

"Who Are We, You and I? Meditations on Death and Afterlife"

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Late Life Concerns: The Final Miles

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I plan to weave Judaism and Buddhism together, particularly the mystical traditions. Their views on this topic have much in common. Also Buddhism and what we think of as Judaism (not solely Israel) have their primary origin about the same time (6th cent. BCE).

In general, Jews and Buddhists focus most of their attention on this life, not what comes after. They share an empirical focus, where you are supposed to draw from experience and tradition in order to make sense of what is going on inside you and outside you.

Even Tibetan Buddhists, who are very detailed about death rituals and the intermediate states between two lives (called the *bardo*), are primarily focused on what we humans have in front of us—this life. Buddhists are generally skeptical of speculating about things which are abstract and prone to endless metaphysical theories. They are much more interested in focusing on the present and on awareness.

Jews have a wide variety of views of afterlife, but do not commit themselves to any one view: physical resurrection, heaven and a temporary hell called Gehenna (there is really no permanent hell for Jews), reincarnation. But Jews conclude that the afterlife is so fundamentally different than what we can understand that we should not spend too much time attempting to describe it or understand it. Instead, we should focus on this life and what we can do to make ourselves, our communities, and the world a better place. This leads to an emphasis on learning (including science), wisdom, the arts, social betterment, inventions, and philanthropy, among others.

Buddhists assume reincarnation, but they essentially conclude that the idea of a static "self" that reincarnates is itself an illusion and that therefore both birth and death are themselves illusions. Reincarnation happens, but only because most of us are unable to move beyond the notion of fixed time and a permanent self. How are you born, or how do you die, if time and space are

illusions and if you don't exist as a definable entity? We should instead focus on the present moment, which is ultimately the only moment that truly exists (the past is no more, and the future is yet to be—they have no fixable reality). This leads Buddhists to emphasize mindfulness, meditation, the arts, wisdom, mediation, listening, and compassionate treatment of the suffering.

Because of this, I don't want to directly address the question of afterlife, but rather the issue of who we are, our personhood. How can we talk about afterlife if we don't know who we are? Who and what is it that exists before we die, as well as after we die? What exactly is coming after what? In other words, Jews and Buddhists question the idea that we can comprehend what happens after our lives if we don't comprehend who we are in the first place and what it is that we call life.

For Buddhists, the ego, the self, the I, have no separate existence at all. Buddhists often point to the amazing intellectual leaps that allows us to connect the person we are now with the infant we were years ago. How can we assume that this is the same person? Only by telling ourselves, and others telling us, that this in fact the case. Most people unfamiliar with you would not draw that conclusion. There is no natural way of making that leap except by practice and habit. In fact, we have millions of cells that die every day, and our cells completely replace themselves every 7 years. So literally every moment we are giving birth to a new human in the next moment. We die and are born every millisecond of our lives. There is no period of time where we stay the same. We are always changing—constantly. So how can there be an identifiable "I," except by psychological and social agreement, a kind of contract with ourselves and with one another that allows us to function without having to change all the rules every millisecond. And this is not true simply for us, but for all living beings and for the world itself. Change/impermanence is what characterizes everything. As the Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, said, "You can never step into the same river twice."

As a Jew, I have always known this, because Jews better than most understand that everything you have can be taken away in the blink of an eye. So, for Jews, you have one thing to hold on to, and that's your learning and your wits.

Here's Thich Nhat Hanh discussing the same topic, but with paper and flowers as the theme: "So what permanent thing is there that we can call a

self? The piece of paper these words are written on does not have separate self. It can only be present when the clouds, the forest, the sun, the earth, the people who make the paper, and the machines are present. If those things are not present the paper cannot be present. And if we burn the paper, where is the self of paper? Nothing can exist by itself alone. It has to depend on every other thing. That is called inter-being. To be means to inter-be. The paper inter-is with the sunshine and with the forest. The flower cannot exist by itself alone; it has to inter-be with soil, rain, weeds, and insects. There is no being; there is only inter-being . . . There is nothing that is not present in the flower. We see sunshine, we see the rain, we see the clouds, we see the earth, and we also see time and space in the flower . . . The whole cosmos has come together to help the flower manifest itself. The flower is full of everything except one thing: a separate self or a separate identity . . . We are of the nature of no self, but that does not mean that we are not here. It does not mean that nothing exists. A glass can be empty or full of tea, but in order to be either empty or full the glass has to be there. So emptiness does not mean non-being and does not mean being either. It transcends all concepts." Emptiness for Buddhists is nirvana, what some of us might call heaven.

The Jewish mystic, Martin Buber, expresses a similar sentiment: "Through the Thou a person becomes an I." Or "Persons appear by entering into relations with other persons." Buber believed that by making God, the Source (which is the term I use for "God"), into a you, Jews understood personal relationship as the fundamental characteristic of Jewish spirituality. There are no separate I's and You's, only I's and You's in relation to one another. You do not have a relationship with an It, only with a You. So every You is dependent on every I, and every I is dependent on every You. As Thich Nhat Hanh says, we all live in inter-being; we are interdependent.

In contrast to Buddhists, however, Jews do accept the idea of a self, at least in this world on earth. Isaac of Polnoye used to say that "there is no act, no matter how good, that is free of self-interest." For Jews, the "self" serves a purpose in this world, which allows human beings to reproduce, to feed our families, to protect ourselves, to feed ourselves, to make inventions, and to improve our quality of life. So the ego has a purpose for our earthly lives. We would not be able to function and survive without having our ego to navigate in this world.

But Jews question the existence of the ego, the "I," as the defining characteristic of our true nature. We may need the ego in this world, but it should be our servant, not our master. The great Hasidic teacher, Menahem Mendel of

Kotzk, was famous for this view, demanding that his students and followers subdue their egos in order to allow the Source (God) to enter their lives and to allow them to be present to the Source. In his more cantankerous later years, the Kotzker (as he was affectionately called) used to shout at his congregants that they were all a bunch of liars, because all of them were engaged in actions designed to satisfy their egos.

The story of Jacob's ladder in Genesis 28 provides a classic example of the ego, the I, getting in the way of spiritual awareness. When Jacob realized what he had dreamt, he said, "The Source (God) was in this place, and I did not know it." The Hebrew essentially repeats the word, "I" twice—once as the pronoun, *anoki* ("I"), and once in the verb, *yada'ti*, ("I did not know"). Jewish commentators, such as Pinchas Horowitz and Shelomoh of Radomsk, observed that what the text actually meant was: "The I did not know it." That is, it was the ego that prevented Jacob from recognizing the presence of God when God appeared to him. The Kotzker made a similar comment about Exodus 24.12, when the Source, God, said to Moses: "Come up to me on the mountain and be there." According to the Kotzker, to "be there" Moses had to set aside his ego. Otherwise, he would find himself in the same position as the unaware Jacob. Some of you might find this a little disconcerting, but these are fears which we must all face if we are to have calm and hope. You cannot expect to understand calculus if you don't have basic math skills. The same is true here. What's the point of talking about afterlife if we don't really understand what happens before it?

To put that in perspective, let me give you two short stories, one Buddhist, one Jewish. Here's is a Buddhist parable: "A man is walking along a narrow forest path and sees an unmistakable shape lying on the road in front of him. He naturally freezes. He backs up as smoothly and noiselessly as possible, shuffles off to hide behind a tree. There, his heart pounding and his body sweating, he waits for the way to become clear. After a while he ventures a look from behind the trunk and widens his eyes to see more clearly. He bends forward, sticking out his neck and squinting into the patterns of light and dark. But there is no movement. Finally he gingerly ventures back to that spot on the path and stares down at the snake. There is no snake. It's only a piece of coiled rope. With a deep sigh of relief, he reaches down and picks it up. As it pulls it, it untwists. All of it is worn out from use and exposure to the elements. It separates into a thatch of fine, hairy strands, and then he is left holding . . . NOTHING." This story is an

illusion both to our fears and to the static self itself which disappears when you try to hold on to it. The point is that what we fear never really existed in the first place and that we hold on to things that have no real staying power. We can attain enlightenment and eventually nirvana only if we let go and stop demanding solidity when everything is in fact liquid movement.

The second story is a Jewish one. The teacher of the Kotzker, Simcha Bunim of Przysucha (late 18th cen CE) used to say that he kept two pieces of paper in his pocket depending on the circumstances, one when he was feeling pretty good about himself, and the other when he was feeling pretty low. He said, "A person should keep two pieces of paper, one in each pocket, to be used as necessary. On one of them is written, "The world was created for me," and on the other, "I am dust and ashes." "The world was created for me," is actually a quote from the Talmud (Sanhedrin 37), the sacred text on a par with the Bible for Jews, that interprets the creating of the single human being, Adam, in Genesis 1. But both statements of Simhah Bunim are true: the "I" ("Larry" in my case) that I find so alluring and stationary will eventually dissolve (become dust and ashes), but it's also true that the world was created for me and each of you as well.

The question is: what is the "I" that dissolves and the "me" that is so important? Perhaps they are not the same thing. What is this authentic me? Since the Bible says that human beings are made in the image of God, the Source, let me begin by talking about the Source. I use the term, Source for God, because the word, "God," implies a self, another entity like ourselves, another being, only one that is omniscient and omnipotent. But one of the words for God, which we translate as Lord (*adonai*) comes from the Hebrew root word for "being" or "becoming" (*hayah*). So God is not an entity, a self, but rather a state of existence---being, becoming—pure energy. The word, "source," comes much closer to this. Jewish mystics who wrote the Kabbalah in the Middle Ages spoke about the Source as Ein Sof, which means "without boundary." In other words, our world (this world) is composed of separate entities with boundaries, but the Source and the divine realm are infinite, unitary, not separated, and without boundaries. We humans must learn to function in a world of limits and learn from that experience, but, at the same time, we have to keep our eyes on the unbounded dimension that is also our true birthright.

Likewise, the Hebrew word normally translated for God is *Elohim*, which literally means "gods." Why do the Bible and Jews use a Hebrew word for the One God that actually means "gods"? My personal understanding of this is that God, Source, is a unitary collective entity. The Source is not single, but rather composed of many voices, like a choir that sings as One. God is the distillation of many, but is also One.

We are made in the image of God, the Source. So our higher or greater self, so to speak, as opposed to our lower or smaller nature (our ego) has something in common with the description of God as the Source of being or becoming and as the One distilling the many. In other words, our higher self is not really an entity at all, but rather a boundless energy flow that holds within us some of the sparks of the Source. Likewise, our higher self is not really a single being at all, but rather many voices distilled into One (e.g. the voices of our ancestors and the voices of our family). That's who we are if we take seriously the description of human beings as being modeled after God.

What a person is also comes up in the passage cited above about the two pieces of paper: "the world was created for me." This refers to the story of the creation of Adam in Genesis 1. As you may know, there are two creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2, originally probably coming from two different source traditions. Genesis 1:26-27 literally says: "And God created a human being [Adam] in God's image; male and female, [God] created them." Jews have traditionally understood this as the creation of one androgynous being, bi-gendered, male and female both. These two gendered parts are the "them" of the Genesis 1 passage.

Of course, in Genesis 2, Adam is split into pieces: one becoming male (Adam), and the other becoming female (Eve). So there are two Adams: one, the primordial Adam in Genesis 1, androgynous; two, the primordial Adam of Genesis 2 that is then split into man and woman—Adam and Eve.

According to rabbinic tradition, the reason why the Source, God, created one human being in Genesis 1 was because God wanted to show humanity that the world was created for our sake, for the sake of just one being. For that reason, the Talmud says that "Whoever saves a life, it as if he or she has saved an entire world." Some of you may remember this from Schindler's List and it's reminiscent of Thich Nhat Hanh's earlier statement about the flower. Of course, this is not the ego or the separate self, but rather the higher, greater self that we all have.

In each of the Genesis stories, we are seeing somewhat different versions of what a person is. In Genesis 1, we see the androgynous being that models for us our perfect state, when we have the feminine and masculine sides of ourselves in balance: Men have feminine energies, and women have masculine energies. A person balances these to come closer to the primordial Adam and to live as the image of God. In Genesis 2, we see our current biological condition, men and women, with the gender roles that writers envisioned as appropriate two and a half millennia ago.

But the Bible recognizes that there are at least ways to envision personhood: one which sees each person, both female and male, as multi-gendered beings; the second sees which each person as female or male. The point is not to explain what this all means, but to identify that the idea of personhood in biblical texts is fluid and may not conform to preconceived ideas. What we may think constitutes a person is one thing, but he or she may in fact be something else altogether.

There are other biblical passages which give us a sense of personhood and have to do with death and afterlife. Phrases such as "Go to your ancestors"; "lying down with my ancestors"; "gathered to your kin" (Gen 15.15, 25.8, 47.28-31; Num 31.2; Deut 32.50 (cf. 1 Kings 13.31; 2 Kings 8.24, 22.20) indicate that someone had died and that the deceased would be buried in a family tomb. However, they also suggest that the deceased would be incorporated somehow into the ancestral hive and continue to have some kind of presence in the world (Deut 26.14; 1 Samuel 28.3, 7-25; Isaiah 57; Jer 16.5-9 Ezek 43.7-9; Amos 6.7), as the story of the Witch of Endor indicates in 1 Samuel 28. While Jews were not supposed to consult the dead (which would subject them to ritual impurity), at least according to some biblical writers, ancestors were clearly present in other forms in the lives of the living. These ancestral beings are not human beings (because they are no longer alive), but another life form that operates as a kind of collective, a hive (like the Borg in Star Trek or the Kami in Japanese Shinto). This hive-like quality of ancestors bears some resemblance to Israel's understanding of itself as a collective community rather than an assembly of separate individuals. This idea is well described in the famous valley of dry bones that comes to life in Ezekiel 37.1-14, which refer not to a group of distinct individuals, but rather to "the whole house of Israel" (*kol bet yisrael*). For Jews in antiquity, the person exists as an individual, but the individual is subsumed into the greater community as part of something much bigger. This idea still exists in modern Judaism, though to a much lesser degree.

The collective hive-quality of Jewish ancestors and the Jewish people in the Hebrew Bible is mirrored by the term, Elohim, which suggests God, the Source as a kind of hive. This is reflected in the Israelite practice of worshipping the household ancestral deities, Teraphim. While some biblical and rabbinic writers severely criticized this practice, ancient Jews as a whole (see Hosea 3.4 and 1 Samuel 19.13) seemed to view the Teraphim as a kind of national symbol, since they were located in practically every home. Just as Elohim, God, the Source, is a kind of ultimate energy hive, the ancestors form a familial hive, which was also reflected in the living Jewish people. The individual person becomes increasingly less significant the higher you go in the system from human community to ancestral community to God.

Buddhist thought likewise even more emphasizes the lack of a truly distinct human individual.

Another characteristic that Buddhist and Jewish sources share is the body-spirit continuity that not always, but often, characterises Christian theology and psychology. Christianity has been profoundly influenced by Platonic dualism which sees the material world as fundamentally inferior to the spiritual realm. Jews and Buddhists do not generally denigrate the body. Buddha, who followed the Middle Way on this topic (as opposed to some rather extreme Hindu ascetics) and his followers placed great emphasis on the much older practice of meditation that focused on the breath in the body. Jews saw body and spirit as inextricably linked in the human person. For Jews traditionally, the heart was the seat of both feeling and thought so that there was never any radical dichotomy between the supposedly spiritual world of the intellect and metaphysics and the supposedly physical world of emotion and need. For Jews, they stem from the same place: the core of the body, where is found the heart in which dwells the sparks of light that come from God, the Source of All that Is.

I want to add one brief note on resurrection. Some Jews believe in physical resurrection, but what this means has always been open to considerable interpretation. Many Jewish mystics (by the way, probably including Paul) believe that the body would be resurrected as an energy body, not the dense body with which we normally associate ourselves—this body here. Both bodies may be understood as having physical properties, but of a very different kind, one body being much more fluid than the other. So once again we are faced with not being certain who we are before death and who we will be after it. Even if we possess a body in our resurrected state, what would such a body look like?

The person who faces death may not be who we think it is. The I, the Larry for example, is not what we really are according to either Buddhist or Jewish self-understanding. The name by which we call ourselves, our habits, our genders, our problems, do not describe the you that is you. The problem is that the I covers up the You so that we find it difficult to get to know who we actually are.

There is a wonderful poem by Walt Whitman, called "To You" (from his classic *Leaves of Grass*), that suggests the idea that "You" are so much more than you may think you are. Here are three stanzas from it: "There is no endowment in man or woman that is not tallied in you, There is no virtue, no beauty in man or woman, but as good as in you, No pluck, no endurance in others, but as good as in you, No pleasure waiting for others, but an equal pleasure waits for you. As for me, I give nothing to any one except I give the like carefully to you, I sing the songs of the glory of none . . . sooner than I sing the songs of the glory of you. Whoever you are! Claim your own at any hazard! These shows of the East and West are tame compared to you, These immense meadows, these interminable rivers, you are immense and interminable as they . . ."

Or, as some Zen Buddhists say, "We are all Buddha." That is, we may not realize it yet in our fragmented state, but we are already complete and have everything we need.

That's what both mystical Jewish and Buddhist spirituality calls us to do. Be there. Know that the You is not the I. Set aside the I for a while, so that You can emerge. Do not attach to any *thing*; attach to no-thing, nothing. Allow yourself to melt into the universe so that you realize that You are not a thing, but an energy flow, one which has no single location and conforms to no object.

When we look at ourselves in this way, the You that faces death and afterlife looks very different. Instead of trying to preserve our familiar surroundings and our familiar habits—all the accoutrements of the I, the ego—let go and recognize that what comes after life cannot be understood by directly referring to our current one or to our current identities. To understand nirvana and the world to come (*olam ha-ba* in Hebrew) means that we have to re-envision the ways we see ourselves.

Thank you.