decisions. Before signing on the dotted line, run it by someone out of the picture. It's a sort of reality check, a way to make sure that we are aiming towards the target, rather than adjusting the goal to suit us.

By Mendy Wolf

PIRKEI AVOT

Rabbi Shimon the son of Judah would say in the name of Rabbi Shimon the son of Yochai: Beauty, strength, wealth, honor, wisdom, sageness, old age and children are becoming to the righteous and becoming to the world. As is stated (Proverbs 16:31): "Old age is a crown of beauty, to be found in the ways of righteousness." And it says (ibid. 20:29): "The beauty of youths is their strength, and the glory of sages is their age." And it says (ibid., 17:6): "The crown of sages are their grandchildren, and the beauty of children their fathers." And it says (Isaiah 24:23): "And the moon shall be abashed and the sun shamed, for the L-rd of hosts has reigned in Zion, and before his elders is glory." 6:8

IN JEWISH HISTORY

Sunday, 26 Av, 5786 – 9 August, 2026

Tzemach Tzedek Departs Petersburg (1843)

In 1843, the Interior Ministry of the Czarist government convened a rabbinical conference in the Russian capital of Petersburg, to the end of imposing changes in Jewish communal life and religious practice. Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Lubavitch (1789-1866, known as the "Tzemach Tzedek" after his Halachic works by that name) was invited; as a primary figure in the leadership of Russian Jewry, his compliance was required to lend legitimacy to the government's proposed "reforms". In the course of the conference, the Tzemach Tzedek was placed under arrest no less than 22 (!) times for his refusal to cooperate. When he finally departed Petersburg on the 26th of Av, he had successfully prevented the government's disruption of traditional Jewish life.

Passing of R. Yoel Teitelbaum (1979)

R. Yoel Teitelbaum was the founding rebbe of the Satmar chassidic dynasty, named after the town of Satmar (or Satu Mare) in what is today northwestern Romania. After World War II (see entry for 21 Kislev), he relocated to the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn, where he continued to lead his thousands of followers. He passed away on 26 Menachem Av, 5739 (1979).

Wednesday, 29 Av, 5786 – 12 August, 2026

Flight from Liadi (1812)

On this date, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, who supported and aided the Czar's army during the Napoleonic wars, was forced to flee his hometown from Napoleon's forces which were advancing through White Russia in their push toward Moscow. After five months of wanderings he arrived in the town of Pyena. There he fell ill and, weakened by the tribulations of his flight and the harsh Russian winter, passed away on the 24th of Tvet, 5573 (1812).

Passing of R. Eliezer Zusia Portugal, the Skulener Rebbe (1982)

R. Eliezer Zusia Portugal (1898–1982), the Skulener Rebbe, is best known for his superhuman efforts to rescue Jewish orphans and refugees in Eastern Europe before, during, and after World War II and his continuing support of them. He immigrated to the United States in 1960, after imprisonment in Rumania and international efforts to secure his release. He was renowned for his lengthy prayers and the beautiful tunes he composed.

Thursday, 30 Av, 5786 – 13 August, 2026

2nd Tablets Hewn (1313 BCE)

On the last day of Av of the year 2448 from creation (1313 BCE), Moses carved, by G-d's command, two stone tablets -- each a cube measuring 6x6x3 tefachim (a tefach, "handbreadth", is approximately 3.2 inches) -- to replace the two divinely-made tablets, on which G-d had inscribed the Ten Commandments, which Moses had smashed 42 days earlier upon witnessing Israel's worship of the Golden Calf.

Friday, 1 Elul, 5786 – 14 August, 2026

Moses ascends Sinai for 3rd 40 days (1313 BCE)

On the early morning of the 1st of Elul of the year 2448 from creation (1313 BCE) Moses ascended Mount Sinai, taking with him the stone tablets he had hewn by divine command (see "Today in Jewish History" for yesterday, Av 30), for G-d to re-inscribe the Ten Commandments. On the mountain, G-d allowed Moses to "see My back, but not My face" (which Maimonides interprets as a perception of G-d's reality but not His essence) -- the closest any human being ever came to knowing G-d -- and taught him the secret of His "Thirteen Attributes of Mercy" (Exodus 33:18-34:8).

Moses remained on the mountain for 40 days, until the 10th of Tishrei (Yom Kippur), during which time He obtained G-d's whole-hearted forgiveness and reconciliation with the people of Israel following their betrayal of the covenant between them with their worship of the Golden Calf. This was the third of Moses' three 40-day periods on Mount Sinai in connection with the Giving of the Torah. Ever since, the month of Elul serves as the "month of Divine mercy and forgiveness."