

## Man's Mortality on Yom Kippur

The *tefillot* of Yom Kippur bring us face to face with our own mortality. Here are four sources - two ancient, two modern – which in different ways make us confront the meaning and significance of our existence. Don't miss Michael Wyschogrod on the next page.

### Pirkei D'Rebbi Eliezer – The Man and His Three Friends

A certain man had three friends. Two of whom he loved dearly, but the other he lightly esteemed. It happened one day that the king commanded his presence at court, at which he was greatly alarmed and wished to procure an advocate at which he was greatly alarmed. Accordingly he went to the two the two friends whom he loved. One flatly refused to accompany him, the other offered to go with him as far as the king's gate but no further. In his extremity he called upon the third friend whom he least esteemed, and he not only went willingly with him, but so ably defended him before the king that he was acquitted.

In like manner, every man has three friends when death summons him to appear before his creator. His first friend, whom he loves most, namely his money cannot go with him a single step; his second, relations and neighbours, can only accompany him to the grave but cannot defend him before the judge, while his third friend, whom he does not highly esteem – his good deeds – goes with him before the King, and obtains his acquittal.

### Midrash Rabbah Vayakhel – The Two Ships

Two ships were once seen to be sailing near land. One of them was going forth from the harbour, and the other was coming into the harbour. Everyone was cheering the outgoing ship, everyone was giving it a hearty send-off. But the incoming ship was scarcely noticed.

A wise man was looking at the two ships, and he said: 'I see here a paradox, for surely people should not rejoice at the ship leaving the harbour, since they know not what destiny awaits it, what storms it may encounter, what dangers it may have to undergo. Rejoice rather over the ship that has reached port safely and brought back all its passengers in peace;

It is the way of the world that when a human being is born, all rejoice; but when he dies, all sorrow. Rather ought the opposite to be the case. No one can tell what troubles await the child on its journey into manhood. But when a man has lived and dies in peace, all should rejoice seeing that he has completed his journey, and is departing the world with the imperishable crown of a good name.

### British Chief Rabbi Hertz (1872-1946), *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs*, p180

'And Jacob lived' (Genesis 47:28). Of how few men can we repeat a phrase like 'And Jacob *lived*'? When many a man dies, a death notice appears in the press. In reality, it is a life notice, because but for it the world would never have known that that man had ever been alive. Only who has been a force for human goodness, and abides in hearts and souls made better by his presence during his pilgrimage on earth, can be said to have *lived*, only such a one is heir to immortality.

## A Different Take on Animal Sacrifices

*Michael Wyschogrod is, in my humble opinion, the most important Jewish philosopher alive, that no one has ever heard of. A true and creative theologian, he was born in Europe, the son of a chess master, he studied under Rav Soloveitchik in America in the 1940s before pursuing a career as an academic philosopher.*

*What I like best about his writing is his ability to take a topic which many modern Jews find 'difficult' or 'problematic' or prefer to ignore, and give them a spin which is provocative, thought-provoking, and which feels fundamentally authentic. This excerpt from his major work, *Body of Faith*, focuses on the idea of *korbanot*, sacrifices, which play a central on Yom Kippur. **READ THIS PIECE!***

### Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith*, pp.18-19

And yet the darkness of the sacrificial order must not be ignored. In sacrifice, man alleviates the darkness of his situation. A dumb animal is to be slaughtered, does it understand the fate that awaits it? Does it realise that on this spot thousands upon thousands like him have perished. The priestly slaughterer approaches the animal with the lethally sharp knife in his hand, yet the animal does not emit a sound of terror because it does not understand the significance of the instrument....

This horror is brought in the house of God. What is the bridge that leads from this slaughter to the holy? Sacrificial Judaism brings the truth of human existence into the Temple. It does not leave it outside its portals. It does not reserve sacred ground only for silent worship. Instead, the bruited, bleeding, dying animal is brought and shown to God. This is what our fate is. It is not so much, as it is usually said, that we deserved the fate of the dying animal and that we have been permitted to escape this fate by transferring it to the animal. **It is rather that our fate and the animal's are the same because its end await us, since our eyes, too, will soon gaze blindly as his and be fixated in deathly attention on what only the dead seem to see and never the living.**

In the Temple, therefore, it is man who stands before God, not man as he would like to be or as he hopes he will be, but as he truly is now, in the realisation that he is the object that is his body and that his blood will soon enough flow from his body as well... Enlightened religion recoils with horror from the thought of sacrifice, preferring a spotless house of worship filled with organ music and exquisitely polite behaviour. The price paid for such decorum is that the worshiper must leave the most problematic part of his self outside the Temple, to reclaim it when the service is over and to live with it unencumbered by sanctification. Religion ought not to demand such a dismemberment of man.