

TRAVEL BROCHURES AND THE WORLD TO COME

by Rabbi Ben Tzion Shafier

"Jamaica: White beaches, cloudless skies, endless oceans. Once you go, you know." -Travel ad

There is an entire industry dedicated to writing travel brochures. Their advertisements offer to take you by rail, cruise, and camel back from the African rain forests to the snow-covered Alps. Then off to Jamaica, Aruba, and the Gulf of Mexico — from the quaint to the spectacular, the picturesque to the breathtaking. They beckon you to see the world.

If you watch people when they look at these pamphlets, they often get a far-off gaze in their eyes as they imagine themselves traveling to those exotic lands. This is interesting because most people who pick them up have no intention of ever going to those places. They're nice to look at, interesting to see, but it has nothing to do with me.

This seems to be the way we view the World to Come. Intriguing! Fascinating! I love the descriptions. But it has nothing to do with me. Don't get me wrong; being close to Hashem and enjoying eternal bliss sound wonderful. It's just that I have no intention of being there. You see, by the time it happens, I will be dead. My nishamah might be there. My soul could end up there. But me? I will be dead and gone. So this whole discussion is interesting, but irrelevant.

I Am a Physical Being

The reason we feel this way is that we view ourselves as physical beings. After all, isn't man just flesh and blood, a mere mortal? "With the sweat of his brow he earns his daily bread, and then passes from the earth never to be heard from again." We get so caught up in this limited definition of man that we start to believe it. And we start to confuse ourselves with our bodies. Oh, granted, I have a soul — whatever that is — but it has little to do with me. I am this body. Ever since I can remember, I've been inside this body. Everything that I have ever experienced is through it. I guess this is all there is. And life seems to confirm this. If you punch my arm, it hurts me. If I stub my toe, I feel pain. I and my body are one. So obviously, when this body is buried in the ground, I am dead. Gone. Extinct. And the World to Come is irrelevant.

Of course, we are supposed to believe otherwise. The problem is that in our heart of hearts, this is how we feel. The question is: how do we get our feelings in line with our beliefs? Here is an illustration that may help.

Winning the Lotto

It is a Sunday morning; you pick up the newspaper, lazily turning the pages, letting your eye fall where it may. "No news today," you say to yourself. Before you put the paper down, just for kicks, you turn to the Lottery section, and look for that week's winning numbers. You find them. A jolt surges through your body. "What!? 7 8 4 3 4 5. Those are my numbers!? What?! Wait. How can that be?" You run to your desk drawer. You grab your lottery ticket. You run back to the kitchen. You hold your ticket up to the newspaper. "7 8 4 3 4 5. That's it! Those are my numbers! Oh, my goodness. My numbers. My numbers. I won! I mean, I won! I won the NY Lotto! I don't believe it. I mean, I won! I Won! I WON! WOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!!"

If we could stop time and ask what you were feeling at that moment, you would probably answer, "Elation. Great joy. Fantastic happiness. I mean, I WON!!!" Then if we were to ask you who felt it, you'd say, "What do you mean who felt it? I felt it."

That's true, but was it your arms, your head, or your chest that felt it? Was it your back, your shoulders, or your legs?

The answer is none of them did. You felt it. Even if your legs were numb and your arms were tied up, you would still feel that tremendous sense of joy. So who felt it? Not your body, not your physical housing — you felt it. You felt pleasure. You were ecstatic. That sense of pleasure isn't dependent upon your body. In fact, it has no connection to your physical state of being. But you experienced it.


On the other side of the spectrum, imagine that someone is screaming at you, calling you every nasty name in the book. "You worthless excuse of a human being. I didn't even know that people as low as you could exist." Hearing those words causes you pain. You feel hurt. It's not your heart that feels it. It's not your nerves or your synapses that feel embarrassed. You do. True, you feel with your fingers, taste with your tongue, and smell with your nose, but it is you that experiences it. You are the one who occupies the body and controls its destiny. You are the master of the ship.

There are many things that you feel that aren't physical in nature. The full gamut of emotions, from love to hate to rage to jealousy, are things that you feel. You feel proud of your accomplishments. You feel appreciative of kind gestures from others, and you feel hurt by cruel words that people say. It isn't your heart that feels the pain. Euphemistically, we use expressions like a broken heart, but what we really mean is that you have been hurt.

You enjoy listening to music and looking at beautiful landscapes. You feel a sense of awe when you view a majestic mountain. You are moved to tears by the sheer power of the ocean. You are grieved when a friend dies. You are ecstatic when your sister has a baby.

The single most life transforming thought a person can ever come to is that when your body dies, you will live on. You — with all of your feelings, thoughts, and memories — step out of the coat called the body.

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 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.