The Death of Death

My Data

One of the unexpected results of my delving into this issue has been my growing awareness that the theological and philosophical literature on the afterlife by Jews and non-Jews in the past two decades is simply overwhelming. No single volume can encompass it all. Before I proceed to discuss my own conclusions, the reader deserves to know what data I have chosen to ignore—and why.

First, I have chosen to ignore many of the arguments for and against human immortality that are couched in the language of academic philosophy and psychology. These arguments deal with an analysis of how moderns can speak meaningfully of the human soul, its possible relationship or non-relationship with the human body, its origins and its ultimate destiny, and the implications of all of this for notions of bodily resurrection and spiritual immortality. This kind of argumentation, however interesting it may be in a scholarly setting, assumes a grounding in classical philosophical literature and is difficult to convey to readers without such a background. It is primarily the intelligent and concerned lay reader that this volume hopes to reach.¹

Second, I have chosen, with a much greater sense of guilt, to ignore the literature that finds convincing arguments for immortality in the wide range of experiences commonly denoted as “New Age.” I concede the value of being open to the entire range of human experience, yet I remain unconvinced by the evidence of parapsychology, near-death experiences, and alleged communications between the dead and the living. I acknowledge the bias that leads me to be skeptical of these claims. But fortunately, for the reader who does not share this skepticism, there is a wealth of easily accessible, published material that does take this data seriously.²

Third, I tend to minimize the popular notion that one’s immortality rests in the memories one leaves behind, in the impact of one’s life on friends, family and community, in children and grandchildren, in the institutions one helped build, the students one taught or the books one published.

I am fully aware that my identity has been shaped by biological factors that predate me by millennia. I know that my more immediate ancestors had a decisive impact on my psychological makeup. I also share a Jewish communal memory that dates back, at least, to the biblical Abraham and Sarah. Some of those who succeed me on earth will in turn be shaped by who I was, by the life I lived and the values I affirmed. This is a kind of immortality, and for many, it is quite sufficient.

It is not sufficient for me, however, largely because this view does not acknowledge my concrete individuality as I experience it during my life here on earth. According to the view that my immortality is fulfilled through succeeding generations, my immortality merges with that of the countless others who share in shaping the identity of those who follow us. Judaism, on the other hand, provides me with a doctrine of the afterlife that affirms that despite the influence on me of countless others, I remain a totally distinct and individualized human being. It is precisely this individualized existence that is most precious to God and that God will preserve for eternity. We shall quote, below, the claim of the Mishnah that though we are all shaped in the image of the single person that God created at the outset, each of us is different from the other. Each of us can then say: “For my sake was the world created.” Moreover, when that individual person dies, he or she dies, and there will never be another precisely like him or her. The burning question remains: Is that death the final word on the destiny of that individual? Judaism argues that it is not, and I agree.

I will construct a Jewish understanding of the afterlife out of our classical sources, but one that is also congruent with our contemporary understanding of religious thinking and language. Also, in much of what follows, I will be drawing on the work of the contemporary thinkers that I discussed in the previous chapter.
THE REALITY OF DEATH

To deal with the question of the afterlife means, first of all, to accept the reality of death. This may appear incongruous because, at least in the popular imagination, notions of an afterlife seem to be designed precisely to challenge the reality of death. Not so! The very opposite is the case. What doctrines of the afterlife do challenge is the finality of death, the view that death represents the end point of our individual destiny and of our individual relationship with God, not its reality. The distinction between the reality of death and its finality may be subtle, but it is crucial. It may even be argued that until we have fully accepted the fact that our death is real, there is no reason for us to even consider whether or not we have an afterlife.

Note that even scientists such as Dr. Sherwin Nuland (whose thinking we discussed in the first chapter) accept the reality of death, while rejecting its finality. They believe that, like plants and animals, all humans live on in the broader ecosystem:

We die...so that others may live. The tragedy of a single individual becomes, in the balance of natural things, the triumph of ongoing life.¹

I will never appreciate the full power of what Judaism says about my afterlife until I fully accept the fact of my death. Not simply death in the abstract, not my all-too-human mortality, not simply the acknowledgement that all living things must eventually die, but precisely my death in all its painful concreteness. If I never really die, why worry about an afterlife? It is precisely because I live daily with an impending awareness that I will soon live no more that the question of what will happen to me after I die presses upon me. And that it does so with increasing urgency the closer I come to the end of my days.

All living things eventually die, but only human beings live with the awareness of their death. This is the terrifying paradox at the heart of human existence: We are animals who are yet conscious of our animal nature. We live an animal-like existence: We eat, drink and mate. Yet, we have self-consciousness. We are aware of our bodily functions and can control them. And we think, value and feel. We are capable of love and generosity, guilt and despair. We can search the mysteries of nature and create great art. We can even spin theories about our afterlife (as I am doing right now). Yet we die the death of animals.

William James calls death “the worm at the core of all our usual springs of delight.”

The fact that we can die, that we can be ill at all, is what perplexes us.... We need a life not correlated with death, a health not liable to illness, a kind of good that will not perish, a good that flies beyond the Goods of nature.²

To live with the constant awareness of that paradox is well nigh impossible, which is why most of us work desperately to deny it. But such denial is increasingly difficult to maintain, as we age or become mortally ill.

How I deal with my death is crucial to how I deal with my life. That is what lends the issue of my afterlife even greater urgency. Discussing the afterlife is not simply determining what will happen to me in some indefinite future; it affects how I live today. If my death is an integral part of the larger reality which constitutes my life, then to deal with my life demands that I deal with my death. Of course, I can also avoid the larger issue of my life’s meaning; most of us do. But one who is not satisfied with simply living day by day without a broader purpose, without a sense of what it means to live as a human being, or of how a human life-experience coheres and acquires significance, will eventually have to confront his or her death and integrate that fact into the broader structure that

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constitutes the life that one is living.

No more than any other human being do I know what will happen to me after I die. But what I believe will happen to me after I die affects how I lead my life today. That is why the issue of my afterlife presses upon me now.

RELIGION AND THE AFTERLIFE

The impulse to create that broader structure, to knit together the discrete moments of a human life into a pattern of meaning is precisely the function of religion. Religion, the anthropologist Clifford Geertz reminds us, formulates “conceptions of a general order of existence.” The operative word here is “order.” Religion orders our world, discerns patterns in what appears to be anarchy, wrests cosmos out of chaos, sense out of senselessness.

To claim that death is final is to subvert the order that religion imposes on our experience. And that, too, is our existential claim, one which cannot be supported by rational or empirical data, yet one that even a Sherwin Nuland would agree with. His entire book, How We Die, attempts to show that death is an indispensable part of the natural order. But in the light of what we referred to above as the paradox of human existence, to accept the finality of death is to revert to chaos. Death is the ultimate absurdity, the total annihilation of everything that a human life distinctively represents. That is the basis for John Hick’s insistence that

any religious understanding of human existence—not merely of one’s own existence but of the life of humanity as a whole—positively requires some kind of immortality belief and would be radically incoherent without it.

WHAT DO I BELIEVE?

It is not only the fact of death that is incoherent. If death is an integral part of our broader life experience, then it also subverts that as well. To insist on the finality of death is to condemn the totality of human life to meaninglessness. Human life cannot be fulfilled here on earth. We are born and grow into adulthood with hopes and visions, goals and ideals, yet most of us prepare to die with a haunting sense of potentials unfulfilled, aspirations unrealized, relationships unresolved, accounts still not balanced. Our life-experience is inevitably fragmented. That pattern lends human life as a whole what Hick calls “a tragic character,” and it leads him to recognize that

if the human potential is to be fulfilled in the lives of individual men and women, those lives must be prolonged far beyond the limits of our present bodily existence.

This is a singularly modern extension of the impulse which led the author of Daniel to insist that it is the need for retribution that demands a doctrine of resurrection. In Daniel, retribution was a moral issue: God had to reward the martyrs of that age for their loyalty and punish the evil-doers for their treachery, if not in their lifetime then in an afterlife. For us today, retribution is more than a moral issue. It represents the intuitive sense that since humans are born with an impulse to lead fulfilled lives, God must provide a setting for that fulfillment to be achieved, if not now, then in an afterlife.

THE LANGUAGE OF ESCHATOLOGY

The surest way to trivialize any eschatological doctrine is to understand it as literal truth, as a prediction of events that will take place just as they are described in some eventual future. That is the fatal
flaw in the arguments, both of modern traditionalist and modern liberal Jews. The former accept it as literally true; the latter reject it because they understand it in the same way. But is there a middle ground?

I believe there is. I believe that the most fruitful way of making sense of these teachings is to understand them as part of Judaism’s classic religious myth.

In the first chapter, I suggested several possible definitions of the term “myth.” I will not recapitulate that discussion here. Suffice it to say that a myth is a way of connecting discrete experiences so that they form a coherent pattern and acquire meaning. Myths, then, are not objectively literal descriptions of some reality “out there” beyond the individual. But neither are they total fictions. Rather, they are subjective, somewhat imaginative portraits that make it possible for our experience of the world to hang together, to be ordered, and thus, to make sense.

Mythic thinking becomes progressively indispensable the more our experience eludes immediate sense-perception, the further we get from what we can directly perceive. That is why scientists who investigate the origins of the world, or the ultimate make-up of the material world, or the dynamics of the human psyche revert to myth. Each of these deals with events or realities that exist “beyond” the range of direct human perception. It is this elusive “beyondness” of some data that makes it inaccessible to our senses and that demands a different way of thinking and talking that can fulfill our need to understand our world.

Dealing with the “beyond” is intrinsic to religious language. All religions speak voluminously of God, a reality that, certainly in Judaism, is beyond direct human apprehension. The same can be said for doctrines of creation, or narratives that describe the founding events of that religion. That God descended upon a mountaintop and spoke to Moses and the children of Israel is classic myth. So is the doctrine that God revealed God’s self in the person of Jesus of

Nazareth in the first century of the Common Era, that this man was crucified for the sins of humankind, was resurrected on the third day, and will return to judge all humanity.

These are mythic statements precisely because they speak of the “beyond.” To understand them as literal truths is to trivialize them. To believe, for example, that God literally came down on Sinai and literally spoke to our ancestors is to commit the sin of idolatry, which, in its purest form, reduces God to a natural/human phenomenon. People descend and speak, God does not—except in a mythic way.

All eschatology deals with the “beyond,” with events that will take place beyond the range of time, in some other “age” or “world.” It is simply impossible for human beings to comprehend what this world will look like “after time.” The very phrase is oxymoronic; there simply is no “after” to time. Every “after” remains within time.

Eschatology complements our thinking about creation. Together they deal with the beginnings and endings of all things, with the “beyond” before and after. Thus they provide a frame for the “in between,” which, in classic Jewish religious thinking, is understood as the age of history, the age in which we are now located. They also provide the broad structure which Jews use to make sense of how everything came to be and how all things will eventually end. With this pattern in place, we know “where we are” within the broadest perspective of time. Creation and eschatology provide the frame which gives the portrait integrity. They are properly indispensable.

This book has focused on only one of the many themes that compose Jewish eschatology, the one that deals with the ultimate destiny of the individual human being. We have seen that during its richest phase, in the Talmudic era, Judaism proffered two doctrines on this theme. One taught that, at the end of time, our bodies will be resurrected; the other maintained that a part of us, our “soul,” never dies, but continues in some other sphere under the loving protection of God. Eventually, these two doctrines were conflated

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so that, at the end, God will restore our immortal souls to our resurrected bodies. From the age of the Talmud to the dawn of modernity, most Jews accepted some form of this conflated version.

Both doctrines share the classic characteristics of myth. We have no direct apprehension of what constitutes a “soul,” nor can anyone speak in literal terms of what will happen to our bodies after they become dust. Both doctrines take us “beyond” the boundaries of human experience; both strain our normal conceptual faculties and our language. But the alternatives are not simply uncritical literalism or silence. Our task is to understand how the doctrines function as a way of completing the frame which lends coherence to our life experience here on earth.

There are two core arguments for the indispensability of a doctrine of the afterlife. One is theological; the other is anthropological. The theological argument stems from the Jewish understanding of God; the anthropological, from its understanding of the nature of the human being.

THE THEOLOGICAL ARGUMENT: GOD IS MORE POWERFUL THAN DEATH

Ask the typical Jew to describe the nature of God and he or she will immediately tell you that God is omnipotent. No doctrine is more central to popular Jewish religion. Of course, God can do whatever God wants to do. That is what makes God, God! But even a brief glance at the image of God as it emerges in our classic texts will reveal that our ancestors understood God’s omnipotence to be far from absolute.

Read the Bible carefully and the overwhelming impression is of God’s dismal failure in accomplishing God’s central purpose: The creation of a sacred people who will be unquestionably loyal to God’s will. God’s very first interaction with human beings, with Adam and Eve in Eden, is a paradigmatic narrative since Adam and Eve are everybody. They disobey God’s command with tragic results. The Bible recapitulates that pattern again and again with the role of Adam and Eve taken up by the people of Israel. Israel, too, rebels, with equally tragic results. God tries to re-establish a relationship with Israel, is challenged yet again, and the cycle continues. The whole is a poignant record of frustration suffused with hope and infinite yearning.

In much of the Bible, the main impediment to the full manifestation of God’s power is human freedom. That God created human beings free even to rebel against God is never questioned. Adam and Eve were free to eat the forbidden fruit; Cain to kill his brother; the Israelites to build a golden calf. God had to live with the fruits of that freedom. The only significant exception to that rule is Pharaoh. God hardened Pharaoh’s heart, we are told, so that God’s eventual redemption of Israel would be a striking manifestation of God’s power:

I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, that I may multiply my signs and marvels in the land of Egypt. When Pharaoh does not heed you, I will lay My Hand upon Egypt and deliver My ranks, My people the Israelites, from the land of Egypt with extraordinary chastisements. And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord.... (Exodus 7:3-5)

The Bible goes out of its way to show that God deprived Pharaoh of his freedom to choose to release the Israelites. That is a clear signal that Pharaoh’s inability to act freely is the exception that proves the rule.

Sometimes God’s power is limited by God’s own commitments. When God threatens to destroy the Israelites for having built the golden calf, Moses intercedes, pleading that God remember the covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob:
"You swore to them by Your Self and said to them: I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, and I will give to your offspring this holy land of which I spoke, to possess forever." And the Lord renounced the punishment He had planned to bring upon His people. (Exodus 32:13-14)

In this instance, the limitations on God's power are not intrinsic, but rather result from God's decisions about the destiny of Israel. There is no question that God has ultimate power. There is also no question that God chose not to exercise that power.

In other texts, the reasons for God's impotence are far more mysterious. The author of Psalm 44 has been told (by his ancestors) that in days of old, God had led Israel to victory over its enemies, but in his own day,

...You have rejected and disgraced us;
You do not go with our armies,
You make us retreat before our foe;
our enemies plunder us at will.
You let them devour us like sheep;
You disperse us among the nations....
You make us a byword among the nations,
a laughingstock among the peoples....

The psalmist would understand God's abandonment of Israel if it had been disloyal to God. But this is not the case now:

All this has come upon us,
yet we have not forgotten You,
or been false to Your covenant....

Indeed, the very opposite is the case:

It is for Your sake that we are slain all day long,
that we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.

It is precisely for Israel's loyalty that it has been persecuted. Finally, the coda to the psalm:

Rouse Yourself, why do You sleep, O Lord?
Awaken, do not reject us forever!....
Arise and help us,
redeem us, as befits Your faithfulness. (44:10ff)

Is Israel's vulnerability before its enemies a commentary on God's lack of power? Or is it a matter of God's will? There is no explicit answer to this question in the text. It may be the result of a deliberate decision by God. But it may also be the result of intrinsic divine impotence, some inherent limitation on God's power. That conclusion is certainly the implication of the psalmist's claim that Israel has not been unfaithful to God. Why then would God choose to abandon God's people? The psalmist is left to wonder, as is the author of Psalm 13:

How long, O Lord; will You ignore me forever?
How long will You hide Your face from me?
How long will I have cares on my mind,
grief in my heart all day?
How long will my enemy have the upper hand?
(Psalm 13:2-3)

The setting of this psalm is personal, not communal as in Psalm 44. But the experience of God's withdrawal is the same. In neither case is God's absence a form of punishment. Indeed, in the first of these, the author insists that Israel suffers not only despite, but paradoxically because of its loyalty to God.
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However limited God's power may be in historical time, it is Judaism's overwhelming testimony that these limitations will vanish in the Age to Come. The central thrust of Jewish eschatology is that this Age will mark the ultimate manifestation of God's sovereignty over all creation. That promise forms the climax of one of the earliest Jewish eschatological visions on record:

In all of My sacred mount
Nothing evil or vile shall be done;
For the land shall be filled with devotion to the Lord
As water covers the sea. (Isaiah 11:9)

A far more elaborate statement of that vision is the concluding paragraph of the Aleinu liturgy which dates from the second century of our era and now is the concluding prayer of every Jewish service of worship.

We therefore hope, Lord our God, soon to behold Your majestic glory, when the abominations will be removed from the earth and the false gods exterminated; when the world will be perfected under the reign of the Almighty, and all mankind will call upon Your name, and all the wicked of the earth will be turned to You. May all the inhabitants of the world realize and know that to You every knee must bend, every tongue vow allegiance.... May they all accept the yoke of Your kingdom, and reign over them speedily forever and ever.

It is also expressed in the High Holiday Amidah.

Now, Lord our God, put Your awe upon all that You have created.... Grant honor to your people, glory to those who revere You, hope to those who seek You....

WHAT DO I BELIEVE?

May the righteous see this and rejoice, the upright exult, and the godly delight. Iniquity shall shut its mouth, wickedness will vanish like smoke, when You will abolish the rule of tyranny from the earth. You will reign over all whom You have made, You alone, O Lord, on Mount Zion the abode of Your majesty, in Jerusalem Your holy city, as it is written in Your Holy Scriptures, "The Lord will reign forever, Your God O Zion, for all generations." (Psalm 146:10)

This is the very same impulse that leads the tradition to forecast God's eschatological triumph over death as well.

The expectation that death itself will eventually disappear assumes that death was perceived to challenge God's power manifest in history. How we understand that expectation depends on how we deal with Judaism's differing accounts of the origins of death.

Earlier, we reviewed four biblical explanations for the presence of death in the world. Death may be part of God's original creation, it may be retribution for Adam and Eve's disobedience, it may be a trade-off for human self-awareness and our powers of discrimination; or it may represent a remnant of a pagan notion of death as a power that God did not or could not subdue at creation and that persists independently of God's will and power.

In reverse order, if death is a power that resisted God's ordering work of creation, it will vanish in an age when God's sovereignty will be complete. If death is understood as the fruit of the full flowering of our humanity, it becomes one of the many tensions that mark the nature of human life within this age of history, and which will be abolished when history has come to a close. If death is retribution for sin, it will disappear in an age when loyalty to God will be intuitive on the part of all humanity.

But if death is part of God's creation from the outset, we find ourselves in more difficulty. If from the outset, God created us to
die, why then the eschatological promise to banish death?

The clue to understanding this paradox lies in the message of Psalm 44 and 13. Their authors despair at God’s mysterious abandonment of Israel or of the psalmist. Where is God’s power now? But history is replete with instances of God’s apparent withdrawal, both in the communal sphere and also in the life of individuals. The psalmists make no attempt to account for God’s withdrawal; they bemoan it and plead for God’s renewed engagement. The psalms end with a plea that God’s presence and protection be manifest once again, but also with no explicit assurance that this will, indeed, take place.

That God’s presence is sometimes inexplicably eclipsed is the central paradox of the life of faith. This is what led Martin Buber to suggest the notion of “moment gods,” and Rabbi Irving Greenberg to write of “moment faiths.” The immediate context of Greenberg’s discussion is our theological response to the Holocaust.

After Auschwitz, faith means there are times when faith is overcome. Buber has spoken of “moment gods”; God is known only at the moment when presence and awareness are fused in vital life. This knowledge is interspersed with moments when only natural, self-contained, routine existence is present. We now have to speak of “moment faiths,” moments when the Redeemer and vision of redemption are present, interspersed with times when the flames and smoke of burning children blot out faith—though it flickers again.

For Greenberg, in the light of the Holocaust, the dichotomy of theist and atheist is impossible to maintain. Instead, faith exists in a dialectic, it is

a life response of the whole person to the Presence in

life and history. Like life, this response ebbs and flows. The difference between the skeptic and the believer is frequency of faith, and not certitude of position.9

It is not the Holocaust alone that challenges faith. History is replete with holocausts, communal and personal. They represent an enduring challenge to God’s power. But the believer’s response to that challenge is nourished by the assurance that the dialectic of faith is endemic to our historical situation alone, and that it will be resolved in an age when, in the words of the High Holiday liturgy:

Iniquity shall shut its mouth, wickedness shall vanish like smoke, when You will abolish the rule of tyranny on earth. You shall reign over all whom You have made, You alone O Lord....

Death may well be an inexplicable part of God’s created world, as inexplicable as the other manifestations of anarchy we see about us. But if Jewish eschatology views history as moving from chaos to cosmos, then God’s victory over death is part of that broader mythic pattern.

On theological grounds, then, Judaism demands the death of death. If God is truly God, if God’s will and power are absolute, then God must triumph over death as well. The death of death marks the final step in the triumph of the monotheistic God.10

THE ARGUMENT FROM ANTHROPOLOGY I: MY BODY

The death of death is the ultimate eschatological promise. Judaism came to affirm that expectation because, certainly beginning with the middle of the second century BCE and possibly
somewhat earlier, some Jews believed that in the foreseeable future, at least some of the dead would live again. Eventually, that promise was expanded to include all Jews who had ever lived. That doctrine soon achieved quasi-dogmatic status in the Jewish system of beliefs. Begin with that premise and the inevitable conclusion is that in such an age, death itself would be no more.

But what are we to make of that premise? What does it mean to say that God has the power to bring the dead to life?

We saw that this doctrine began as two separate doctrines that later merged. The first teaches that, at the end of time, bodies will be resurrected from their graves. The second, that there is a non-material “something” in every human called the “soul” which never dies, which departs the body at death and returns to God. The later conflation of the two doctrines led to the belief that, at the time of resurrection, the soul would be restored to the resurrected body, and that each individual human, with body and soul united as they were on earth, would come before God for judgement.

This scenario is profoundly true. Even more, it is indispensable for us if we are to make sense of our lives here on earth—as long as we accept it, not as crude biology, but as classic Jewish religious myth.

To characterize this phase of my argument as “anthropological” is to suggest that it stems from the Jewish view of the human person as a psycho-physical unity. The “psycho” part of that entity is what I call my “soul”; the “physical,” my body.

To speak of “my body” is to capture a relationship that is totally unique, a relationship between something that is “me” and something else that is a “body.” But what is that relationship? In what way is it unique? 31

One possible way of construing that relationship is to suggest that my body is something that I “have” much as I “have” a watch. But surely the relationship with my body is far more intimate than my relationship with my watch. What I “have” I can dispose of. I can give you my watch and I remain myself, just as I was when I wore it on my wrist. But I cannot give you my body (except in some crude, sexual sense) without disposing of myself, of “me.” When my body is born, I am born; when my body gets sick, I am sick; when my body dies, I die. I can dispose of my body by committing suicide, but I can only do that once. When I do that, I have also disposed of my “self,” of me in my totality. To say that I simply “have” my body, then, is to miss that dimension of my relationship with my body which makes it a unique relationship.

A much more accurate way of capturing that relationship between me and my body is to claim that “I am my body.” That formulation captures the felt relationship between whatever it is that “I” am and my body. It affirms the indissolubility of that bond, the fact that without my body, I am no longer me. I feel quite differently toward “my” body than I do toward “a” body. Were I a surgeon, the patient’s body that lies before me on the operating table is simply “a” body; it could be “any” body, and after completing the surgery on this body, I will move on to another body.

In fact, medical ethics insists that the body on which a surgeon operates must be simply “a” body, certainly not his own body nor even the body of someone the surgeon feels particularly close to. Similarly, the mortician embalms “a” body. Even in the most intense of interpersonal, sexual relationships, what I feel toward the body that lies next to me is qualitatively different than what I feel toward my own body. The latter relationship is even infinitely more intimate than the former. I can divorce my wife and move on to a new, intimate relationship with someone else and with that person’s body. But I cannot divorce my body.

That comparison is suggestive. We can posit a range of relationships between me and someone or something else which reveal a progressively diminishing sense of intimacy: Between me and my body, me and my wife, lover and children, me and my cat, me and the superintendent of my building, me and the people who share
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my bus trip, me and my watch, etc., etc., etc.... To use Buberian terminology, this range of relationships takes me progressively from the realm of the I-Thou to that of the I-It, from intimacy to detachment. My relationship with my body is the paradigmatic I-Thou relationship. I can enter into other I-Thou relationships because of the paradigmatic I-Thou relationship I have with my body.12

Even more, it is because of my body that I am inserted into time and space, into history and society. If I were not embodied, I would not be sitting at my word-processor on this very day. Nor would I be teaching my class or playing with my children. My body is the landmark which connects me with everything else that exists physically, specifically with all of history and society.13

The thrust of these reflections is to suggest, first, that my body is indispensable to my sense of self. Without my body, there is no “me.” Whatever my ultimate destiny, then, whatever God has in store for me at the end, must include my body. That is why any doctrine of the afterlife must deal with my body as well. Belief in bodily resurrection is, then, indispensable to any doctrine of the afterlife.

It is indispensable for another reason. If my body inserts me into history and society, then the affirmation of bodily resurrection is also an affirmation of history and society. If my bodily existence is insignificant, then so are history and society. To affirm that God has the power to reconstitute me in my bodily existence is to affirm that God also cares deeply about history and society.

But we know that God does care deeply about history and society. Will Herberg is one of many thinkers who claim that it is Judaism that contributed “the sense of history” to Western culture. Every people and nation had their historians, but only in the Bible is history viewed, not as a series of random events, nor as an endless cycle without an ultimate goal, but rather as “a great and meaningful process.” Herberg quotes the biblical scholar, J.P. Hyatt, as contending that the prophets conceived of God as

a God of history, manifesting himself on the stage of time and controlling the destiny of men and nations.

History, in Judaism, has a beginning, an end, and a purpose. History is linear, and it understands the past as manifesting promises which would be fulfilled in the future.

Biblical historiography also takes time seriously. Herberg writes:

God’s ends are effected with time, in and through history; the salvation that is promised as the ultimate validation of life lies indeed beyond history but it lies beyond it as its fulfillment and consummation.... From this point of view, earthly history takes on a meaning and seriousness that are completely absent where the Hebraic influence has not been felt.

To take time seriously is to take the mundane events of everyday life seriously. Among the Greeks, Herberg notes, humanity

had no destiny. The strivings and doings of men, their enterprises, conflicts and achievements, led nowhere. All, all would be swallowed up in the cycle of eternal recurrence that was the law of the cosmos.16

To shape “the strivings and doings of men” in minutest detail is the central purpose of biblical legislation, and in biblical prophecy, Israel’s loyalty to God’s moral law becomes the decisive factor in its national history. The purpose of the whole is to create a distinctive social structure, a unique community, an “am kadosh,” a “people” that is “holy” or “set apart.”

Torah is suffused with this concern for Israel’s social polity. It is implicit in every piece of legislation in the Torah affecting
interpersonal relationships, but it is explicit in Leviticus 24, an entire chapter devoted to regulating the social life of the community. The legislative details pertain to the Sabbatical and Jubilee years, and to the redemption of land, of indentured servants and of slaves. In each case, the text begins with the phrase, “If your kinsman is in straits...” The whole chapter is permeated with such admonitions as “fear your God,” or “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt,” or “for they [the indentured servants] are My servants...; they may not give themselves over into servitude.”

The repeated emphasis on God’s redemption of Israel from Egyptian servitude provides the equally explicit grounding for this legislation. Indeed, why were our ancestors enslaved in Egypt for 400 years if not to provide them with an object lesson about the evils of social oppression, if not to teach them how to create a social structure in which no one will be oppressed?

In the writings of the prophets, this emphasis on the primacy of morality reaches its apogee. Witness Amos’ cry to

...let justice well up like water,
Righteousness like an unfailing stream. (5:24)

or Isaiah’s

Learn to do good,
Devote yourself to justice;
Aid the wronged.
Uphold the rights of the orphan;
Defend the cause of the widow. (1:17)

Ychezkel Kaufmann, the noted Israeli biblical scholar, emphasizes that it is precisely

the commonplace ‘venial’ sins that offend the prophets:

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bribe-taking, biased justice, false scales, extortion from the poor and defenseless, raising prices, and the like. For such sins they prophesy destruction and exile....God made Himself known to Israel, made with it a moral-religious Covenant, intended it to be a holy nation dedicated to do His will. But a people perverting justice, practicing violence, drunken and debauched, is no people of God! For the prophets, justice and righteousness are not a private affair. The entire nation is responsible for the moral state that prevails in it. Hence it will be judged as a whole both for idol worship and for moral sin on the day of reckoning.15

God’s engagement both with human history and with Israel’s social polity come together in prophetic eschatology. The prophets do more than rebuke and call for repentance. They also envision a future age when paganism will end and monotheism will become the heritage of all peoples, when war will be no more, and when all humankind will recognize God’s moral law as absolute.16

To affirm that vision is effectively to affirm the value to God of human history and society as we participate in them during our lifetime. But that participation demands our embodied existence here on earth. That is why any Jewish doctrine of the afterlife must also affirm the significance of that dimension of my being.