

WHY IS DEATH DIFFICULT TO DEFINE?

by Rabbi Ben Tzion Shafier

Travel Brochures and the World to Come

Even great thinkers get so lost in the thickness of physicality that they are not able to distinguish between themselves and the form they temporarily occupy. As an example: one of the great moral debates in medicine today is the definition of death. Is it when the heart stops beating? Is it when there is no brain wave activity? What about a person whose is kept on a respirator in a vegetative coma for ten years? Is he dead or alive?

Death should not be difficult to define. It is when the spirit, the essence of the person, no longer occupies his body. As long as you are housed in your body, you are alive. Once you leave the body, you are dead. What is so complicated about that?

The reason that death is difficult to quantify is because science is very effective at measuring physical properties. How long? How dense? How hot? How distant? But you are not physical. Your body is physical. You are not. We are so used to mixing ourselves up with our bodies that we have trouble remembering that they are separate entities. And so we end up applying physical measurements to something that doesn't exist in that dimension.

It is like trying to weigh light. If someone were to ask you, "How many pounds does that beam of light weigh?" you would give him a strange look. We can measure luminosity. Candle power is a convenient standard of reference. But weight is the wrong criteria to use for measuring light. So, too, we cannot use physical attributes to measure you. We cannot put "the essence of you" into a beaker, add red dye, heat it up, and see what color it turns. The body is measurable in physical terms. Blood pressure is quantifiable. Breathing efficiency can be calculated. Gas levels in the blood can be determined. But what test do you run to see if you are still there? You are not physical, and any attempt to measure you with physical criteria will fail. And so, just as weight is not relevant to light, death is not applicable to you. Death applies to physical life. So while the body dies, you live on.

I Am Not the Brain

There is, however, one more step we need to take to fully grasp this concept. When we begin this process of relating to our body and ourselves as separate entities, many people get a blank look on their faces, these ideas being as foreign to them as moon dust. After a while, though, they start to

relate to their bodies as the outer shell, a casing, a tool that they use. Then comes that aha moment. Like a light bulb that clicks on, their faces light up with excitement and they shout, "I get it! I get it! I am not my head. Not my chest. Not my back. I am not even my heart! I finally get it. I am the brain! Right?"

Wrong! When they bury the body, the brain is buried with it. Just as you are not the head or the chest, you are not the brain either. The brain is an organ you think with. It is something you use to filter your experiences through, but it isn't you. This is a very significant step. Even your brain is physical.


A Flash of Intuition

Did you ever have a flash of intuition? It was hard to explain, but you just knew something. Maybe it was a hunch, maybe a thought, but it was there. Then you had to run it through that clunky, concrete process called thought. "Let me see... what I mean is..." This is an example of knowing something and then having to process it through your brain. The brain is sluggish and thick, slow to understand, and quick to forget. When you leave this heavy coat of physicality that we call the body, you are no longer limited to thinking through the brain. At that point, everything comes through in a flash of brilliance. You perceive. You understand. And you remember every action, every conversation, and every thought you ever had — from the time that you were an infant until your last dying breath. All right there, accessible, because you and your thoughts are one.

Did you ever wonder what happens to a great Torah scholar who at the end of his days suffers from Alzheimer's disease? He spent a lifetime accumulating Torah knowledge and now can access none of it. What happens after he leaves this earth? As an old man, he is unable to recall the Torah that he learned because the physical organ called the brain is not functioning properly. His brain is damaged, but he, the essence of him, remembers everything. When he leaves this life, everything will come flowing back.

This tendency to view ourselves as physical entities is a severely limiting thought, and inhibits our growth. On the simplest level, if we do not understand who we are and what we are made of, it is a given that life would not make sense. We will have many, many questions, and there will be no answers.

Text Copyright © 2011 by Rabbi Ben Tzion Shafier and **Torah.org**

 This is an excerpt from the new Shmuz on Life book: [Stop Surviving, Start Living](#). It is powerful, thought provoking, and life changing. The book is available for purchase at Judaica stores, Feldheim.com and [TheShmuz.com](#).