



The Final Encounter?

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Mankind has been confronted with the experience of death since the beginning of time, and yet there is hardly another subject about which we know so little. Modern man chooses to escape from the awesome awareness of his own mortality and seeks ways to isolate himself from those approaching death. Why is this?

The Scriptures approach death with a sense of realism. Jacob was "gathered to his people" (Genesis 49:29). "David slept with his fathers" (I Kings 2:10). In the fourteenth chapter of the second book of Samuel we're told, "We must needs die, and are as water spilt on the ground, which cannot be gathered up" (verse 14). "What man is he that liveth, and shall not see death? That shall deliver his soul from the hand of the grave?" (Psalm 89:49). The inevitability of death for every man as spoken of in the Scriptures is a matter few would disagree with, and in light of this the Scriptures encourage us to "number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom" (Psalm 90:12). "Lord, make me to know mine end, and the measure of my days..." (Psalm 39:5). It is with this very idea in mind that many wear the kittel on Yom Kippur, a burial shroud to remind one of the day of his death. The Day of Atonement is thus an annual encounter with death.

Our rabbis and sages certainly didn't avoid the subject. The Shulchan Aruch deals in great detail with the proper response to death, and it must be acknowledged, with a great deal of psychological insight. For example, one is to show respect for the body as though the person were still alive. There is a prescribed period of time in which we may mourn, and after this period we must accept God's decree and cease from mourning. One must light candles and say the Kaddish, praising God and allowing for His sovereignty: Baruch Dayan Emet -Blessed be the Truthful Judge. Beside the Halachic prescriptions which serve to give the mourner a structure in which he may function during the period of grief, community support is enjoyed through the custom of sitting shiva. The mourner is not to cook meals or do any work, but instead the community undertakes to be his solace, his support and his companionship for the week following death.

All of this tradition serves to help and comfort the bereaved. Yet the emphasis of the tradition is on what to do in response to the death of others and not how one should prepare himself for his own death.

Formerly, the traditional prayer book included the following prayer: "I acknowledge before Thee, O Lord my God and God of my Fathers, that my life and my death are in Thy hands. May it be Thy will to heal me. But if death is my lot, then I accept it from Thy hand with love. Into Thy hands I return my spirit. Thou wilt redeem me, O ever faithful God. Hear O Israel the Lord our God is one Lord." Unfortunately, this prayer has been deleted from modern prayer books, and solace for the dying is sparse. Why is this?

Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that we associate death with an awesome sense of accountability. It seems as though death is the final crucible in which the mettle of our lives is tested. The Talmud reflects this idea when it says, "The dead reap the desert of the acts they performed while alive" (Shabbat 30b). This sense of accountability points directly back to the source of death itself. "There is not death without sin" (Shabbat 55a). "From a woman did sin originate, and because of her all must die" (Ben Sira 25:28). If death is a result of sin, then death becomes the climax of our accountability. It is at this point in the writings that there appears to be some discrepancy as to whether this sin which brought about death is inherent in human nature. David says, "In sin did my mother conceive me" (Psalm 51:7), and in reference to original sin, the apocryphal book IV Ezra explains, "O thou Adam, what hast thou done. For



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though it was thou that sinned, the fall was not thine alone but ours also who are thy descendants." Yet Baruch 54:19, another apocryphal source, tells us that each of us has been the Adam of his own soul, placing the responsibility and accountability back on our own shoulders.

E.E. Urbach grapples with this and comes to the following conclusions: "The episode of Adam and Eve only marks the time when death came into being. Death came, but not the necessity to sin." ¹ However, just a few paragraphs later he says, "One might say that just as he (Adam) brought death to his descendants so he caused deterioration in their very nature and made them incline ineluctably towards sin." ²

In either case death brings us to an encounter with a God who demands justice, and each of us remains accountable to Him. If this be true, then as Abraham Heschel said, "Anxiety about death is really anxiety about after life." ³ Could it be that the reason for this silence, this avoidance, the omissions and deletions of teaching concerning death are because man feels helpless to atone for himself before the Creator? Could it be that our apprehension concerning death is not merely the fear of death but rather of judgment?

Hamlet, in his famous soliloquy, contemplates his own fate in these now classic lines:

To be, or not to be: that is the question; whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune [or] by opposing end them? To die, to sleep; to sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub: But that the dread of something after death, the undiscover'd country from whose bourn no traveler returns, puzzles the will and makes us rather bear those ills we have than fly to others that we know not of? Thus conscience does make cowards of us all.
(Hamlet, Act III, Scene 1, Line 47ff)

The subjects of death and guilt meet in an unusual way in Jewish thought as well. It is very interesting that after the destruction of the Second Temple, death became an important means of self-atonement. An individual may personally atone for his sins through his own death, barring suicide, of course (Shev. 16, San. 6:2, Shab. 119b). The problem with this teaching as is the case with so much teaching originating from the post-Second-Temple era is that it is not found in the Jewish Bible. ⁴

There is, however, a teaching very similar and yet very different from this which is found in the Bible, and yet is virtually ignored by the rabbis after the Temple's destruction. This teaching is that death brings atonement-not our own death, but one specific death. "He was taken away from rule and from judgment; and his life who shall recount? For he was cut off out of the land of the living; through the transgressions of my people was he stricken because he hath laid open his soul unto death, and was

¹ The Sages, Their Concepts and Beliefs, E.E. Urbach, Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1975, p. 421.

² Ibid., p. 422.

³ "Death as Home Coming," Abraham Heschel in Jewish Reflections of Death, ed. Jack Riener, Schocken Books, New York, NY, 1974.

⁴ The Sages, Their Concepts and Beliefs, p. 432 and Encyclopedia Judaica, Volume V, Macmillan Co., New York, NY, 1971, "Death."



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numbered with transgressors; and he took off the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors" (Isaiah 53:8, 12b).

Some 700 years after Isaiah penned these words, an Israelite from the tribe of Judah announced fulfillment when He said, "For even the son of man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

Certainly death is an awesome and sometimes fearful prospect, but those who have accepted God's provision in this Israelite, Jesus, have a tremendous hope. For it is he who said, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die" (John 11:25, 26).

Additional Sources

Everyman's Talmud, A. Cohen, Schocken Books, New York, NY, 1975.

Studies in Sin and Atonement, A. Beuchler, Oxford University Press, London, 1928.



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