

Trapped!

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By Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch

Franz Kafka wrote a compelling short story – hauntingly Kafkaesque. Here it is in full:

“Alas,” said the mouse, “the world is growing smaller every day. At the beginning it was so big that I was afraid, I kept running and running, and I was glad when at last I saw walls far away to the right and left, but these long walls have narrowed so quickly that I am in the last chamber already, and there in the corner stands the trap that I must run into.” “You only need to change your direction,” said the cat, and ate it up.

Kafka called this story “A Little Fable.” I interpret it as a little fable on life. At the beginning, the world is so big that we find ourselves lost inside the bigness of it all. But as the years unfold and we keep running and running, the walls seem to close in on us. We run towards a goal or we run away from danger, disappointment, disease, and death. We cannot stop running. The walls of life keep closing in. We run the same track every day, rising at dawn, running to answer e-mails; running to work; running at work; running to the gym; running at the gym; running to take care of the kids; running to pick them up from school, camp, soccer; running home to prepare dinner. And then, in bed, and all over again – Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday – and for rabbis Saturday and Sunday. Month after month, year after year.

As Albert Camus wrote, “one day, the ‘why’ arises and everything begins in that weariness.” At some point, increasingly desperate to escape what philosophers call the “anxiety” of life, we seek ways out to explain and ultimately, escape our predicament. We want to find the way out – the way to give meaning and purpose to our infinitesimal smallness within the colossal bigness of the universe.

Most Americans choose one of two avenues of escape:

The first path is the path of power. Science and technology have empowered us as never before. We have the capacity to resolve any ailment – physical, emotional, psychological or sociological. There is a scientific explanation to everything, and hence a scientific solution to every problem. The meaning of life is not a philosophical or religious problem; it is a scientific problem, and we now have science-based solutions. The way out of the maze is not to change direction, but to plow ahead. Keep inventing. Keep discovering the scientific essence of things. We can invent our way out of the existential anxiety most of us will feel at some point in our lives.

Many believe that we are well on our way to overpowering and ultimately conquering nature. We can already predict storms, earthquakes, and droughts, and this capacity will improve in the decades to come. We know how to build earthquake-resistant structures. We know how to desalinate water from the sea and make the desert bloom. Israelis have invented a machine that can suck water from thin air. We bend rivers to our will. We harness the sun and the wind and molecules to produce immense energy. Most of us – especially those who live in cities – hardly know nature’s wrath. Drought was the terror of the ancient world, causing famine and death. Today in America our bigger problem is over-consumption. More Americans will die from obesity than starvation. For New Yorkers, nature is Central

Park. Nature is sanitized and homogenized and climate is acclimatized. When I ask youngsters where avocados come from, they respond, “Fairway.”

Until the modern era, almost everyone came into this world and departed this world never experiencing anything but their own village or town. Today, we have conquered the skies so thoroughly that we hardly think twice of the miracle of hurtling through clouds in a metal tube to the furthest reaches of the globe. For eons, we were prisoners of gravity, wondering what was out there. Our ancestors looked to the heavens, dreaming of “slipping the surely bonds of earth to the high un-trespassed sanctity of space to touch the face of God.” Reaching the stars was so fanciful that the mere speculation was evidence of human hubris. Icarus received his just reward by crashing to earth. Today, we take space travel for granted. In the coming centuries, humans will explore the distant reaches of the universe.

The science of modern communications is a thing of miraculous beauty. It is stunning to think that we can communicate instantly with almost everyone in the world. From the days that the Sumerians first invented writing, human beings endeavored to bridge the chasm of ignorance and distance separating one individual, one society, from another. Until the invention of the telegraph less than two centuries ago, messages were carried by hand or pigeons. Today, in one hour we can organize mass protests half a world away. When Chava left Anatefka, she and Teyve knew they would never see or speak with each other again. Today, we are never distanced from our loved ones. Wherever they are, we can Zoom or chat or FaceTime at all hours. And if, somehow, we have lost track of family or friends, computer specialist Apple can find their phones anywhere.

Medicine has revolutionized our lives. Lifespans have increased dramatically. We are healthier than ever. A hundred years ago, we could die of a sore throat. Scientists now predict that at some point – perhaps in a century or two – human beings will conquer death itself. We will discover why cells age and die, and intervene genetically to stave off illness and mortality. At that point, we will have the power of the gods: immortality. Science will succeed where religion and philosophy failed to resolve the central problem of mortality. We will eliminate the problem altogether, thus obviating the need to explain it. No one will die. There will be no need to feel the anxiety of mortality.

So it is not surprising that so many people look to science to provide all the answers to our most pressing questions. Even existential angst is a medical problem – not a philosophical one. If not now, then at some point in the future, we will invent a pill that will rewire our brains so that we never feel anxiety. Science will replace religion, philosophy, psychology and sociology. It is already happening. Already today, computers can produce music that is indistinguishable to most people from the best of Beethoven. No person on earth can defeat the latest and most advanced computer chess champion.

But if science so empowers us, why do we feel so weak, so lonely, so broken, so adrift? If we now know everything – how we were created, how the universe came into being, how to cure disease – then why do we feel so ignorant, fragile and alienated from others and from ourselves? If we know so much about the human brain, why do our minds trouble us so? If we are filled with so much knowledge why do we feel so empty?

In his massively popular book, *Homo Deus*, Yuval Harari asserts that modernity is a deal that all of us sign onto. “The entire contract,” he wrote, “can be summarized in a single phrase: Humans agree to give up meaning in exchange for power.”

In other words, science has so empowered us that we now know for sure there is no higher meaning to existence. We have given up dreaming of Paradise for the power to create paradise on earth. We give up the belief in life after death for the power to create life without death. We already slipped the surely bonds of earth 50 years ago and we know that there is nothing out there – certainly not the face of God.

Science teaches that there is no cosmic plan. There is no purpose. We now know how we got here. Creation was not guided or intended. We evolved chaotically, haphazardly and coincidentally. There is no rhyme or reason to suffering. There is no rhyme or reason to anything. It just is. Humans are insignificant talking apes on an insignificant rock, a tiny speck in the vastness of space. We are the product of random chaos.

How liberating!

We can do anything we want. We suffer not because of some higher purpose or Higher Being. We suffer because we haven't yet found the cure to this particular physical, emotional or sociological ailment. The only thing holding us back is our own ignorance. There is no God to punish us. There is no master plan to frustrate us. We acquire ever more power in a universe that has ever less meaning. That is what I think Harari means by the compact with modernity.

But how empowered are we, really? How many hours a day do you spend watching a screen? Are you even able to resist the hypnotic hold the screen has over you? Is that empowerment or servitude? Have you seen people walk the streets, their heads buried in a phone called "smart" that makes them so dumb they get run over? If a space alien were to visit us from a distant planet – not knowing anything about the human race – would the alien conclude that we are the masters of the screen or that the screen masters us? A Martian would surmise that this device must have some mesmerizing grip over human beings. We can't pull away. Our data intrigues us even more than our dinner date. Is that freedom or slavery?

And they accuse religion of being the opium of the masses! It seems to me that many more people are much more addicted to Google than God.

Modern communications, social media, the internet, indeed, have empowered humanity immensely. We now have all of human knowledge in the palm of our hand. It should have made us smart, informed, knowledgeable. But is that really the case today? Are we more open, more tolerant, more educated – or do we spend most of our time in the echo chamber with people who agree with us? Does social media make us a bigger, better and more content human family or has it polarized us even more? If we are so knowledgeable, how is that some of us refuse to vaccinate our children? Have we been liberated by Dr. Google or enslaved? This summer another El Al flight attendant died after contracting measles.

Even if we have all the knowledge of the world at our disposal, do we know what to do with it? Does it liberate or paralyze? Does it clarify or confuse? Knowledge is power, but it is a power that can be turned against us as well. I have so much information available to me that I do not know how to process it. I have so many options on Netflix that I can't choose. I often flick around the net after work and fall asleep not having watched anything.

There was something very 21st century about the Russian interference in our elections. Their method was not censorship. That is getting harder and harder to do, especially in the West. The Russians did not try to block information. To the contrary, they flooded America with so much information that we could

not distinguish between what was real and what was fake. We could not separate the wheat from the chaff – the truly important from the trivial or the fictitious.

Airplanes, indeed, empowered us enormously. We can reach the furthest points on earth in less than a day. But they can reach us as well. They can fly these airplanes into buildings and drop death from the sky. Is that empowering or weakening? After 9/11 can you look at a plane quite the same innocent, peaceful and empowering way as before?

Fossil fuels fueled a great leap in human technological power. But we have also polluted the skies, the drinking water, the very air we breathe. We are on the verge of ecological catastrophe. Have we conquered the problem of human existence, or complicated it? Nuclear physics created enormous energy, enabling our deepest desires for power. It also created the bomb. Our empowerment has empowered us to destroy everything.

Medicine has so advanced that it has liberated us from the chains of pain. But more of us than ever are addicted to pain medication. Computers, indeed, have liberated us. But it is a double-edged sword. It is not only that we cannot disconnect; we cannot go on vacation without working. More disconcerting, the machines determine how we live. Steve Jobs told me that I need a smart phone to live a productive life. I didn't reason into smart phones myself. Am I stronger or weaker as a result? Am I more empowered or more adrift?

C.S. Lewis wrote: "Each new power won by man is a power over man. Each advance leaves him weaker as well as stronger. We give up our soul to get power in return. But once our souls, that is, ourselves, have been given up, the power thus conferred will not belong to us. We shall in fact be the slaves and puppets of that to which we have given our souls... If a man chooses to treat himself as raw material, raw material he will be."

If I have sold my soul to the machine, the power I receive in return does not belong to me. Google, Facebook, Amazon – they are the masters of what I do with my life. I am merely the raw material. Even if I am bored and just messing around on YouTube, the algorithms are determining what I will watch, how I will spend my time. The algorithms influence what I want and what I buy. Nowadays, algorithms even choose our life partners.

Lest I be misunderstood, this is not an attack on modern science. Not at all. I would much rather live in these times than any other time in history. I like running water. I like air conditioning. When I am sick, I go the doctor. If they don't know how to cure my shingles, I get very discouraged by the lack of scientific progress. I like to travel on planes – well, I like to arrive quickly in distant lands. I prefer avocados at Fairway to having to grow my own. I cannot imagine a computer-less existence. I tried that 40 years ago in school. I prefer Windows.

But we have been so seduced by the empowerment of science that we have turned the very science that so confidently asserts there is no God into a god. Until the modern era, the human problem was how to align ourselves to the reality of the world. We did that through discipline, morals, justice, a sense of right and wrong, an intuition of the eternal. Now so many expect to align the world to themselves. Take the pill and you won't feel sad. We can eliminate sadness. Rewire your prefrontal cortex and you will avoid the crime. We can eliminate crime, violence and injustice through science. When the technology improves, we can hand over all our decisions to artificial intelligence that will know us better than we know ourselves and never get tired, never get emotional, never feel conflicted.

It is a kind of nihilism.

Do not sell your soul. Do not give up real meaning in exchange for the illusion of power. How to save a life from killer viruses? That is a question for science. Why save that life? What is the worth of that life? What value do we ascribe to that life? These are religious questions – or poetic or philosophical questions.

We have become so mechanical: soulless. Modern economics has generated so much affluence – at least for some of us – that we now have to figure out what to do with all our free time. Boredom has become another affliction to overcome in our hyperactive era. We need to be on all the time; we can't waste time – as if frenetic activity in pursuit of a hollow goal is not wasting time. As if spending a fortnight playing "Fortnite" is not wasting time.

We forget that the most meaningful moments of our lives often seem trivial, even boring when we lived them: that uninterrupted afternoon on the beach with the entire family; lounging around the house; just talking or reading or listening to music. When, as a teenager, I endured another boring Shabbat afternoon in Jerusalem not doing anything but sitting around listening to people talk, sometimes in languages that I did not even understand, it seemed deadly. But now, looking back, I don't remember the boredom. I remember all the people I loved who are no more. I remember my mother singing her beloved Russian songs. The memory of my mother singing – an inconsequential event at that time – is so meaningful to me today. Oh how I wish I could hear my mother sing again. Just once – just one of those Russian songs she loved so much. It would be bliss.

By presuming that all reality can be explained by physics, biology and chemistry, we are losing the sense of transcendence – the essential component of what it means to be human. Is there really nothing more to loyalty than self-interest? Is there nothing more to empathy than selfishness? Is altruism merely brain connections, and we can manipulate any brain to be altruistic? No wonder so many are so alienated and in such despair. There is nothing sacred. Nothing profound.

Is there really nothing more to love than the firing of brain synapses, adrenaline, dopamine, hormones and chemicals? Do not forego the poetry of love:

"How do I love thee? let me count the ways;
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach...
I love thee freely...
I love thee purely...
I love thee with passion...
I love thee with the breath,
Smiles and tears of all my life."

Do not desacralize human existence. Preserve, protect, defend and deepen the sense of human grandeur, the spark of the divine within us. We are much too confident in our knowledge. We know a lot. We know incomparably more than we used to. But don't forget – that's all we know. We don't know anything else – which is most of what there is to know.

Some people take the opposite approach: resignation. The only way to avoid despair is to withdraw. Stop running. Stop fighting. Do not take anything too seriously. Resign yourself to the inevitable – a hard, painful existence that ends in death.

There are both religious and secular versions of this philosophy.

Some religions emphasize the world to come over this world. This world is hopelessly and irredeemably unredeemable. We run towards some unachievable destination because we mistake the true destination. Our purpose is not this pitiful world filled with suffering and discontent. Running will only lead to more walls, more traps, more despair. Our true destination is heaven. Some religions assert that while we cannot redeem the world, a redeemer will arrive to save us in the nick of time. Either way, these religions assert that power is an illusion. No invention, no discovery, no breakthrough will redeem humanity. Give yourself up to our ultimate destination: Paradise.

In these post-religious times, many of us pursue the secular version of the philosophy of resignation. Its central teaching is happiness. Don't worry, be happy. We are all going to die anyway. So focus on yourself. At least while I live, I will live happy. Let those other sorry souls suffer.

In "Les Miserables," Victor Hugo puts these words in the mouth of a senator speaking to the bishop of Digne: "The immortality of man is a daydream. What nonsense it all is. God is a grotesque humbug. What am I but an organized handful of dust? I have a choice. I can suffer or enjoy. Where will suffering end? In oblivion, and I shall have suffered. Where will enjoyment end? Also in oblivion but [at least] I shall have enjoyed...The only thing to do is to...use yourself while you have yourself."

So many of us live that way. We use ourselves to the limit while we still have our strength. In pursuit of happiness, we pursue money, success, fame, pleasure, consumption, ease, luxury. We convince ourselves that if only we had this one thing we'd be happy.

Samuel Johnson invented a place called Happy Valley. It was not in Pennsylvania. That valley seems to have been particularly unhappy recently.

In Johnson's story, everything that could make people sad was excluded from the valley. The inhabitants of Happy Valley devoted their lives solely to pleasure. The young prince, Rasselas, was dissatisfied by having all his desires granted. As soon as he wanted something, he had it – and this created in him a state of despair. He decided to escape Happy Valley, and after many months and much searching, he found the secret way out. Rasselas traveled the world for many years. He discovered that no one achieves happiness. Ultimately, he returned to Happy Valley unhappy – but at least less unhappy than the other miserable souls he met in his travels.

Beware of the high priests of happiness. Herman Melville told the parable of the death of an Ohio honey hunter who, seeking honey in the crotch of a hollow tree, found such exceeding store of it that, leaning too far over, it sucked him in so that he died embalmed in honey.

The lure of honey entraps. The more we find, the more we want. We are never satisfied. Human beings have an infinite longing. Once a desire is satisfied, we want more. This longing, this drive for more, can entomb us. As too much honey leads to physical ailments, too much happiness leads to a diabetic spirit.

It is why the American founders brilliantly defined one of our purposes as the pursuit of happiness. They realized that if we ever actually found happiness – like Rasselas – we would be miserable.

While the self-help shelves overflow with advice on doing this one thing that will make you happy, in truth, the happiness specialists of our days, are, themselves, the product of the confusions of our times. The clay of human composition is too complicated, compromised, conceited, competitive and combative to be satisfied with the happiness elixir pedaled by popular culture.

Philosophers understood human wants better than our current happiness experts.

Heinrich Heine wrote: "...My wants are modest – a hut, a thatched roof, a good bed, good food, milk and butter, all very fresh; flowers at my window, a few beautiful trees at my door. And if the good Lord wants to make my happiness complete, He will give me the pleasure of seeing some six or seven of my enemies strung up on those trees. With all my heart, I shall forgive them, before their death, all the evil they have committed against me while I was alive. Yes, one should always forgive one's enemies – but not until they are hanged."

We do not measure satisfaction by objective material standards. If we did, we would be the happiest people in the history of the world. Americans today are so better off materially than any past civilization. Relativity, not objectivity, drives our state of mind. We measure happiness in comparison to others. No matter what I have, I can't be happy if my enemies are happy. No matter how much I have, I can't be happy if the other guy has more. Famed mid-20th century journalist H.L. Mencken said it best: "A [happy] man is one whose income is a hundred dollars a year higher than his wife's sister's husband."

There is a third way: the Jewish way. Of course, we speculate about eternity. We believe that there is more to our lives than what we see. The body dies; the spirit lives on with God. Of course, we speculate about reward and punishment, about free will and destiny, suffering, why bad things happen to good people.

But we do not spend most of our time speculating about the world to come. We focus on this world. There are mitzvahs to do – daily commandments that require engagement with others and with the many details of our own daily subsistence.

We do not reject science. We embrace science as an ally and a friend. Many of the greatest Jewish minds devoted themselves to the natural and social sciences, to research, medicine and now technology. Science helps explain creation. We are appalled by literalists who place themselves against progress. There is a rabbinic principle that whatever has been conclusively proved by science must be embraced, even if a biblical verse seems to contradict scientific fact. If science has proven conclusively that the world could not have been created in six days, the biblical passage of the six days of creation cannot be literally true.

We do not reject secular power. To the contrary, much of Jewish thought is devoted to how to exercise power morally. Power is necessary to repair a world that often misuses power to oppresses the powerless.

Nor do we reject pleasure. We embrace any technological breakthrough that has the potential to make life easier or more meaningful. Fertility clinics are filled with the most orthodox of Jews. We believe in the future. We believe in life. Life should be enjoyed. We do not worship weakness. We do not glorify

poverty. We do not venerate hardship. We are an optimistic people. We *kvetch* a lot, but if you look more deeply, our complaints reflect our commitment to the future, our belief that we can do better. Human beings do not need to be so miserable.

We do have a concept in Judaism called “Messiah.” That’s where the other Western religions got it from; they got it from us. But Jews do not await the arrival of a redeemer. We force the messiah to arrive through our daily acts of repair. Salvation comes not through a savior. The savior comes through salvation. The messiah will arrive only after we have prepared the world for his arrival.

As Kafka wrote, with such profound Jewish sensibilities: “The messiah will come only when he is no longer necessary. He will come the day after his arrival.”

While embracing progress, while marveling at, and making use of, the brilliant achievements of science, we return time and again to those age-old principles and values that were carved out of the stone of antiquity and anchor all human life. Nothing better has been invented since, and nothing ever will be.

Love your neighbor as yourself;
What is hateful to you do not do unto others;
Honor your father and mother;
Do not murder;
Do not steal;
Do not bear false witness; do not take bribes;
Speak the truth within your heart;
Be faithful; be loyal;
Protect the stranger and the weak;
Relieve poverty: When you cut your harvest, and have forgotten a sheaf, do not go back to pick it up. It shall be for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow.
Free the captive, redeem the oppressed; let the slave go free;
Be compassionate – may the law of kindness be on your tongue;
Pursue justice, love mercy, walk humbly.

What is the Jewish way out of Kafka’s maze? How to avoid the ever-narrowing walls and the trap guarded by the cat? Not by overpowering the world, and not by escaping the world. But by persistence. Defiance. Tenacity. By finding meaning, purpose and joy in the world as it is, and ceaselessly working to create a better world.

The meaning of life is a life of meaning. The purpose of life is a life of purpose. The energy of life is a life of energy. Commitment to life is a life of commitment. Devotion to life is a life of devotion. The promise of life is a life of promise.

We do not seek salvation through the worship of false gods. We do not seek escape. This is our arena. We embrace the struggle. We get better through struggle. We do not seek, nor do we expect, a challenge-free world. We do not seek to empty challenge from our lives but to challenge the emptiness of life – not to escape struggle but to struggle with escapism. We want our fight to count. To mean something.

We pray for strength; the capacity to endure. Human grandeur is revealed in all its glory through the struggle to carry on.

David Foster Wallace gave this brilliant interpretation of Kafka's Little Fable: "The horrific struggle to establish a human self results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle: That our endless and impossible journey toward home is in fact our home. We pound and pound on the door seeking admission, desperate to enter. We pound and pound until it finally opens and it opens outward. We've been inside what we've wanted all along."