

How often do you think about the hereafter? How often do you, like me, find yourself walking into a room and asking yourself, “What did I come in here after?”

This is one of the questions that I get regularly. Do Jews believe that death is the end or do we believe that that we have an eternal soul that will survive the death of our bodies? I’ve always thought it to be a bit odd when Jews ask me, ‘what it is that we believe?’, because they are also asking, ‘what do I believe?’

I can answer the question, ‘do Jews believe that death is the end or do we believe that that we have an eternal soul that will survive the death of our bodies?’ But don’t know that I can tell you what to believe. In fact, I’m not sure that it matters what you believe about your soul. Judaism, for the most part, is a practice of mitzvot and action. We are part of a people and mitzvot are the way we express our citizenship. You can believe what you want, and as long as you don’t worship golden calves or gods of weather or things made of stone or wood or paper, nothing you believe will disqualify you from being a pretty good Jew. The only way I can answer the question, ‘is death the end,’ is to tell you what I believe and why. And you’ll search your heart or make up your own mind and figure out what you believe.

I wear my body daily, 24-7. It serves me well, although it’s beginning to show some wear and tear. I try to take care of it, but I get busy and sometimes I don’t eat well or get enough exercise. I live each day knowing that my body is not going to last forever. But I care for my body because I still have things that I’d like to do before my body gives out.

Sometimes I fantasize about having lived my life in a different body. What if I was taller, stronger, more coordinated. What if I could throw a football 60 yards with pinpoint accuracy or leap and make a one-handed catch over a defender; pivot and dunk a basketball, control a soccer ball while running down the field, throw a curveball and catch the far corner of the strike zone for a called strike three? How could I integrate who I am with the professional athlete I would have become? Would I have been the first shomer Shabbat quarterback, NBA all-star, or Major League Baseball player?

Growing up, there were times that I didn’t love my body. It’s hard to be a kid without the speed or coordination to enjoy success on the ball field or basketball court. I tried, but my body just wouldn’t do what I wanted it to do. Other bodies had a natural grace and rhythm that I lacked. Nonetheless, I grew to appreciate it as the gift God gave me to be a container for my life. I am grateful for it and for its imperfections which contributed towards making me who I am.

But I also have an inner life disconnected from my body, although you might argue that my inner life takes place between my ears, in a space that is also technically part of my body. But my imagination in that space takes me to places and times far from the narrow band of space and time that my physical being occupies, places that exist only in my imagination. Or maybe I study Torah and find my soul soaring up to heaven, touching the Divine Presence. No matter how far I travel, though, inevitably I return to my body and to an awareness that my life exists within this mass of oxygen, hydrogen, nitrogen, carbon, calcium, phosphorus and a few other elements, a sturdy frame surrounded mostly by water, organized into cells that create my consciousness.

My physical self is fragile and subject to disease in the form of viruses, bacteria, and occasionally cells whose reproductive coding goes awry. At some point, my physical self will end, my body will die. Jewish tradition says that it is not the end of my inner life. Our Biblical tradition doesn’t speak about a life for the soul, but for the past over 2100 years, Jews have believed in a life of the world to come, a world to follow this one, in which the pure souls of all

who have ever lived will continue living. Judaism goes one step further than that, also envisioning that our bodies will live again in a future messianic world, when body and soul will be reunited. We sing about it in Yigdal, based on Maimonides 13 principle beliefs:

מֵתִים יְחִיָּה אֵל בְּרַב חֲסִדוֹ, בְּרוּךְ עֲדֵי עַד שֵׁם תְּהִלָּתוֹ.

God will revive the dead in God's full kindness, may God's name be blessed and praised forever.

We mention it in the Amidah, in the phrase *m'haye meitim*, God, who gives life to the dead.

Other than receiving a tradition that tells me that I am more than my body, why do I believe that the death of my body is not the end of my life?

First of all, because I believe that a transcendent God, who exists above, beyond, and apart from the natural world, created life in that God's image. And thus I choose to believe that life transcends its physical properties. A light bulb dies when its filament or the cathode burns out. I choose to believe that human beings are more than just light bulbs. I choose to believe that the energy, or life force, or soul, of a human is real; and because energy in a physical sense cannot be created or destroyed, therefore I believe the energy of a human life does not die, but only changes from one form to another.

Second, because I believe in a loving God, and, following Psalm 16, I do not believe that a loving God would abandon me to the grave and let death be the end of my being. The Psalmist says:

For You will not abandon me to Sheol, or let Your faithful one see the Pit. [Psalm 16:10]

כִּי לֹא־תַעֲזֹב נַפְשִׁי לְשָׂאוֹל לֹא־תִתֵּן חַסִּידְךָ לְרְאוֹת שְׁחָת.

According to the Psalmist, God is loving, kind, compassionate, and caring. I choose to define these qualities of love in a particular way that I find comforting, that it would not be loving, kind, compassionate, and caring for my existence to end with the death of my body.

Third, I like the idea that my essence will reunite with the souls of my parents and grandparents, and other family and friends near and far. Some might argue that this is a misguided and delusional attempt to mitigate the fear of dying. I'm OK with that. In a variation of Pascal's wager, if I'm right, the payoff is beyond measure. If I'm wrong, I won't be around to suffer the consequences.

I don't have much of an idea of what this next world might be like for me and I'm actually not much interested in speculating. I'm not interested in knowing whether I'll sit around a table studying Torah with God, Moses, and Rabbi Akiva, or sit at banquet tables enjoying all of the delicacies that I might ever have dreamed of eating. I do hope the next world isn't one big golf course – not my thing – but I recognize that your vision of the next world might be exactly that. The details will sort themselves out in time and I'm confident that God's vision of the coming world is big enough to accommodate all good people from time immemorial on. I don't believe in an exclusive heaven.

May each of us live out our days in the fullness of life, untroubled by worries about the life of our soul; may our innate human goodness bring our bodies and our souls into alignment with God's will; and, at the end of our days, may we pass quietly into the sweetness of the world to come.