

[Transcript] Leading / 31: Yuval Noah Harari: The dangers of AI and the future of humanity (Part 2)

Hi there, Rory here. You're about to listen to the second episode in our two-part series with Yuval Noah Harari. If you haven't heard the first episode where we talked to Yuval about the current situation in Israel, just scroll down on your podcast feed and listen to it now. Welcome to the rest of politics leading with me, Rory Stewart.

And me, Alistair Campbell.

And very, very rarely, I'm in the privileged position of having a friend on the show. Whereas usually it's Alistair. Usually I'm being teased by Alistair for claiming to have any of my friends because they're usually his friends. So, Yuval, I'm very, very grateful that you're here. So, just to explain for people listening, we have Yuval Noah Harari with us. And Yuval is 47 years old, right? Yes. And is many, many, many things. But I'm going to try to provide a rough one-minute summary of your life. And then I'd love you to come back and tell me what I've missed and how I've misrepresented you. So, my sense of Yuval is he was born in Israel, was a bright, precocious little boy. He studied medieval history, both in Israel and did a doctorate at Oxford University. He then returned to become an academic and teach. And in the process of teaching, began teaching a general course to undergraduates, essentially on the entire history of the world. And out of his course on the history of the world, he produced his first book called Sapiens. And Sapiens became an extraordinary best seller. Yuval will have better figures than me, but well over 10 million copies sold worldwide was followed up by a second book called Homo Deus, which looked at the future of humanity, then a book on lessons for the 21st century. And I've never really managed to pin Yuval down enough on his work on medieval warfare, because he's moved on so quickly to talk about artificial intelligence and the future of democracy and many, many, many other things. But can I just pause there and listen as I hope who listened last week will have picked up that he's become a very, very passionately politically engaged campaigner on the issue of rights in Israel, where he's been one of the people leading the fight against the Netanyahu government and its attempts to try to fundamentally change the Israeli constitution. But Yuval, can you just respond to this account I've given you? What have I missed out? What is irritating about the way that I've described you? What is a misrepresentation of who you feel you are? Except for the fact that Israel doesn't have a constitution. That's one of our problems. Everything else was I think spot on. Yeah, I still sometimes myself, I'm very surprised how quickly I managed to move on from medieval military history to AI and cyborgs and things like that. Maybe it's still the field I know best, medieval military history. Yuval's team has reminded me that Sapiens has sold 25 million copies. I am massively underestimated the number of copies itself. Just quickly, what is it that first drew you to medieval history and why is medieval history interesting? And then I'm going to hand over to Alasdair. I mean, I was interested in history in general. I had a very good teacher and mentor at the Hebrew University, Professor Benjamin Kedari, and he was a specialist in medieval military history. So I wanted to study with him and this is how I ended up in this particular subfield. When you started out as an academic, did you imagine that you'd be an academic and just an academic as it were for the rest of your life? And when you first essentially put lots of lectures together in the form of a book and kind of edited around them and inserted a few big themes, you can't ever have imagined that it was going to be the success that it's become. And I guess completely changed your world. Absolutely. I mean, I wrote it. It was 2010, 2011. It was based on my lecture notes at the

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Hebrew University. It was in Hebrew. It was published in Hebrew. I thought it could be, you know, a textbook for classes in Israeli colleges and universities. Because one of the things I noticed when teaching this world history course is that there was nothing in Hebrew. So I said, okay, so you have all these things in English, I'll write the Hebrew textbook. And then it was, it became so successful in Israel way beyond just university and college students. So it wasn't really me. It was my husband, Itzik, who is a much better business person than I am, who said, this, you know, this actually has potential beyond Israel. And it took Itzik, I think, like two years to find a publisher who was willing to publish it in English, which right in the US, nobody wanted it. Now, I mean, he's Israeli, what does he know about world history? And finally, so the UK publishers were much more cooperative. That's hilarious, because I've got a friend in publishing who I won't name names, but is one of the people that turned down JK Rowling's first drafts. So those are very good. And he's still in publishing. Yeah.

You mentioned your husband there, who's also your business partner. And I was interested in what it was like growing up in Israel. And what it was like growing up as a gay young man in Israel. My sense of reading about you is that it was only really when you got to the UK that you felt you could kind of express yourself truly as who you are. Is that is that correct? It started before that, when I was still studying in Jerusalem, doing my master's degree. But definitely when I grew up as a teenager in the 1980s, in a small industrial Israeli town, the atmosphere was so homophobic that I couldn't even come out to myself. I learned many things from that. But one of the things I learned is how little people can know about themselves and the absolutely incredible ability of the human mind to not know very important things about itself, to invent all kinds of fantasies and to, you know, hold on to them as if they're reality, which is of course one of the main guiding ideas of my later work as a scholar, as an as a scientist. Were you telling yourself that you weren't gay?

The question was not even raised. Like nobody was gay. What do you mean? It's not that I'm a nobody and there is no such thing in the world. Like luckily for me, because I was reading history books, then I didn't counter very, very rarely some gay figure in a history book, like about ancient Greece. But also making this may have something to be connected with my life. It didn't occur to me consciously. And what about your parents and your siblings? When would you first talk? When did you first come out to them? When the barrier came down in my own mind, like when I suddenly had this realization, hey, I'm gay, then it took something like two weeks to tell my parents and siblings. It's not something that I could keep from them. The really difficult process, which took me years, was to understand it or acknowledge it about myself, which again, is very, very strange. Given that when I look back, it's obvious that I was sexually attracted to other guys already when I was a teenager. But I somehow managed to kind of not know it. So you've all ten of you seems to have quite a liberal, vibrant gay culture. And one of the things I guess that is underlying the current issues in Israel, the current fights between Netanyahu's coalition and the opposition is partly about issues like this. I mean, do you feel as a gay man that one of the questions is around gay rights in this? Absolutely. I mean, you have government spokespersons and coalition members talking about it. You have a coalition member called Avi Maoz, who is the representative of a homophobic party. And this is the main issue of this is a small splinter party, which joined other parties into a bigger union. But its

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flag is against LGBTQ people. You have another coalition member who recently said that LGBTQ people are Israel's worst enemies, worse than the terrorists and the Hamas and the Hezbollah and should be eliminated. So it's very clearly there in the demonstrations, you see like a sea of flags of Israel and always are also rainbow flags, because the connection is very close. I mean, a positive thing that happened is that the protest movement and many people in the protest movements who previously distant themselves from LGBTQ rights and LGBTQ people, we now feel much more

embraced by this part of Israeli society. But for many people, it's quite obvious that if the Netanyahu coalition wins, then they are likely to destroy LGBTQ rights in Israel and the LGBTQ community.

One of the paradoxes or contradictions in this is that you are very much on the liberal progressive side, I suppose on the left, but you find yourself in alliance with the military, which in many countries would be associated more with the right. And your movement is doing something that sometimes

feels quite conservative. In other words, you're trying to stand up for a vision of the unwritten Israeli constitution. And your opponents, the right, somehow seem not to be conservative.

Yes, I think this is a fascinating and really terrible thing that is happening all over the world. Politics is no longer divided between liberals and conservatives. I think what really happened in politics in the last 10 or 15 years in Israel, in the US, in Brazil, in other countries, is that the conservatives committed suicide. There are no longer conservative parties in many of these countries. You know, conservatives, the main idea of being conservatives is to conserve. You are the party, the conservatives who conserves institutions, traditions, and so forth. And then you have the liberal progressives who are now like, nah, things are not good enough. We want to change this. We want to get rid of that. Let's change that. And this is the kind of traditional politics. And over the last 10 or 15 years, one conservative party after the other just committed suicide or disappeared and was replaced by a radical revolutionary party. You look at people

like Netanyahu now in Israel and his supporters or like Trump in the United States. They are revolutionary. They want to destroy institutions. They want to destroy traditions. The conservative ideology was like its founding moment is the French Revolution. The masses are storming the Bastille and you have Burke saying, no, this is not good. This will end badly. This is kind of the founding myth of conservatism. And now you have the 6th of January, another Bastille day, and the so-called conservative party is clapping, it's cheering. And this destabilizes the entire system because now what happens is that the progressive liberal forces are left with the task of being the protectors of institutions and traditions. And they are not good at it because this is not their job. I mean, what? We now need to protect institutions, but this was your job. Come back and do it. Yeah, yeah. So I feel this very strongly in a more mild way, but I think very distinctly also in Britain that Boris Johnson represented a direct affront to all the conservative traditions. He tried to paroch Parliament. He lied to the Queen. He breaks the ministerial code. He tries to rubbish Parliament and play the people against Parliament. And he discredits the House of Lords by putting people in their 20s into the House of Lords, putting me in a very, very odd position, which is that as a sort of right of center person, I find myself allying myself with Alistair and the left trying to stand up for conservative traditions against this guy that's pretending to be the leader of the conservative party. Yeah. And I think this is happening all over

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the world. And this is part of the reason for the political chaos we see. It's like a car that traditionally you have somebody with their foot on the fuel pedal and the other guys with their foot on the brakes. And now you have two feet on the fuel pedal and that's it. Nobody's on the brakes.

And one of the big question is why is it happening? One theory. I don't know the answer. One theory is that given the pace of technological changes that is sweeping the world, the conservative ideal of let's just keep traditions more or less as they are and move very slowly and carefully is becoming untenable. And that you have to change rapidly. The only question is in which direction? Now, this is very bad news. Again, as a historian, even though politically I have a lot of progressive and liberal ideas, as a historian, I also have a very deep sympathy for the conservative worldview, which I think is based on a better understanding of history and human nature. The basic conservative insight, again, going back to Burke and these people, is that humans don't understand the world very well. Humans don't understand the history and society very well. Therefore, it's very dangerous to try and change too many things, thinking that you know best. If something works with many problems, but it somehow works, then don't mess with it too much because you're likely to make it worse and not better. You're not as smart as you think. This is, I think, the key conservative idea. Whereas the progressives say, I know how to fix it. Let me have a try. I know how to fix it. And the great thing is that we're right.

That may be sometimes, sometimes. Listen, I want to homodeos ends with you posing this question to the reader. What will happen to society, politics, and daily life when non-conscious, but highly intelligent algorithms know us better than we know ourselves? Now, that was that was some years ago now. And yet that goes right to the heart of the debate about technology, about democracy, and about some of the struggles that we're having right now to make sense of the world. So what's your own answer to that question? I think this is an extremely dangerous development.

I wrote it in 2016. I thought it will be like, you know, like decade centuries until we have to confront this. But in 2023, this is already becoming a reality. In many ways, algorithms do know us better than we know ourselves right now. And this is frightening. This opens the door to new types of totalitarian regimes, much worse than anything we've seen, for instance, in the 20th century. You know, in the 20th century, it was technically impossible, even for somebody like Stalin, to follow everybody all the time and to know everything they do and everything they say and think. He didn't have enough NKVD agents. Even if you have an agent following a person 24 hours a day, you need to analyze the data. Okay, so there is an NKVD agent following me. At the end of the day, they write a report about me, you have millions of reports coming to the Lubyanka or to NKVD headquarters in Moscow. Somebody needs to analyze them to make make sense of it. So it was impossible to build a total surveillance regime that follows everybody all the time. Now it is possible. You don't need human agents to follow people around. You have smartphones and all the online activity and drones and cameras and microphones everywhere. And you don't need human analysts. This is AI. This is machine learning. Are you more worried about governments? You mentioned totalitarian governments. That's the risk. Or is it also the fact that corporations now have become more powerful because of this? It doesn't matter who holds this kind of information.

They effectively would constitute a totalitarian regime. So it can come in different forms.

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At present, I think governments are still more dangerous. I know that in the West, we often focus on corporations, you know, like in this groundbreaking study by Shoshana Zuboff, surveillance capitalism. So the focus is on surveillance by corporations, which is dangerous in many ways. But if you look at what is happening in China, or I look at what Israel is doing in the occupied Palestinian territories, and the type of surveillance regimes that governments are now building and exporting to more and more countries around the world is really dystopian. So this is a surveillance aspect. And then there is, of course, the aspect of deep fakes and the way that they can play into elections. Can you give us a sense of whether we should be worrying about the next US election in terms of the consequence of AI on that? Absolutely. I mean, it's not just new generation of deep fakes. You can now have a video of President Biden doing and saying anything you want. It's more than that. We now have AI that is able to generate ideas, texts, stories. Previously, bots simply disseminated fake news or political ideas that people created. Now AI can generate the texts and the stories and the fake news and the conspiracy theories by themselves. Also, it's not just spreading them. AI can now hold conversations with people that you don't know if you're talking with a human or with an AI, and can also build real intimacy with people. We see more and more cases that AI through conversations online and images and so forth can create real intimacy with people. So you have a friend online, which you really like and knows a lot of things, and you know them for weeks and months, and you don't know that this online friend is actually a Russian bot that gives you a lot of good advice and truthful information about 99% of issues, but gradually shifts your opinion about Putin or the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In the 2010s, we had this big struggle about human attention. Almost everybody by now realizes that there was a huge battle for how to grab human attention, and the algorithms discovered that the easiest way to grab human attention, the Facebook algorithm, the YouTube algorithm, they discovered that to grab human attention outrage is the easiest way to do that. So they spread outrage and destroyed the public conversation in much of the world. You know, the US now has the most sophisticated information technology in history, and Americans are unable to talk to each other, and unable to agree on the most basic facts like who won the last elections, or whether the earth is flat or round. So and this was just with attention. Now the battle front is shifting. Very soon, we'll see AI battling AI for human intimacy and intimacy. If you want to change people's views on anything, religion, politics, climate change, whatever, intimacy is the kind of nuclear weapons of changing people's opinion. It's much, much more powerful than attention. So we talked on the podcast a few weeks ago to Francis Fukuyama, who of course, painfully is known almost universally for one phrase, the end of history. Yes. I wonder whether actually you are closer to the, he by the way, disputes that what people think he meant was actually what he meant and what he said and so forth. But in a way, you kind of are talking about the end of history. Yes. I'm talking about not the end of history, but in a way, the end of human history. Well, what does that mean? History will continue, but with somebody else, not humans, in the driver's seat. So what happens to us? What happens to humans in that? That's a big question. But history basically is the interaction between biology and culture. That's history. So you have our biological drives for food and sex and whatever. And then you have culture which shapes and interacts with these drives, with laws and religions and ideologies.

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Now, we are now at a point when increasingly our mythology, our stories, our laws will be shaped by a non-human intelligence, AI. So the interaction, yes, it's still between biology and culture, but the culture is no longer human culture. In the first few years, AI like chat GPT will still work on the basis of previous human culture. I mean, the way they work is they eat all the previous things that humans produced, like they go over all the texts or all the music or all the paintings produced by humans over thousands of years. They eat this, they digest it, and then they start producing new stuff. At first, the new stuff will be quite similar to what they ate to our culture. But with every passing year, they will create more and more alien culture which will still be human culture in the sense that humans will consume it. It will surround us. Just imagine living in a world where almost all stories, poems, songs, videos, movies, theater plays are produced, created by a non-human intelligence.

So will you be back, are you backing the strikes in Hollywood? Are you worried AI is going to write your next book? I think it will take it a few more years. I don't know how many years, but I'm definitely down the road. They will get to that. But I think it was Lord Hague who wrote, very interestingly, that Hollywood for years had all these science fiction scenarios about the robots are coming for us. And funnily enough, the robots are really coming for them. It's not a movie, it's happening to them in real life. So we've still got much to discuss. Let's just take a quick break and we'll be back in a minute.

Hello, and welcome back to The Rest is Politics Leading, where we're joined by Yuval Noah Harari. In a way, we've recently had the two extremes of this. We talked to Yuval, Roy and I talked to Paul Nurse, who's a great Nobel Prize winning scientist a few weeks ago. And he was basically saying, this AI thing, it's all overblown, humans are going to stay in control, it'll be fine, stop sort of scaring the world. And you're giving quite a scary vision of the world. So I wanted to really ask Roy where he fits on the scale.

Yeah, this is an interesting thing. I mean, often when you talk to older scientists, I find particularly distinguished biologists and others, and I've been arguing with some of the states, they tend to say, oh, these fears about AI are very overblown and get very defensive about it. Whereas people like yourself, or Mr. Fusulamin, tend to be much more concerned about crisis and catastrophe. And I just wondered whether this is something that you'd experience, whether you had any intuitions about how the sort of general public decides whether the 75 year old Nobel Prize winning biologist is right, or whether kind of younger people in their 30s work on AI are right. Now, part of the issue is they're talking about different scenarios. Part of the problem goes back to Hollywood. But for years, Hollywood fed us with a diet or sci-fi movies about AI and robots, you know, running the street shooting people. And when people hear about the AI apocalypse, they think, okay, the terminator is coming for me. And then this is not going to happen anytime soon. This I agree with the kind of people who say, nah, this is fantasy, you're not going to see the terminator anytime soon. But this is not what I'm worried about. I'm not worried about the terminator. I'm worried about much more primitive and stupid AI, which can't do what the terminator does, but can is still good enough to disrupt our societies from the job market to democracy. Again, just look back to the 2010s. We have cases like the Rohingya genocide in Myanmar. Oh, like what happened to American politics, that very stupid AI, very stupid AI, which was used by companies like Facebook and YouTube and Twitter was partially responsible for that. You know, it doesn't take so much intelligence

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to find out that outrage captures eyeballs, outrage captures attention.

Yeah, it strikes me that there is also another issue, which is that in so far as Facebook has tried to open source or appears to have maybe accidentally ended up open sourcing its generation of a large language model, we now seem to be in a situation where it's more plausible that somebody in a basement in Thailand can start playing around with the base model. And then the ability of these companies to control it. So one of the hopes is that there are only two or three companies who are really on control of this and they can stop a sort of autonomous generalized AI grabbing tools and getting its finger on the nuclear trigger. But presumably, there is a problem that it isn't that easy to keep control. And another state could decide to invest in dangerous applications or somewhere in allowing the public into the base code, somebody else could

begin to do stuff. I'd love to know your thoughts on this. I prefer to stay away from the kind of doomsday scenarios of a rogue AI taking control of the nuclear weapons of humanity.

You're pretty doomsday without that. Yes, I don't need that. I have other doomsday scenarios. Like, a favorite scenario is the financial system. How many people today understand the financial system?

Let's be generous and say 1%. Yes. Now, think about the 2007, 2008 global financial crisis and what it did to humanity. It all started with these financial devices that nobody understood.

You had a few wizards, a few kids going from Harvard to Wall Street, inventing these CDUs, CDO, you know, the big short, but what's the name of the thing? Credit default swap.

And nobody understood it. It was not regulated because it was difficult to understand what it is, and it brought down the global economy. Now, fast forward five years, you have AI

creating new financial devices that cannot run in the street and kill people,

but much of the global economy is based on new financial devices, very complicated mathematics, that no human being can understand. Only AI can manage it. And the whole financial system is built on that. And, you know, you wake the Prime Minister at two o'clock in the morning, telling him or her

that there is a financial meltdown, and nobody understands why, because nobody understands these new devices except the AI. That's pretty doomsday. But it happened. It can happen.

What do we do about it? I mean, how on earth do we mitigate these risks?

You know, there's been a lot of talk of regulation, and it's certainly necessary.

What should be clear is nobody knows what is coming. AI is just a baby. It's, you know, like 10 years since we had real AI. The early 2010s is the moment when AI became a real thing and not sci-fi. It's still a baby. Nobody knows where it will be in 10 or 20 years. We cannot

regulate in advance what we need our living institutions that can understand and react to things on the fly. And they need to be, on the one hand, staffed by top human talent and the best

AI. You need a thief to catch a thief. You need AI to understand AI. And also to have public trust. If you have a good regulatory institution that the public doesn't trust, this is not good enough.

So again, going back to what we talked earlier about conservatives and liberals and institutions, we need new institutions. The same way that when print came along, new institutions appeared

to regulate print like newspapers and academic journals and publishing houses. We need new institutions and not just, you know, a once and for all regulation. You've talked before about

in this field of regulation that you call for some pretty heavy sanctions against the tech company executives who fail to, for example, guard against fake profiles on their platforms. And

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you talked about that in relation to the American elections. Within that, you're basically saying that people like Zuckerberg and Musk should go to jail because their platforms are doing this, whether they like it or not. They've lost control as well, it seems to me.

No, I think they have responsibility. If you make them focus their mind on a problem, they can solve it. I remember the days when it was almost impossible to open my email because it was full of spam. When Google wanted to solve spam, it found very good ways. I don't have any problem with spam anymore. So if government says if you allow fake people on your platform, you go to jail, I'm sure that very intelligent people like Zuckerberg and Elon Musk will find ways to solve this problem. And again, this is part of the thing about regulation. When we talk about it to the public, we need things that people understand easily. In many cases, we simply need to take our common sense rules that we had for thousands of years and apply them to the new technology. We had this rule for thousands of years, don't steal. Very familiar, right? Don't steal. But we had the tech companies saying, oh, online, it doesn't count. If I steal your data, that's not stealing. That's my business model. And we just need to come to the tech companies and tell them, no, it also applies online, don't steal. It's as simple as that. You can't steal people's data online. The same way, you can't do it offline.

Is that genie not left the bottle? You can put it back. In the 19th century, you had all these coal companies, like these owners of coal mines, telling people, you had nine-year-old kids going to the mines to dig for coal. And then you had the company saying, this genie is already left at the bottle. You cannot force us to take the kids out of the mine, because if we do that, the Germans will do it and they'll get ahead of us. Now we know that it was not only possible, but also sensible, to take the kids out of the mines and send them to school. It was good for the economy, not just for human rights. So don't believe the tech companies that tell you, no, it's impossible or the Chinese will do it. I feel a paradox in you. You have a side of you which is very evident in the books, which is very detached and looks from a great distance at human history. And you have a tendency to question free will and to suggest that the entire liberal global order is just another myth, another fiction, another cultural artifact, on the one hand. And on the other hand, you're becoming an increasingly passionate defender of liberalism. You're taking a political stance, you're taking considerable risk, you're sacrificing things, you're speaking passionately. Yeah, I mean, part of the thing is that when I was writing about these things 10 years ago, I thought that yes, liberalism has many defects. We need to go beyond them. We need to understand what it gets wrong and go to the next stage. But what's happening now is that people are trying to drag us back, that all the lessons that we thought we learned in the 20th century have been forgotten. So you know, if you have a student who forgot the lessons of the previous week, you need to repeat it. Like, okay, let's relearn the lessons of the 20th century, fascism is bad, militarism is bad, got that? Okay, now let's move on to the new lesson. But we are stuck. I mean, as a historian, it's very frustrating that people just forget the history. Another thing I would say is that I think that liberalism in its essence, it encourages, it allows people to question itself in a way that no other ideology allows. And this is its big strength, that it's okay to question the basics. You know, I compare, for instance, I don't know, a text like the US Constitution, to the 10 Commandments. Both texts approve of slavery or approved of slavery originally. The 10 Commandments, people sometimes forget it, but the 10th Commandment says, don't covet

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your neighbor's field or your neighbor's wife or your neighbor's slaves. It's okay to hold slaves, just don't covet your neighbor's slaves, that's wrong. Now, the US Constitution, as a liberal text, acknowledges that it was created by humans, and therefore it might have some errors because humans

are fallible. So it includes a mechanism to amend itself, to amend the Constitution. It's very common today to criticize the founding fathers of the US. They were slaveholders and racists and so forth. But one thing should be said in their favor, they had the humility to understand that maybe we got some things wrong. So we'll give the next generations the ability to do better. Now, the 10 Commandments, not being a liberal text, claims to be a divine creation, infallible, free of all errors. So there is no 11th Commandment, which says, if you find one of the previous 10 Commandments unacceptable, this is the mechanism to amend it. No. And this is why we are still stuck

with a 10th Commandment that approves of slavery, even in the 21st century. So this is one thing about liberalism. And the last thing is, with regard to free will, because I get this question a lot, I see the naive belief in free will as a barrier to curiosity and to research. One of the most fascinating questions in life or in the universe, and it goes back to the beginning of our conversation about my childhood or my teenage years as a closeted teenager, is how well do we know ourselves? And why do we do the things we do? Why do we believe or why do we decide the things

we decide? Now, if you believe in free will, I decide things out of my free will, there is nothing to investigate. Like, why did I choose to vote Democrat or Republican? Why did I choose to marry this person and not that person, to buy this car or not that car? It's always the same answer. It's my free will. There is nothing to investigate. Now, if you say, wait a minute, I'm not sure I'm buying this free will story. Then you start realizing, actually, my beliefs, my choices, my decisions, they are influenced by cultural factors, by biological factors, by all kinds of internal hormones and enzymes and synapses and whatever. And then you start being curious. You start to look inside yourself. Now, if you go on a long journey of self-observation and meditation and research, and after many years of careful examination, you say, I've taken into account all the cultural and political and biological influences, and I still find within myself this spark of completely free will, then okay, I want to argue with you. But first, embark on this journey of self-exploration, and it needs to start with doubting the idea that anything I do, this is just my free will. So, are you saying that we basically tell each other's stories and that other people create stories for us, and then we believe them because we want to, and that is driving us to behave in the way that we do?

In many cases, yes. You know, culture, religion, politics, these are all stories often created by dead people who lived decades or centuries or thousands of years ago, and we still believe them, and they still shape the world. Now, listen, you mentioned the self-exploration. I'm a bit of an odd one out in the three of us here because you two are both meditators, and you both go off on these

silent meditation retreats. In fact, I was amazed to read you, Val. You did not know until five weeks after the American presidential election that the wretched Donald J. Trump was the president of the United States. How could you possibly last five weeks without knowing the outcome of the one of the most important events of the world? I think I gained five weeks without this knowledge.

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It wouldn't have mattered to anyone if I knew it, right? So, tell me what it does for you. Tell me what you do when you go off on these retreats. Tell me how often you do it. It's called vipassana. Vipassana. Tell me what you do, how often you go, and what you get from it. I started it when I was doing my PhD in Oxford, and a friend recommended it. So, I went to a vipassana center near Hereford,

and I did my first 10 days silent retreat and learned the technique. Hereford is rather famous for the finest special forces in the world. I didn't know there was also a meditative retreat down there. It's not in the city. It's kind of on the outskirts in some small village. Neville Boston Way. Why? I think it's called. Okay. Since then, I've been going every year. Now, I'm going to longer retreats, like 60 days or 30 days. I was also there when Donald Trump was elected in the same center doing a 45-day retreat. This is why it took me so long to hear about the results. It's partly, again, an exploration of myself. The key question in meditation, at least for me, is what is really happening? What is reality in contrast to what are just stories created by your own mind? We think we see the world. Most of the time, we see only stories created by our own mind, even about ourselves. And both on a personal level, but also on a professional or even political level, if I am constantly trapped within the stories generated by my own mind, I can't understand things like wars and revolutions and political developments and things like that. Now, the first thing you realize in meditation is how little control you have over your own mind. Like the first instruction given is just focus all your attention on your breath coming in and out of your nose. And you don't need to control it. You just need to notice, to observe, to feel when the breath is coming in and when it's going out. That's it. Sounds very simple. Amazingly, when I did my first course, I couldn't do it for more than five seconds before my mind was kidnapped, was hijacked by some story. Like I would try to feel my breath and I would remember something from yesterday or from my childhood or I would think about, I don't know, a political issue or whatever. And I would be rolling in this story for five minutes before I remembered, hey, you're supposed to be observing your breath. And I come back to it five seconds, 10 seconds, and another story takes me away. And you see the immense power that these

stories have over you. And if I can't observe my own breath for five seconds, how can I expect to observe political development in Israel or the rise of AI or anything like that?

Yes. So I think maybe just sort of finish on this. And I guess it's me trying again at the paradox that I keep sort of worrying at, because as a practicing meditator and somebody who's deeply influenced by Buddhism, there is a side of you which sees a lot of the world as different forms of illusion or myth and is tempted to remember that the Buddha's advice and many issues is to do nothing. And as a historian, you have this very cold objective stance on beliefs. But also now, as a political activist in Israel, you have passionate commitments. You're not saying my beliefs about Benjamin Netanyahu are just fictions, myths, concepts. Of course, at some level, maybe they are. But you are living them. You believe in them. I mean, you're putting enormous energy and time into fighting hard for a particular vision of the world. So there's a sort of interesting thing between your objective view and your immense subjective commitment to the people that you believe in and to the values that you're upholding. Yeah, there is a big tension there. But I think Buddha is often misunderstood that when Buddha said do nothing, it didn't mean do nothing in the outside world. He meant do nothing in your mind. Don't create new illusions

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and fictions and stories in your mind. Don't generate more hatred in your mind. But on the basis of this, do nothing in your mind, you can take a very forceful stance in the outside world. Now, if you're a monk, you have this long list of things you're also not supposed to do in the outside world and you're not supposed to engage in politics and whatever. But if you're a lay follower

of Buddhist tradition, then this is not the case. At least I don't understand it this way. And you have to be very careful about what's happening in your mind. Don't generate hatred. Try not to generate all kinds of fake news and conspiracy theories and spread them around. Now, I try to be very mindful of what's happening inside my mind as I'm now engaged with this political upheaval in my home country. Am I inventing some fictional stories and then using my platform to poison the minds of thousands of people with fictions and fake news and so forth? This is something that worries me a lot. So I still meditate two hours every day. I wake up in the morning. I meditate for one hour. In the middle of the day, I take a break. I meditate for another hour because this is the basis for everything else. Do you not hate Ben Gavir? I try to be angry and not hateful. I think anger in certain situations is a healthy and positive thing. It also brings you to action and you can be angry even at people you love. I'm not saying I love Ben Gavir, yes, but anger is not the worst kind of emotion. In many situations, including in very intimate relationships, there is a place for anger. Hatred is different. It's really destructive and it is self-destructive. When you're angry at someone, you can also still do things to benefit them.

Could you imagine, right now, for example, given what's happening in Israel and given how much it means to you, could you imagine just disappearing to this retreat and here for 60 days? Right now, no, but eventually, yes. I wouldn't be able to keep going like this without a period of going back in and basically detoxifying the mind. As much as I try with this daily practice, it's obvious that I'm still generating a lot of garbage in my mind every day. I'm still picking up a lot of garbage from the outside and I need the time to detoxify my mind. Today, many people are so careful about what they put in their mouth, the food they eat, but we need to be equally careful about the mental food, about the information we put in our mind. For me, meditation is part of an information diet. To be very mindful about the information I take in and also generate inside myself. So we all need mental dustbins? Absolutely, yes.

I think especially politicians, more than anybody else, would benefit from it that the words of a politician, they are seeds that go into the minds of millions of people. If an ordinary person says something hateful, it's not good, but it doesn't have much effect. A politician publicly says something hateful, it's extremely destructive. Now, we have today this new type of authentic politicians who say the first thing that comes in their mind and people say, this is wonderful. They don't repeat what some spin doctor says, they are authentic, but this is terrible. I mean, politics is not therapy. You want to speak your mind authentically, go to a therapist. You want to be a politician, you need to be very, very careful about what goes out of your mouth and much of what is happening in your mind is garbage. You have all these politicians today who love walls, they want to build walls everywhere. The first wall to build is between your mind and your mouth. You need a gate in the wall, that's true, but you need to be very careful what immigrants you allow through the gate leading from your mind to your mouth.

Thank you. You've been very patient, incredibly energetic, given all the emotional strain that you're under and all our best wishes are with you on this fight that you're conducting and it's

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incredibly kind of you to give us well nearly two hours of your time in the middle of one of the great fights of your life. So thank you so, so much for me. Thanks for all your time. Thank you so much. Bye-bye. Take care. Bye-bye. Normally, I'm in awe at your energy and ability to keep going, but I was pretty impressed by that. To put it in context, when I saw him last week in Israel, he's completely exhausted. He's addressing crowds of some of them, sort of 100,000 people, I think he got 200,000 people at one rally. He is totally torn apart emotionally, psychologically, by this fight. And yet he just pushed through two hours of interviews with us. I thought with immense kind of chirpiness, grace and energy without flagging half as much as I would in that situation. Well, even to the point where you've just been sneaking a little snack, have you not pleaded guilty or innocent? Do you want to plead guilty? No, I think, listen, energy is so important in any campaign and he's right at the heart of a campaign. I suspect there's a lot of adrenaline going there at the moment. I didn't want to say this in the interview with him, because it would feel kind of that I was not belittling it, but sort of I think the comparison doesn't quite work. And I'm going to raise it with you. I imagine how people like him woke up on the morning after the vote in the Knesset was how a lot of people in the UK woke up the day after Brexit, where you feel that something really profound and fundamental has happened and you can't quite work it out. But you know that this is really, really big change. And that's scary. It is scary. And I think you did an amazing analogy in our thing last week where you said that the hundreds of thousands of people that have been gathering, demonstrating in Tel Aviv every week for 21 weeks now, the equivalent in the United States would be tens of millions of people, wouldn't it, out on streets. I mean, it's a real sign. And I think this was something I was pulled up for when we did our main part on Israel, not emphasizing enough how Benjamin Netanyahu doesn't speak for all of Israel. I mean, that a very considerable half of the population is so passionately opposed to what he's doing. I also liked how incredibly honest and open he was about growing up and being gay, how comfortable he was talking about personal things. I thought that was an interesting line of questioning. And it was rather sort of touching for him to say that he just didn't really even believe that you could be gay in his teens. And it was only later looking back that he could sort of recognize he'd been attracted to men. I didn't want to revisit it later in the interview because we were kind of moved on to other things, but I wondered whether that whole thing he has about we tell each other stories all the time, about money, about the economy, about religion, about family, about institutions, whether actually that's where that line of thinking comes from, that he spent most of his childhood and his teens and part of his youth basically telling himself a story and living that story. And maybe part of why he became a historian. I mean, as he said, the only time he actually saw that it was sort of okay to be gay was by reading about ancient Greece, a sort of reminder that in some ways from his point of view that there was a society 2,300 years in the past, which was in some ways more progressive and open than the things that he was seeing around him. It was interesting. The other thing I read was I read some of the reviews of his book. He got some pretty harsh reviews, particularly from the people that would probably regard themselves as absolute proper died in the wall, his story of the academic types. But the thing is that I think to take the sort of issues that he thinks about, writes about, talks about, and make them so

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accessible

to so many different people. I also love the story about the success of his book. I mean, he literally just strung together a bunch of research notes that he did for lectures, wrote them all out in Hebrew, got a Hebrew publisher, struggled to get it published anywhere else, and then became this mega, mega, mega success.

Yeah, the US just wouldn't look at it. I mean, it's fascinating because when I read the first page of that book, I think, my goodness, I'm immediately struck by how clearly he thinks. I mean, he's got this fantastic ability to categorize things. So he says, I think the first period of world history is about cognitive. Yeah. Well, he does this thing where he says, first bit's physics, the second bit's chemistry, and the third bit is biology. So he's able to sort of... But I think, of course, academics are going to attack him because it's not possible to write about the whole of world history and all of human history over 80,000 years without getting a few things wrong. I mean, I was tweeting out something I'd just been reading in this book about how it had been five years, only five years from the time at which the first steam locomotive moved some stuff through a coal mine to the moment at which the first railway was opened between Manchester and Liverpool. And of course, immediately I was assaulted on Twitter by people saying, absolute nonsense, here's a photograph of a steam engine in 1805 and the same the other. So presumably the book has got a lot of that stuff going on. Nonetheless, as somebody who tries in a small way to talk generally about the whole world, I am in complete awe. I mean, he is unbelievably clever, unbelievably clear thinking. And also that last line I read from from Homo Deus, I mean, okay, it's only seven years ago. But he basically is asking the question that right now, politicians, business people, leaders, citizens around the world are wrestling with what will happen to society, politics and daily life, when non-conscious but highly intelligent algorithms know as better than we know ourselves. And also has the honesty to admit he doesn't really know the answer. No, I think there's something really impressive about that kind of clarity and confidence and the ability to take risks like that and see patterns. So I have no sympathy for the academics that are grumbling. I'm an out and out Amara. Good, well, I enjoyed both episodes. And as you say, he does have a lot of energy. And I also hope that he and his colleagues in this, I think, fundamental campaign, existential campaign almost for Israel, that the right side wins. Good. Well, thank you, Alison. Bye-bye. See you soon. Bye-bye.