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Understanding Life through Death in Jewish Thought:
Philosophical Inquiries and their Application in Classroom Education

Abstract:

This paper informs readers on how, within Jewish Thought, death is understood to be an essential component in life and that contemplating on it adds to the quality of our lives. For it is precisely by the finitude of our lives that, according to Jewish tradition, we are capable to experience and connect to the infinite, i.e. God. Further, this paper makes an argument for the benefits of practicing and internalizing these ideas, particularly within an educational context. Drawing mainly on sources from within Jewish Philosophy, such as modern Jewish thinkers as well as kabalistic sources, the aims of this paper are threefold: One is to present the significance of death within Jewish philosophy and how it is understood to be a part of life. Second, by comparing certain of the relevant Judaic ideas to the thoughts of Immanuel Kant on beauty and creativity, to show that this way of thinking is not restricted to Jewish tradition – thereby highlighting the universal value of this idea. On a practical level this paper proposes several educational strategies and tools to allow for the notion described to emerge from secular educational settings, ranging from highlighting the importance of the liberal arts or mutual respect, to advocating that handicraft, gardening or cooking classes should be made mandatory.

The most certain thing in life is that one is born and that one dies. Life and death, often being viewed as complete opposites, are however perhaps not to be understood as such but rather as completing each other. Thus, in Jewish Thought

death is understood to be part of our lives by completing it. Furthermore, it is precisely death that makes our corporal lives finite, thereby enabling us to appreciate the infinite since it is beyond us. For it is obvious that the awe one has for the infinite emerges from our inability to ever grasp or fully know it.

Further, within Jewish tradition, a lot of importance is given to infinity since, as for any monotheistic religion, God is defined as Infinite, the “Ein Sof”, the most obvious reason probably being that this Infinite too can never be fully grasped. However, according to Jewish tradition, the Infinite (God) can be experienced within the finitude of our lives. And since it is precisely through the finitude of our lives that we are capable of experiencing the Infinite, death becomes an even more essential part of our lives.

Interestingly though, according to the main Jewish traditions, after death our soul continues to be - either in another place or in another body. Furthermore, all souls are connected to and through the *Root of the Soul*. As we will see, accepting death to be part of our life enables a connection to said realm, which lies beyond our personal lives and needs. It is a place where everything and all is connected, beyond our imagination and itself infinite¹.

In order to experience the Infinite it is necessary to acknowledge the temporality of our lives². A notion within Jewish thought that perhaps becomes more comprehensible when looking at the discussions concerning intention while praying. For it is during prayer that the individual has the ability to directly connect

¹ Volozhin Chaim: *Nefesh HaChaim*: Chapter 4

² ib.

to God³. Said intention should be a fully selfless and totally disinterested one⁴. Now, you might already realize that a fully selfless and totally disinterested intention in order to connect with God might be a tricky thing – since one’s intention is already made clear by wanting to connect to God. According to Kabbalistic thought there are four levels of intention when praying: From just mumbling the prayer without any particular intention to one where God Himself guides one. All these levels are interconnected, as are the levels of our souls, too⁵. The highest level of intention while praying is described by Chaim of Volozhin (1749- 1821) as:

The most exalted contemplation in prayer corresponds to the loftiest of the souls of man, the “Root of the Soul,” (*shoresh ha-neshamah*), which transcends the other three, a state attained only by Adam before his transgression, and which will remain beyond the reach of man until the resurrection. This self-elevation, by means of prayer, towards the equivalent of the level of the “Root of the Soul,” implies the divesting of one’s physicality, and must include the willingness to submit to death, to utter annihilation, in order to ensure the success of the soul’s flight upwards. As one reaches this extremely rarefied level of self-extinction, one can be utterly passive during his praying, for then God opens man’s mouth and gives him the gift of speech to pray to Him; it becomes a form of divine solipsism in which man is but the passive instrument by means of which God relates back to Himself.⁶

³ ib.

⁴ ib.

⁵ ib.

⁶ Lamm: *Torah Lishmah*: P. 80

This last or highest sort of intention is beyond our reach. Yet, even though Lamm writes that this level can no longer be attained until the resurrection, it is of course possible to at least fancy it. Furthermore, since all levels are interconnected, we can still get close to reaching this level and experience or feel its rays. Connecting to the *Root of the Soul* is connecting to all souls and the equivalency to death is therefore not far-fetched. Since all that is left of us after dying are our souls, it seems that we will at last become unified with the Mystery of Mysteries. We realize that according to this text, cancelling out one's own corporal needs or wishes allows for connecting to the Infinite. Furthermore, this state of being is achievable through a state of mind that is connected to the Oneness of all and thereby resembles the state of being dead.

The reason for using Adam's notion "before his transgression", i.e. before he knew good and bad as example, is because his intentions were then aligned with and by nature - and thereby connected to the One or oneness of all. For it is precisely the knowing of good and bad that hinders one's intention to be of a disinterested nature. The reason therefore being that once you know good and bad you are capable of contemplating what the right thing to do might be. Rather, in order to achieve said level of intention described above, we encounter a certain passiveness that is demanded when wanting to intend in a disinterested manner. It is almost as if our actions are pulled into a direction by an external force and we become our true

selves only by this extraneous influence⁷. Furthermore, there is of course the emphasis on the willingness to submit to death in order to experience the Infinite.

We then come to see that not only is the acceptance of death an important aspect in our lives, but it is through it that we are capable to appreciate the Infinite. Furthermore, we have seen that in order to connect with the Infinite or the oneness of all, there is a quite peculiar sort of intention that is demanded of us. We are demanded to let go of our corporal needs and wishes in order to allow for a totally selfless intention which in return allows for one to enter a certain 'zone' in which we no longer make conscious decisions but rather let ourselves 'go with the flow'. One intends not to intend in order for our intention to be selfless – and naturally there can hardly be any instructions on how to achieve this sort of intention. However, the notion of intending without intention – or indenting not to intend, even though it might sound like some exercise in logical thinking, can be found also in Immanuel Kant's writings concerning taste and creativity.

Needless to point out that in Judaism too, creation is of importance, since it is founded in the belief that the world was created. What is most interesting however, are the similarities that we will see emerge between the intention needed when wanting to become creative and the one when wanting to connect to the Infinite. Furthermore, since studying too can be understood to be a creative act – for one creates knowledge - the parallels between and contrasts of the finitude of our lives to the infinite amount of knowledge or the infinity of God as well as between

⁷ This way of description emerged in a conversation that I had with my teacher and friend Professor René Arcilla.

creativity and religious intention will become even more interesting when examining these topics further.

Similar to the intention that one aims for while praying, originality is defined rather by what it is not than by what it is. Bohm makes the point that therefore there cannot really be any instructions on how to be original or creative⁸. The reason being simply that if we would be using instructions to be creative we would no longer be original. In addition to the fact that originality seems to be best described by what it is not, Bohm states that creativity does not emerge from trying to be creative but rather as a by-product of doing so⁹. Furthermore, the idea that if one intends to be creative one might by definition not be, holds true also for intending while praying. When describing what is needed to be creative or have a creative mind Bohm mentions the notion of wholeheartedness and the idea of newness¹⁰. This newness also correlates with the newness of new matter being studied and learned; yet even more so with new solutions and conclusions to matters studied previously. An important parallel to keep in mind here, is that for studying too, the subject matter at hand is infinite and as I have argued elsewhere, studying can go on for ever¹¹.

Furthermore, the disinterested intention that is demanded of us when praying is of course very similar to the disinterestedness which according to Kant is

⁸ Bohm: *On Creativity*

⁹ *ib.*: P. 26

¹⁰ Bohm: *On Creativity*: P. 17

¹¹ Marcus: *Being in the Gap between Past and Future: Hannah Arendt and Torah Lishmah*

required in order to appreciate beauty. In his *Kritik der Urteilskraft*¹² Kant writes that the true sense of beauty is a disinterested one¹³. While Kant himself of course also has a soft spot for pure intention, as can be seen in his earlier writings,¹⁴ he argues that what is needed in order to become creative is what he terms ‘genius’, something, according to him, possessed by only a few¹⁵. When trying to achieve this sort of intention, Kant points out, rules and instructions can only be guidelines which ultimately must be overcome. Furthermore, the moment of overcoming the laws, which is precisely when one becomes creative, is determined naturally¹⁶.

Now, one might argue that according to this, there is no need or benefit in following any rules nor any way to learn how to become creative. Yet even Kant agrees that the only way to achieve the state of genius is by following the rules until

¹² Kant, Immanuel: *Kritik der Urteilskraft*

¹³ ib. §2 & §5

¹⁴ Kant writes in *Metaphysics of Morals*: “A good will is good not because of what it effects, or accomplishes, not because of its fitness to attain some intended end, but good just by its willing, i.e. in itself; and, considered by itself, it is to be esteemed beyond compare much higher than anything that could ever be brought about by it in favor of some inclination, and indeed, if you will, the sum of all inclinations. Even if by some particular disfavor of fate, or by the scanty endowment of a stepmotherly nature, this will should entirely lack the capacity to carry through its purpose; if despite its greatest striving it should still accomplish nothing, and only the good will were to remain (not, of course, as a mere wish, but as the summoning of all means that are within our control); then, like a jewel, it would still shine by itself, as something that has its full worth in itself. Usefulness or fruitlessness can neither add anything to this worth, nor take anything away from it. It would, as it were, be only the setting to enable us to handle it better in ordinary commerce, or to attract the attention of those who are not yet expert enough; but not to recommend it to experts or to determine its worth.” (P. 10)

¹⁵ Kant: *Kritik der Urteilskraft*: §49

¹⁶ Kant: *Kritik der Urteilskraft*: § 46

overcoming them¹⁷. Furthermore, said rules should be taught to the next generation of artists in order to allow for the continuation of culture.

The overcoming of the rules occurs, however, naturally and by itself just as in the case of intention while praying. Perhaps most relevant for my endeavor, is the fact that Kant gives certain instructions on how to become creative - even though he argues that being creative cannot be learned. Showing by example, stimulating the student's imagination, sharp criticism and freedom are then several pedagogical concepts that Kant suggests should be part of instructing on how to become creative¹⁸.

Other than that, Kant also points out a need for 'the other' and with it the acceptance of the finitude of our lives. For the culture of art is an ongoing process reaching far beyond life, basing itself and connecting with or to the ideas of masters belonging to generations long gone. Whatever we study is a completion of what has been studied before, and this seems to be true also when being creative. Ultimately, the former studying or creating of those that came before us not only influences us but is part of what we do. This connectedness, one that goes on beyond our life and death, may of course be understood to be in correlation with the benefit in embracing the finitude of our lives we discussed earlier on, since it comes to show that our actions endure in this world even after our death.

Another very interesting aspect that Kant alludes to is a connectedness to be found in a dimension beyond us and therefore coherent with the *Root of the Soul*.

¹⁷ Kant: *Kritik der Urteilskraft*: §47

¹⁸ Kant: *Kritik der Urteilskraft*: §60

For Kant, our ability to judge and have taste is an *a priori* and universal occurrence and one may argue that through it we are all connected¹⁹. Such a connectedness points towards the need for both the other as well as authenticity, since an important part in his doctrine on taste is our ability to communicate it to the other²⁰. According to Kant, our taste, which in return defines the beautiful, is something that is *a priori* and it is through and by this that we can all connect or be connected. The fact that this connecting link is beyond what we can possibly understand correlates to the *Root of the Soul*, which also links all human beings and is, too, beyond our capabilities to fully grasp. Furthermore, not only are we able to connect but in fact we are always connected. It is only the strength or experience of this connectedness that varies at an individual level and in both cases the highest connection occurs naturally and by itself.

We then come to see that according to Kant, the state of mind that is necessary to create something beautiful shows a lot of similarities to the ideas underlying the concept of intention when praying. The fact that there seems to be a certain intention that may arise out of not intending correlates further to the notion of being creative in so far as both arise naturally and by themselves. Both demand the practicing and studying of rules yet only occur when we overcome them. Furthermore, we have also seen that both, creativity and the intention when praying, reach beyond the finitude of our lives and that acknowledging this can help

¹⁹ Kant: *Kritik der Urteilskraft*: § 29

²⁰ For Kant's insistence on the necessity to communicate taste see for example §49

when trying to achieve those modes. Lastly, the connectedness of all, which for Kant can be found in the *a priori* and, as I understand him, eventually is ‘the nature of things’, is similar to if not identical with the Infinite and Oneness to which the *Root of the Soul* allures.

For application to the pedagogical realm, we have encountered several ideas and even advice that seem noteworthy. The need for the other, showing by example, authenticity, stimulation of our student’s imagination, sharp criticism and freedom are just a few of the tools we have encountered. Accepting the finitude of our corporal lives as well as studying and following the rules are others. Yet the perhaps most interesting point might be that at some point, one should break or overcome the rules.

This leads me to another important point, namely, the significance of rules and laws that allow for our communal wellbeing, since they will create such a setting: While rules are there to allow for the communal wellbeing, we also realize that at times they need to be transgressed or overcome. The main problem here is that we have no concrete instructions on when overcoming the law is in order. Yet, even here, we should be able to communicate even to the youngest of students that overcoming laws and rules can be the right thing to do. That is, by showing how certain people had to break rules in order to achieve great things -- such as Oskar Schindler for example -- yet at the same time pointing out how others have broken rules with bad intentions and that this is not what we would like to see. For it seems that fostering creativity means precisely to make students understand the impact that overcoming rules can have.

It may be somewhat more complicated to communicate the notion of completing the past within the moment as well as being connected to all. However, by looking at the history of architecture, art or the natural sciences, we should be able to internalize the idea of how our lives and actions are dependent and connected to those of others. What is important, though, is that it is not enough to study any of the subjects mentioned but that the points of connectedness and dependence need to be stressed. Furthermore, in order to allow for this notion to actually occur, an authentic discussion in which we are open to listen to the other and see their comments as triggers to further thought and connections is needed. In return this demands for a setting that is accepting of the other, authentic, honest, and open to new ideas.

In more practical terms, I believe that subjects such as handicraft, acting or art classes should be mandatory within any school. For these are subjects that enable being creative and thus allow for a high level of intention, improvisation and the overcoming of rules. Studying languages, too, I believe to be important since different languages encompass different vocabularies, connotations, thoughts and connections. Furthermore, one needs to be open to new ideas and to the newness of things, ready to improvise and sometimes even to overcome rules. Having students work together is of course another important aspect so that from early on the relationship to the other is further stimulated.

Overall, it seems most important to understand that we are all in the same boat. We are all connected within the moment and through time, our actions are dependent on each other, and whatever we create is subject to the influences of

others on us while at the same time immediately influencing others. Therefore, when, for example, we create knowledge or art it is important to realize and acknowledge that it would not be possible if it were not for others. Any action we take is dependent on another action and another actor. Furthermore, our actions will be part of the world even after we die.

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