

# Immortality and the Soul

## by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan

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### 1. MEET THE REAL YOU

Look at your hand. What do you see?

A part of your body, an appendage made of bone and sinew covered with flesh and skin. It is filled with nerves, blood vessels and lymph ducts which run through it and connect it to your body, making it part of you.

You can open and close your hand. It obeys every command that your mind sends to it. It is yours -- a part of you. But what are you? Who is the real you? What happens when you tell your hand to open and close? How does your mind will it to obey its commands?

Now point a finger at yourself. If you are an average person, you will point a finger at your chest. You think of yourself as your body. But is your body the real you?

Not too long ago, a person could consider his own body an integral part of himself. You were your body and your body was you. But this is no longer the case. Scientific progress has changed the entire concept of human personality and identity.

Heart transplants are now an almost commonplace occurrence. They do not even make the news any more. A man can live with another person's heart beating in his breast. If we would ask such a man to point to himself, would he point at his heart? Is this transplanted heart really part of him? Is the heart that beats within your breast the real you? Or is it something else entirely?

Researchers are predicting that within the next decade or two, brain transplants may be possible. This would force us to completely re-evaluate the concept of human personality.

Imagine what it would be like to undergo a brain transplant. A man might be suffering from an incurable disease in his body, but still have a healthy brain. The donor, on the other hand, would have suffered irreparable brain damage, but otherwise have a perfectly sound body. The brain is removed from the sick body and placed in the healthy one.

Who is the new man? We have an old brain with all its memories, personality traits and behavior patterns. But it has a brand new body. The old body might have been old and sick, while the new one may be young and full of energy.

Let us ask this man to point to himself. Will he point to his body? Is the real you your body or your brain?

A brain transplant raises enough questions. How about a memory transfer?

The science of cybernetics has discovered many similarities between computers and the human brain. Computer technology allows one to program a memory transfer, taking all the information contained in one computer and transferring it to another. All that passes from one computer to the other is information.

What if this were done with the human brain? This may lie in the realm of science fiction, but even if it will never be possible in practice, it is certainly possible in theory.

Let us try to envision such a memory transfer. Assume we have a person with an incurable disease where neither the body nor the brain can be salvaged. We clone a new body for this individual, brain and all. The possibilities of doing this have already been discussed at length in the literature. This new body has a blank new brain, capable of functioning, but without any memories or thought patterns. As a final step, we accomplish a memory transfer, bringing all the information from the sick person into the brain of the new body.

We now have a fascinating situation. If all of a man's memories, thought patterns and personality traits are transferred to a new body and brain, this person literally exists in his new body. But nothing physical has been transferred. No physical part of him has been placed in the new body. All that has been placed in this new body is information that previously existed in the old brain. Yet this information contains the sum total of this person's personality.

But if this is true, then it offers us tremendous new insight into our original question: Who is the real you?

The real you is not your body or brain, but the information contained in your brain -- your memories, personality traits and thought patterns.

What happens then when a person dies?

We know that the body ceases to function. The brain becomes inert and the physical man is dead.

But what happens to the real you -- the human personality? What happens to all this information -- the memories, thought patterns and personality traits? When a book is burned its contents are no longer available. When a computer is smashed, the information within it is also destroyed. Does the same thing happen when a man dies? Is the mind and personality irretrievably lost?

We know that God is omniscient. He knows all and does not forget. God knows every thought and memory that exists within our

brains. There is no bit of information that escapes His knowledge.

What, then, happens when a man dies? God does not forget, and therefore all of this information continues to exist, at least in God's memory.

We may think of something existing only in memory as being static and effectively dead. But God's memory is not a static thing. The sum total of a human personality may indeed exist in God's memory, but it can still maintain its self-identity and volition, and remain in an active state.

This sum total of the human personality existing in God's memory is what lives on even after a man dies.

The concept of immortality and of the soul may well be outside the realm of human comprehension. "No eye has seen it other than God." However, our limited understanding of both God and man can provide us with some degree of perception into our ultimate future.

To speak of a concept such as God's memory is indeed very difficult. It involves a deep discussion of the entire transcendental sphere. We therefore give it names that have meaning to us, such as Paradise, the World to Come, the World of Souls, (1) or the bond of eternal life. However, the Bible speaks of immortality as a return to God Himself (Eccl. 12:7): "The dust returns to the dust as it were, but the spirit returns to God Who gave it."

## **2. NAKED BEFORE GOD**

We have seen that our knowledge of the mind and our traditions regarding God can give us some handle on the question of immortality.

But what is immortality like? What is it like to be a disembodied soul? How does it feel to be in the World of Soul?

We know that the human brain, marvelous organ that it is, is still very inefficient as a thinking device. Henri Bergson has suggested that one of the main functions of the brain and nervous system is to eliminate activity and awareness, rather than produce it.

Aldous Huxley(2) quotes Prof C.D. Broad's comments on this. He says that every person is capable of remembering everything that has ever happened to him. He is able to perceive everything that surrounds him. However, if all this information poured into our minds at once, it would overwhelm us. So the function of the brain and nervous system is to protect us and prevent us from being overwhelmed and confused by the vast amount of information that impinges upon our sense organs. They shut out most of what we perceive and remember. All that would confound us is eliminated and only the small, special selection that is useful is allowed to remain.

Huxley explains that our mind has powers of perception and concentration that we cannot even begin to imagine. But our main business is to survive at all costs. To make survival possible, all of our mind's capabilities must be funneled through the reducing valve of the brain.

Some researchers are studying this effect. They believe that this reducing-valve effect may be very similar to the jamming equipment used to block out offensive radio broadcasts. The brain constantly produces a kind of static, cutting down our perception and reducing our mental activity.

This static can actually be seen. When you close your eyes, you see all sorts of random pictures flashing through your mind. It is impossible to concentrate on any one of them for more than an instant, and each image is obscured by a host of others superimposed over it.

This static can even be seen when your eyes are opened. However, one usually ignores these images since they are so faint compared to our visual perception. However, they still reduce one's perception, both of the world around him and of himself.

Much of what we know about this static is a result of research done with drugs that eliminate it. According to a number of authorities, this is precisely how the psychedelic drugs work.

Now imagine the mental activity of a disembodied soul, standing naked before God. The reducing valve is gone entirely. The mind is open and transparent. Things can be perceived in a way that is impossible to a mind held back by a body and nervous system. The visions and understanding are the most delightful bliss imaginable (as per: "the righteous, sitting with their crowns on their heads, delighting in the shine of the Divine Presence."(3) )

This is what Job meant when he said (19:26), "And when after my skin is destroyed, then without my flesh shall I see God."

But then, an individual will also see himself in a new light Every thought and memory will be lucid, and he will see himself for the first time without the static and jamming that shuts out most thoughts.

Even in our mortal physical state, looking at oneself can sometimes be pleasing and at other times very painful. Certain acts leave us proud and pleased with ourselves. Others cause excruciating pains, especially when we are caught.

Imagine standing naked before God, with your memory wide open, completely transparent without any jamming mechanism or reducing valve to diminish its force. You will remember everything you ever did and see it in a new light. You will see it in the light of the unshaded spirit or, if you will, in God's own light that shines from one end of creation to the other. The memory of

every good deed will be the sublimest of pleasures, as our tradition speaks of the world to come.

But your memory will also be open to all the things of which you are ashamed. They cannot be rationalized away or dismissed. You will be facing yourself, fully aware of the consequences of all your deeds. We all know the terrible shame and humiliation experienced when one is caught in the act of doing something wrong. Imagine being caught by one's own memory with no place to escape. This indeed, may be what Daniel is alluding to when he says (Dan. 12:2), "And many of them that sleep in the dust shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to reproach and everlasting shame."

A number of our great teachers (4) write that the fire of netherworld is actually the burning shame one experiences because of his sins. Again, this may be alluded to in the words of the prophet (Isa. 66:24), "And they shall go forth and look upon the carcasses of the men that have rebelled against Me; for their worm shall not die, nor shall their fire be quenched, and they shall be ashamed before all flesh." We find that evil leads to shame, as it is written (Jer. 7:19), "Are they angering Me, says God, are they not provoking themselves, to their own shame...Behold My anger... shall not burn, and shall not be quenched." The main concept of reward is that it be without shame, as we find (Joel 2:26), "And you shall eat and be satisfied... and my people shall never be ashamed."

The Talmud provides us with even stronger evidence that shame burns like fire. It states, "Rabbi Chanina says; this teaches us that each one (in the World of Souls) is burned by the canopy of his companion. Woe, for that-shame! Woe, for that humiliation." (5) We find that shame is a major form of punishment in the Midrash on the verse (Ps. 6:11), "All your enemies shall be ashamed and very confounded." Rabbi Joshua ben Levi says, "God only curses the wicked with shame." (6) This is also alluded to in the Talmudic statement, "It is better for Amram to suffer shame in this world, and not in the World to come." (7) Similarly, "Blessed is God who gave him shame in this world and not the next." (8) When the Zohar speaks of the future reward, it says, "Happy is he who comes here without shame." (9)

Of course, these concepts of fire and shame, as used by our Sages, may also contain deeper mysteries and meanings. But taken literally, one says that a major ingredient of fire may be shame. (10) How else could one characterize the agony of unconcealed shame upon a soul?

We are taught that the judgment of the wicked lasts 12 months. (11) Even the naked soul can gradually learn to live with this shame and forget it, and the pain eventually subsides. It may be more than coincidence that 12 months is also the length of time required for something to be forgotten in Talmudic law. Thus one mourns a parent for 12 months, (12) and says a special blessing upon seeing a close friend after this period of time. (13) (Of course, there is an exception to this rule. There are the non-believers and worst of sinners reckoned in' the Talmud. (14) These individuals have nothing else but their shame and have no escape from everlasting torment.)

But even temporary torment is beyond our imagination. The twelfth century sage Nachmanides writes that all the suffering of Job would not compare to an instant in netherworld. (15) Rabbi Nachman of Breslov says the same of a man who suffered for years from the most indescribable torments: it is still better than a single burn in netherworld. (16) Mental torture cannot be compared to the mere physical.

Here again, when we speak of paradise and netherworld, we find that we are not discussing mystical concepts, but ideas that are well within the realm of scientific psychology, such as shame. We can now proceed a step further.

### **3. WHAT THE DEAD THINK OF US**

There is another dimension of immortality discussed in the Talmud. It asks: Do the dead know what is happening in the world of the living? (17)

After an involved discussion, the Talmud concludes that they do have this awareness. (18) The Kaballistic philosophers explain that the soul achieves a degree of unity with God, the source of all knowledge, and therefore also partakes of His omniscience.

When a man dies, he enters a new world of awareness. He exists as a disembodied soul and yet is aware of what is happening in the physical world. Gradually, he learns to focus on any physical event he wishes. At first this is a frightening experience. You know that you are dead. You can see your body lying there, with your friends and relatives standing around crying over you. We are taught that immediately after death, the soul is in a great state of confusion. (19)

What is the main source of its attention? What draws its focus more than anything else?

We are taught that it is the body. Most people identify themselves with their bodies, as we have discussed earlier. It is difficult for a soul to break this thought habit, and therefore, for the first few days, the soul is literally obsessed with its previous body. This is alluded to in the verse (Job 14:22), "And his soul mourns for him." (20)

This is especially true before the body is buried. (21) The soul wonders what will happen to the body. It finds it to be both fascinating and frightening to watch its own body's funeral arrangements and preparation for burial.

Of course, this is one of the reasons why Judaism teaches us that we must have the utmost respect for human remains. We can imagine how painful it is for a soul to see its recent body cast around like an animal carcass. The Torah therefore forbids this.

This is also related to the question of autopsies. We can imagine how a soul would feel when seeing its body lying on the autopsy

table, being dissected and examined.

The disembodied soul spends much of its time learning how to focus. It is now seeing without physical eyes, using some process which we do not even have the vocabulary to describe. The Kabbalists call this frightening process Kaf HaKela -- it is like being thrown with a sling from one end of the world to another.(22) It is alluded to in the verse (1 Sam. 25:29), "The soul of my master shall be bound up in the bundle of life with the Lord your God, and the souls of your enemies shall He sling out, as from the hollow of a sling." The soul perceives things flashing into focus from all over, and is in a state of total confusion and disorientation.

One of the few things that the soul has little difficulty focusing on is its own body. It is a familiar pattern and some tie seems to remain. To some extent, it is a refuge from its disorientation.

Of course the body begins to decompose soon after it is buried. The effect of watching this must be both frightening and painful. The Talmud teaches us, "Worms are as painful to the dead as needles in the flesh of the living, as it is written (Job 14:22), 'his flesh grieves for him.'"(23) Most commentaries write that this refers to the psychological anguish of the soul in seeing its earthly habitation in a state of decay.(24) The Kabbalists call this Chibut HaKever,(25) the punishment of the grave. We are taught that what happens to the body in the grave can be an even worse experience than the netherworld.(26)

This varies among individuals. The more one is obsessed with one's body and the material world in general during his lifetime, the more he will be obsessed with it after death. For the man to whom the material was everything, this deterioration of the body is most painful. On the other extreme, the person who was imaged in the spiritual, may not care very much about the fate of his body at all. He finds himself very much at home in the spiritual realm and might quickly forget about his body entirely. This is what we are taught. Tzadikim are not bothered by Chibut HaKever at all, since they never consider their worldly body overly important.(27)

In general, adjustment to the spiritual world depends greatly on one's preparation in this world. Our traditions teach us that the main preparation is through Torah.

Many of us think of death as a most frightening experience. Tzadikim, on the other hand, have looked forward to it. Shortly before his death, Rabbi Nachman Bretslaver said, "I very much want to divest myself of this garment that is my body."(28) If we truly believe and trust in a merciful God, then death has no terror for us.

This is a description of what our tradition teaches us about the soul's existence. Most of these facts are from the teachings of our Sages in the Talmud and Midrash as interpreted by the Kabbalists. Here we have synthesized their interpretations with the terminology of modern scientific concepts. The result is a consistent view of soul and human personality as realities which do not possess the body's temporal discontinuity called death.

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## FOOTNOTES:

- (1) See Derech HaShem 1:3:11.
- (2) Aldous Huxley, The Doors of Perception (Harper & Row, NY 1970) p.22 f.
- (3) Berachos 17a.
- (4) Ikkarim 4:33, Nishamas Chaim 1:13.
- (5) Baba Basra 75a.
- (6) Midrash Tehillim a. 1.
- (7) Kiddushin 81a.
- (8) Yebamos 105b.
- (9) Zohar 1:4a.
- (10) Toras HaAdam, Shaar HaGemul (Jerusalem, 5715) p. 78a.
- (11) Eduyos 2:10.
- (12) Moed Katan 22b.
- (13) Berachos 58b.
- (14) Rosh HaShanah 17a.
- (15) Ramban, introduction to Job.
- (16) Sichos HaRan 235.
- (17) Berachos 18b.
- (18) See Tosfos, Shabbos 153a "VeNishmaso," Sotah 34b "Avoi" Maaver Yavek 2:25 Nishmas Chaim 2:22.
- (19) Taz, Yoreh Deah 339:3. Cf. Avodah Zara 20b, Pirkei Rabbi Eliezer.
- (20) Shabbos 152a, Midrash Ne'elam, Zohar 1:122b.
- (21) Shabbos 152b, Sefer Mitzvos Gadol, Esin DeRabanan 2 (Vinitzia, 5307) p. 246a.
- (22) Shabbos, ibid., Maharsha a.l., Zohar 1:217b, 3:185b, 222b.
- (23) Berachos 18b, Shabbos 152a.
- (24) Emunos VeDeyos 6:7, Tshuvos Rashba 369, Sefer Chasidim 1163, Tosfos Yom Tov 2:7, Tshuvos Sh'vus Yaakov 2:97, Zvi Hirsh Chayos on Shabbos 13b. Cf. Tanchuma) VaYikra 8.
- (25) Emunos VeDeyos, ibid, Nishmas Chaim 2:24, Maaver Yavak 2:7.
- (26) Midrash Chibut HaKever in Reshis Chochmah, Shaar HaYirah 12, #3.
- (27) Emunos VeDeyos, ibid. Cf. Midrash Ne'elam, Zohar 1:123a.
- (28) Sichos HaRan 179.

