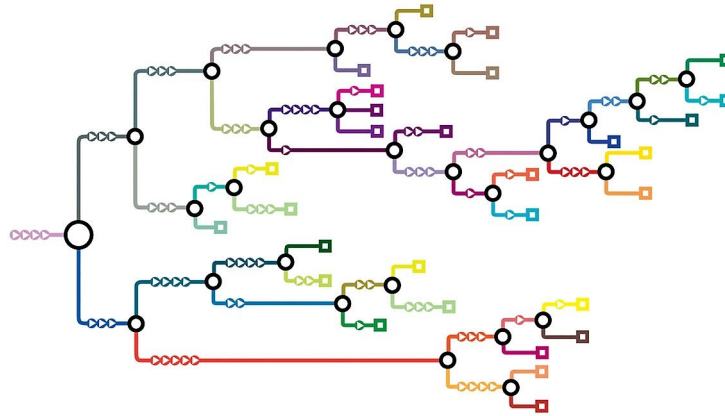


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Devar Torah for Yizkor

Nature, Nurture... and Choice

5779



In the last month, I watched three movies (that takes care of my quota for 2018-2019). Two of them I watched on the plane coming back from a trip abroad, and the third one was recommended to me by Silvia and I watched it at home.

The first movie I watched on the plane, *Three Identical Strangers*, is a documentary about three complete strangers who accidentally discover that they are identical triplets, separated at birth. The 19-year-olds' joyous reunion catapults them to international fame. *"While Bobby, Eddy and David, in those early years, were solely focusing on doing the media circuit and spending time with each other, their adoptive parents - the three sets came from an upper middle class, middle class and working class background - had questions for the adoption agency, Louise Wise, the largest adoption agency specializing in Jewish families. None of the parents were told that the boys they were adopting were part of a set of triplets who were going to be separated."*¹

When the movie *Three Identical Strangers* was over, I decided to go for something a little lighter and watched *Overboard*, "a 2018 American romantic comedy film

¹ <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7664504/plotsummary>

directed by Rob Greenberg." The film's main character is Kate, "a single, working-class mother of three who's hired to clean a luxury yacht that belongs to Leonardo -- a selfish, spoiled and wealthy Mexican playboy. After unjustly firing Kate, Leonardo falls off the boat and wakes up with no memory of who he is. To get payback, Kate shows up at the hospital and convinces the confused amnesiac that they're married. As Leonardo tries to get used to manual labor and his new family, Kate starts to wonder how long she can keep fooling her fake husband."²

The third movie, recommended by Silvia, is *Mr. Nobody*, a 2009 science fiction drama film, which "tells the life story of Nemo Nobody, a 118-year-old man who is the last mortal on Earth after the human race has achieved quasi-immortality. Nemo, memory fading, refers to his three main loves and to his parents' divorce and subsequent hardships endured at three critical junctions in his life: at age nine, fifteen, and thirty-four. Alternate life paths branching out from each of those critical junctions are examined. The speculative narrative often changes course with the flick of a different possible decision at each of those ages...Nemo explains that before birth, children remember everything that will happen in their lives. At the moment of conception, the Angels of Oblivion erase their memory. The Angels, however, forget about Nemo, allowing him to "remember" different possible futures for himself. At age 9, at a railway station, he is forced to choose as his mother leaves on a train while his father stays on the platform. In one case, he manages to board the train while in another he stays with his father."³

The three movies - one a serious documentary, the second a silly romantic comedy, and the third a complex science fiction film- couldn't be more different, and yet, they share a common theme.

The three movies touch on a subject, which has fascinated human beings for generations. The subject can be summarized as - what if I had been part of a different story, or what if I had lived a different life?"

² <https://www.mazzagallerie.com/trends/At-the-Movies-May-4/12238/>

³ [https://alchetron.com/Mr-Nobody-\(film\)](https://alchetron.com/Mr-Nobody-(film))

The theme is not new. *The Prince and the Pauper*, by Mark Twain; The American science fiction film *Back to the Future*, and the book and film, *The Man in the Iron Mask*, are three of the many stories dealing with parallel lives or alternative futures.

One of the main psychological backgrounds to many of these stories is the long time debate *nature versus nurture*.

The nature vs. nurture debate within psychology is concerned with the extent to which particular aspects of behavior are a product of either inherited or acquired characteristics.

*Nature is what we think of as pre-wiring and is influenced by genetic inheritance and other biological factors. Nurture is generally taken as the influence of external factors after conception, for instance, the product of exposure, experience and learning on an individual.*⁴

In the film, *Three Identical Strangers*, the nature versus nurture motif is clear. Bobby, Eddy and David, after having fun in exchanging girlfriends, start asking themselves the same question the researchers wish to know: what if I had a different upbringing, a different childhood, different parents?

In *Mr. Nobody*, the main theme of the movie is alternative futures. In the movie, the character has access to something none of us will ever have: how would my life have been different, had I made a different turn at one point or another in my life. If you wish to watch a less complex film on the same subject, I like to recommend to you *Family Man*, with Nicholas Cage.

Finally, in the romantic comedy *Overboard*, Leonardo, a selfish, spoiled, rich, and mean womanizer, suffers amnesia as a result of an accident, and –in a different setting- starts living a more productive, compassionate, caring, and meaningful life.

Parallel lives and alternative futures were not only dealt with in movies. Some of you may also remember *Choose Your Own Adventure*, "a series of children's gamebooks where each story is written from a second-person point of view, with

⁴ <https://www.simplypsychology.org/naturevsnurture.html>

*the reader assuming the role of the protagonist and making choices that determine the main character's actions and the plot's outcome.*⁵

This subject of parallel lives and alternative futures fascinated writers and film producers and continues to fascinate people, the main reason being that all of us fantasized at one or another point in our lives, openly or privately, with a different version of our lives. Do you remember....

*"Dear God, you made many, many poor people
I realize, of course, that it's no shame to be poor
But it's no great honor either!
So, what would have been so terrible if I had a small fortune?"*

*If I were a rich man
Ya ba dibba dibba dibba dibba dibba dibba dum
All day long I'd biddy biddy bum
If I were a wealthy man*⁶

This motif of parallel lives and alternative futures is mainly dealt with by fiction writers (*Three Identical Strangers* is an exception). In real life it is impossible to go back 25 years and see, for example, what would have happened had I stayed in Argentina, or the Dominican Republic. What if I had worked as a psychotherapist in Buenos Aires instead of being a pulpit rabbi in the States, or how would my life be if I had married my first girlfriend (that's an easy one. The answer is not as good as with Silvia).

As Robert Frost reminds us, there is always a road not taken,⁷ and it is impossible to go back. However, while the past is fixed and unchangeable, the future is always open.

You see, while nature and nurture shaped us, while our genes and our upbringing limited us and made us into who we are, there always was, is, and will be, the

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Choose_Your_Own_Adventure

⁶ *If I were a rich man* by Sheldon Harnick and Jerry Bock

⁷ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44272/the-road-not-taken>

variable of choice. True. I cannot easily undo 50, 75, 90 years of my life. What is done is done, and usually there is a reason for the way our lives unfolded. Nevertheless, while we cannot undo our lives completely, the spiritual journey of the High Holy Days invites us to explore the idea of *teshuvah*, of change, not as a word in the siddur, or as a fictional figure of speech, but as a real possibility applied to our own lives.

There is a story behind the establishing of the Nobel Prizes, the supreme awards for achievement in the arts and sciences. Alfred Nobel, a Swedish chemist, made a fortune by inventing more powerful explosives and licensing the formula to governments to make weapons. One day, Nobel's brother died, and one newspaper by accident printed an obituary notice for Alfred instead. It identified him as the inventor of dynamite and the man who made a fortune by enabling armies to achieve new levels of mass destruction. Nobel had the unique opportunity to read his own obituary in his lifetime and to see what he would be remembered for. He was shocked to think that this was what his life would add up to, to be remembered as a merchant of death and destruction. He took his fortune and used it to establish the awards for humanity, and it is for that, not for his explosives, that he is remembered today. ⁸

Alfred Nobel was given the strange gift of a glimpse into his own future, but we don't have to fake our own obituary in order to confront change. The idea of parallel lives and alternative futures I shared with you is an interesting one to play with. While "if I was a rich man," or "if was 20 years old again," or "had I been born in the Middle Ages," are impossible scenarios; others like "what if I spent more time with my children," or "what if I was more generous," or what if "found more time to connect with God, with my inner essence, and with others," are not only possible, but more meaningful ones.

There is no better time to think of possible alternative futures, or meaningful change, than during yizkor, when, not unlike Alfred Nobel in our story, we are forced to face our own mortality and to think that one day we also will be

⁸ <https://www.drmistyfunk.com/alfred-nobel-second-chance-making-history/>

remembered, the same way we remember our loved ones who made a difference in our lives.

And so we pray;

Master of the Universe! While we cannot change our past, we ask You to help us envision a more meaningful, rewarding, and fulfilling future. Mindful of our own mortality, and more sensitive to Your presence, we acknowledge that there is a better version of us waiting to be discovered, to be explored. Help it shine, help it find its way out.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O God, and as I strive even harder this year to become closer to You, bless me, my family, our congregation and your entire people Israel with a good, joyous, healthy and sweet year. Amen.