

Are we destined to fail?

PHOTOGRAPHY: JONATHAN BORG

HOW DOES EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY DETERMINE OUR CHOICES? **IGGY FENECH** INTERVIEWS BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF *WHY DO SMART PEOPLE MAKE STUPID MISTAKES?*, **JACOB BURAK**, TO FIND OUT.

For a species that has managed to break free from the shackles of the food chain and achieve so much, we can be really stupid, short-tempered and unwilling to do the right thing, don't you think? But is that all down to us, or are we governed by things that are bigger than us?

For ex-businessman Jacob Burak who, in 1987, established *Evergreen*, an investment company that was a pioneer in Israeli Venture Capital, many of the factors that trigger our mistakes can be traced back to when we were evolving. In fact, ever since he retired in 2005, he has turned the understanding of human nature into his life-goal – a journey that can be found laid out in his best-selling books, including the one that was recently published in Malta by Horizons.

So what does the world-wide best-seller, which has already been translated into six languages, actually tell us? Well, one of the first chapters you'll come across while reading *Why Do Smart People Make Stupid Mistakes?* is called 'Working Out with Polar Bears'. In it, Jacob uses a series of studies carried out across the years that show that we do not have an endless supply of willpower.

The particular one that gave the chapter its name was published in the *Journal of Consumer Research* in 2007, and saw two groups of American high-school students being asked to note down their stream-of-consciousness over

several minutes – one group was given no other directions, the members of the other were told that they could not think about one thing in particular: polar bears. Both groups were also given a small amount of money to spend on an array of products. By the end of the study, it became clear that the group that had to control its thoughts (i.e. not think about polar bears) became prone to over-spending.

'If self-discipline is, in fact, a muscle, the most important lesson to be learned is that we have to choose our battles very carefully,' Jacob writes at the end of the chapter. 'Instead of trying to excel all the time, we should reserve our determination for when it really matters. And if you're on a diet, cut yourself some slack, and let yourself think about polar bears.'

The idea behind this book is to give us insight into how our brains come already hardwired at birth, and how being aware of this can help us make fewer mistakes in the long run. Indeed, it uses an approach called Evolutionary Psychology, which theorises that many of the ways in which we act or react to things come from our adaptation throughout the evolutionary process.

"An example of this is how both men and women prefer partners with symmetrical facial features, which, as research has found, is usually believed to be associated with an over-all healthier being, thus more likely to provide ►

healthy offspring,” Jacob, who lives in Malta on a part-time basis, tells me.

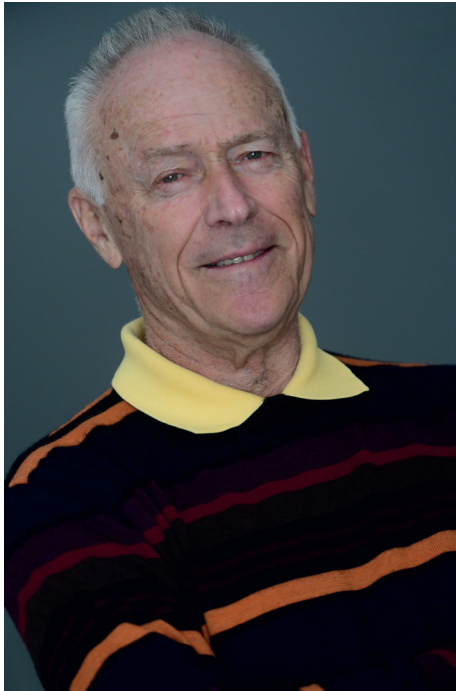
“In addition, women tend to prefer physical strength in men. This trait presumably reflects an improved ability to provide and to protect one’s offspring. Men, from their part, look for signs of fertility and ovulation to spread their genes and, therefore, justify the emotional investment.”

What this means, however, isn’t that we don’t get to choose our partners for ourselves but, rather, that when we do choose a partner, our selection is also determined by factors that we may not even be aware of. Thankfully, according to Jacob, this can be partially avoided.

“The way to work around our evolutionary dictate is to become aware of the different ways in which these ancient factors manifest themselves. Only then will we fully understand why we fancy sweets and are reluctant to leave food on the plate, why we loathe insects, and why we are such obsessive consumers of news and information in general.

“Survival is the evolutionary principle that causes our brains to be constantly on the lookout for potential threats. But those threats that were life-endangering in the savannah of Africa, where *Homo Sapiens* (our biological species) emerged 200,000 years ago, don’t exist anymore. Nevertheless, our hardwired brains continue to protect us from them in our modern world as they did before. 200,000 years of evolution are not enough to rewire our system from an evolutionary perspective.”

First published in 2007 to world-wide acclaim (back then, it was entitled *Do Chimpanzees Dream Of Retirement?*)



the book has stood the test of time. And, while the version we get in Malta has a number of revisions from the original, the bulk of it has remained unchanged.

In the introduction of the latest version, in fact, Jacob addresses this by pointing out what some may notice is ‘missing’ when reading it in this day and age, like the financial crisis of 2008 or the recent data on global warming. But that doesn’t really matter, because the book’s message is meant to be as timeless as our ability to screw up and our inability to admit to it.

“One of the most poisonous biases of all is our overconfidence, which evolutionary speaking, is quite well-founded,” Jacob continues. “But if you are a political leader who is facing a possible military conflict, overconfidence is not a good advisor.

The four cousins who fought each other during World War I all promised their people that the war would be over by Christmas. They just forgot to mention of which year.”

In other words, while we are often given clear examples of the repercussions certain actions carry, we always believe that we can do better than our predecessors or than others. And, while that may sometimes turn out to be true, in reality it’s very rarely the case. In fact, the underlying message of the book is not that we should not be held responsible for our actions, but that we need to be aware of the pre-conditioning that may affect them and to try to control them, be it in business, in love, in life or in war.

Jacob’s quick guide to making fewer mistakes

“Firstly, acknowledge what you know and, more importantly, what you do not know; secondly make a commitment to yourself to seek answers (including from others) to any questions you may have; and, thirdly, be willing to accept new ideas – even if they contradict your views!

“This triad of guidelines (or maxims) taken together are, to me, the definition of intellectual humility; a key concept in what I endeavour to offer my readers... Intellectually-humble people see personal growth as a goal in itself, rather than as a means for improving social status. We will miss out on a lot of available information



if we focus only on ourselves and on our place in the world, so let’s prefer truth over our social status.” ■

***Why Do Smart People Make Mistakes?* is available in all leading bookstores.**