EDITORIAL

Judaism and Death

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My mother died in January after a prolonged struggle with Parkinson’s and Alzheimer’s diseases. I am still mourning the loss. There have been some moments in the grieving process when I’ve needed some distancing from the feelings of loss — and at such moments I’ve been reflecting on Jewish attitudes toward death. I offer the following thoughts in her memory.

It might be comforting to imagine my mother (as some who recently offered me comfort have encouraged me to) as a ghostlike being floating around the universe, looking down on me, and seeking naches (getting pleasure) from my successes. Or to picture her, after having entered into some heavenly assembly of ghosts, being able to intervene on my behalf with the ultimate Judge of the Universe to soften my defeats and my pains. Even more comforting to believe that although her faculties and her ability to formulate sentences and coherent thoughts gradually diminished and then disappeared entirely over the course of the past five years, her soul had magically detached and was thinking its own thoughts and feeling its own feelings, quite whole and independent of the actual incoherence of her earthly being. But such comforts seem little more than self-pitying self-deception. The psalmist proclaimed clearly an early biblical understanding: “The dead shall not praise God, neither all those who descend into silence… therefore we [the living] shall praise God from now and ever, Hallelujah” (Ps. 115). Descending into silence is the reality of death for the psalmist.

Judaism began as a rebellion against the death-centered civilization of the Nile. Enslaved to build the great pyramids as monuments to the desperate efforts of the rulers of the world’s greatest imperial power to achieve immortality, the Jewish people confronted in its daily toil the perversion of life being subverted in the service of death. Judaism emerged as a this-worldly religion. The Torah commands that we not follow the way of the Egyptians; neither should the Jews create an imperial system nor a death-focused religion.

The Egyptians were involved in what Ernest Becker calls the denial of death. This denial has led human beings to construct systems of power, build monuments and empires, attain wealth, or write books and make movies — to try to become heroes in the effort, as Becker puts it, “to transcend the limitations of the human condition and achieve victory over impotence and finitude.”

Yet why are we so afraid of the limitations of the human condition? Ken Wilber’s book Up From Eden offers an intriguing but ultimately partial answer. Wilber argues that all human beings intuit that their true nature is to be part of the infinite spirit, and that their ultimate hunger is for unification with the totality. Nor should this unification be thought of as a loss of all egoic consciousness or a fading into an oceanic state of dissolution. “Wholeness,” says Wilber, “is not the opposite of egoic individuality, it is simply its Ground, and the discovery of the ground does not annihilate the figure of the ego. On the contrary, it simply reconnects it with the rest of nature, cosmos and divinity.”

The problem, says Wilber, is that each person is terrified of real transcendence, because transcendence entails the loss or death of the isolated and separated self. People want wholeness, but they resist and fear it since it would involve the death of their separate selves. Instead they fill up their lives with the pursuit of sex, money, fame, knowledge, and power as substitute gratifications.

What I like about this account is that it acknowledges that ultimately human beings are motivated by more than the material needs for food, clothing, shelter, and security. Many of the historical struggles among cultures, nations, and peoples can be understood as different modes of the search for symbolic substitutes for what people most deeply want — a return to a fundamental wholeness and connection with the entire universe. These substitutes offered themselves in response to the fear of losing one’s own self and dissolving, dying, disappearing.

What Wilber does not explain is why human beings are so reluctant to lose their individuality, and why, if the experience of being part of the totality is so...
much part of who we really are, we don’t find its compensations enough to outweigh our individual fears. In fact, many spiritual traditions present an answer that I find unacceptable—one that sees this fear as a product of some fundamental flaw in human beings. Poor, sad creatures bound by a world of illusions, we are unable to transcend our illusory selves and to realize our full identity with the totality.

In my book Surplus Powerlessness—and partly inspired by the unpublished work of Peter Gabel—I have tried to show that the kind of individuality and separateness that human beings have developed in the past ten thousand years has been a response to the misrecognition we experience in our earliest encounters with a world of alienated others. This misrecognition is sustained and perpetuated by a social order that keeps us apart and separate—and, by extension, undermines our ability to join with others to challenge existing systems of class domination. Of course, the alienation of self is never total—and there remains within each of us a strong yearning for a fuller connectedness with others. We long for a way of being with others in which we recognize others and are recognized for the fullest expressions of our God-self. And we seek to realize a way of being in community that allows us to unite fully, in, through, and with other human beings, with the totality or the Whole that is all being. Yet our experience of life in class-dominated societies is something quite different: religious and political communities that offer merging, unity, and togetherness under an oppressive and painfully unfair distribution of the opportunities for human beings to develop their capacities.

There is scant solid historical data to corroborate these memories of communities unencumbered by patriarchy and class division. Yet buried within the folklore of humanity are the distant memories of a different way of being, an earlier period in which communities were not fundamentally shaped by class domination. But by the time we get to recorded history, “merging with the whole” may have already taken on a very new meaning for most human beings—because the “whole” was no longer a community in the older sense, but rather a human system of oppression and imposed pain. This pain was often justified by the authority of the religious tradition as ontologically necessary or simply appropriate to the fallen, sinful, or otherwise lower consciousness of human beings. Most people felt they had little choice but to go along with these flawed and distorted communities of meaning, but the anger that they began to feel at under-recognition and the lack of real connection became the flip side of these community experiences. And this anger, in turn, was mobilized by ruling elites against external enemies: the barbarians, the evil ones, those whose very being represented a flaw in existence and perhaps explained why life didn’t feel as good as it should have.

No wonder, then, that this primary form of merging with the totality, the Whole, now became a troubled proposition. For some the solution was to separate human beings from the rest of nature, to abandon all hope of merging with the human totality, and to focus attention on merging with the nonhuman order that offered—in imagination, anyway—to free us from the distortions of class societies. These people became the gurus and seekers of the Eastern spiritual tradition. They had their analogue in philosophers, writers, poets, scribes, prophets, and religious thinkers, and eventually in traders, bankers, shopkeepers, and artists who, each in different ways, sought separation from the dominated consciousness of the totality. In the West, this rejection of the corrupted community often took the form of developing oneself as an individual with a separate identity, increasingly detached from the structures of existing religious and political pseudo-communities. Individuality developed not as some irrational “fear” of being part of the totality, but rather as a way of preserving the spark of divinity within us that cannot survive if we merge with an unjust community. Many of us run as fast as we can from those who would recruit us into a “community” precisely because we’ve
had thousands of years of such people offering us pseudocommunities that are too often embedded in ugly systems of oppression.

Yet the kind of individuality that we can develop under these distorted conditions is necessarily limited and distorted. We get to claim ourselves, but only as beings who have been systematically misrecognized, only as beings who are doubtful that we can really connect with others, only as beings who harbor a crippling cynicism and pessimism about our ability ever to really fulfill our deepest needs for connection and recognition. It is this fundamentally isolated human being who then desperately seeks to perpetuate his or her own existence through various strategies to deny death and thereby to keep alive—though always in a state of isolated and separated consciousness.

In short, what Eastern religions leave out of their account is the recognition that people do not crave a fundamental integration with the totality, but crave an integration with a just and morally righteous totality. The denial of death arises out of a depressed and pessimistic acceptance of the unchangeable systems of domination that make genuine community impossible.

Judaism did not have to deny death precisely because it did not believe that systems of domination were immutable. Instead it insisted that the universe, in its essence, is based on justice and love, and that our alienation from a potentially loving and just totality is a product of changeable social relations, not an ontological necessity. Our fear of death, then, is historically conditioned by the false choices we face: between alienated pseudocommunities of oppression on the one hand and alienated individuality on the other. Absent a community that affirms what it is to be a human being—the ways that we are created in the image of God, the ways that we are in need of each other's love, recognition, and creative cooperation—we will always seek some partial solution. It may be individual "eternal life" in heaven, individual acts of glory, or the power of conquest—all of which are bound to fail us in providing what we most deeply want. Overcoming the false consciousness about death requires a collective process in which we actually create a new "we"—and cannot be achieved solely through acts of self-transcendence and individual spiritual growth.

Hence, Judaism arrived on the scene to proclaim that the alternative to subordinating life to death was to create justice and love in this world. And this transformation was not to be an act of individuals only, but required us to remake the entire world through a community dedicated to a God who is the force in the world that makes this transformation possible. To the extent that Judaism itself in later stages of its existence made compromises with various death-oriented practices, built in ideas like yahrzeits and memorial services, began to develop an elaborate ritual around death, and opened itself to notions about spirits that survived the body, it was simply reflecting the degree to which it had lost confidence in its original encounter with God. Hellenistic influence that emphasized the split between the body and soul became powerful cultural forces once the Greeks had conquered Judea. The attraction of an other-worldly focus grew in direct proportion to the degree to which Jews began to believe that the power of imperialism could not be overcome in this world, that the evil was too great to be successfully dismantled, that the story of liberation from Egypt was either a fairy tale or a story of what had happened long ago, rather than an image of what was always possible as long as the God that made possible the overthrow of oppression was the God who created and ruled the universe.

Staying true to Torah, then, is staying true to a vision that does not look to another existence, that sees immortality, as the tradition says, planted within us, within the community of the people of Israel itself rather than in some other world. Our task as Jews is that of healing, repairing, and transforming the world so that we need no longer fear merging with the totality and losing our individuality.

My mother worked at that task of healing and repair. First as a leader of the Zionist movement and Hadassah, then as a leader in the Democratic party, then as political advisor and administrative assistant to a United States senator, she found the ways that seemed to her to best serve that healing and repair. When she first introduced me to JFK in 1959, it was only after carefully grilling him to assure herself that his support for Israel was not lukewarm. It was from her that I first learned that the organized Jewish community did not reward its most tireless activists and even its most dedicated Zionists with the honor they deserved—unless they were also big fund-raisers. And I learned from her stories about the inner workings of the Democratic party just how corrupt even liberal politics could be. For the sake of Israel, she made many compromises to work with politicians she otherwise might have found distasteful, but she also used her considerable influence to oppose injustice. I was most proud when she was one of 400 Americans revealed to be on President Nixon's secret "enemies list," but by that time I had already inherited some of her spunk and chutzpah and was myself sitting in a federal penitentiary for having organized antiwar demonstrations. Her immortality, like that of the entire people of Israel, resides not in some other world, but in the way that we continue the work of healing and repair from generation to generation.