

More Than A Meatball
by Dennis Briskin

Near the end of the March meeting someone in the chavurah (Hebrew for group of friends) brought up the book, "Who Dies?" by Stephen Levine, and someone else asked what the title meant.

"For those who are facing death," I said, "one way to get through it is to recognize that who and what you are is not dying; that you're not a meatball. That which was born, dies inevitably. But that which was never born cannot die."

(What Levine actually wrote was, "It is because you believe you are born that you fear death. Who is it that was born? Who is it that dies? Look within. What was your face before you were born? Who you are, in reality, was never born and never dies. Let go of who you think you are and become who you have always been.")

I also said, "Your body is just the envelope. The message is inside."

Some heads with puzzled faces whipped around to look at me and someone said, "I don't understand what you just said. That didn't make any sense to me at all."

I know. We are all so identified with our bodies, the world appears so physical and material, that it's hard not to slap your head, rap the table and say, "This is it. I end at my skin, where the rest of the world begins, and we are all just flesh."

The problem is if you think you're a meatball, what do you do with your life? Get as comfortable as you can, in every way, and make it last as long as you can. The tragedy of meatball life is no matter how good it is, you can't make it last forever.

(Once there was a king who asked his wise men to bring him something to make him happy when he was sad, and sad when he was happy. The wisest of them all brought him a ring inscribed, "And this too shall pass.")

If your meatball is pretty, you may fly higher but crash sooner because the only way to keep your looks is die young. Or you can join the Blissful, Beautiful Meatball Society and see who gets ugly first. If you hold yourself out as the high siren of meatballs, expect ugly duckling meatballs to take potshots at you.

The tragedy for beautiful people is they get stuck in meatball perception. If you think you ARE your looks, then your life history is written on your face and you BECOME your bags and wrinkles. I prefer to write my story on your nervous system, where it doesn't show but lasts longer.

Pretty or not, if you think you're a meatball, your favorite reading might be, "The Origin, Care and Destiny of Meatballs" (Soup Press, New York, 1980.) Soon to be a bestseller is "How To Cook Low-Cost, Sexy, Microwave Meatballs on Your IBM PC" (Fertile Eggs Press, Palo Alto, 1984.) Scholars will read "Meatballs in UNIX" by Rassen, Lassen, Morgenstein and Phlybayou. The skin trade will be aflame over "Meatballing" by Victoria Soul. And self-improving spiritualists can try "How I Found Carbonation in a Meatball World" by Harry Perrier.

HOW DO YOU KNOW YOU'RE A MEATBALL?

Let's play a game. We're at the next chavurah meeting and everyone sits around the outside of the room. The rules are you can't talk and you can't look in a mirror. Everyone closes their eyes while I circle the room, putting a colored, sticky dot on each forehead. Your identity is now your color, either red, green, yellow or blue. You ARE your color, for the moment.

Then a nuclear bomb starts falling toward the room. Your only chance of surviving is to head for a bomb shelter. A different colored shelter is in each corner of the room. People of other colors won't let you into their shelter. You must find your own colored shelter or die. How? If you can't talk and you can't look in the mirror, how are you going to find out what color bomb shelter you belong in?

While you're thinking of that problem, here's a Genesis story that makes almost the same point.

"So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons."

"And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, 'Where are you?' And he said, 'I heard the sound of thee in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.' He said, 'Who told you that you were naked?'"

Adam's fall was not just that he knew he was naked. He fell into hell on earth by letting someone else tell him what he was and how he was.

So how do you know what color you are? Right, someone who can see your forehead points you toward your shelter, thus silently telling you what you are.

How do you know you're a meatball? Didn't someone tell you?

And didn't you, with your meatball consciousness, look around you and see all the meatballness in the world and agree, "Yup. Sure is a meatball world."?

MORE THAN A MATZOBALL

How do you actually know you're Jewish? Didn't someone tell you? Didn't someone look at you and say, "You are a Jew."?

What would you be if you just found it out for yourself as a natural discovery? Do you think you discovered all of what you are and then put a label on it? Scientific Man likes to think he is objective that way, gathering evidence and then drawing conclusions: "I see all these _____ things I do, therefore I must be a _____ person." Baloney. Man declares himself something (good, bad, Jewish, Moslem, CPA, artist, father, mother, American, Palestinian), and then proves it.

HOW I KNOW I'M NOT AN M.B.

Direct experience. Not seeing, thinking, feeling, sensing, intuiting or any other normal way. By "no way." Simply being it. Not deciding, "OK, now I'll be what I am." Just opening to it, wanting it and waiting for it. And being open to the discovery that what I actually am is something other than what I appear to be from ordinary awareness.

It happened sometime in the morning on a sunny day. The other ambient details are hazy to me, except that I distinctly remember an exhilaration I have rarely experienced. I absolutely could not contain my joy and boyish enthusiasm. I want to say I felt it, but it was more than that. I WAS it. I WAS everything. I stopped being just Dennis, a separate, isolated little particle in a vast, unfriendly universe and became merged with it all in the most fundamental way. I experienced that the "I" of What am I? is not me, Dennis, but me everything. So the answer to the question of what I am is, "I am everything and everywhere. 'I' is what the totality of everything calls itself and everything is included in that all, including me. ME! I am God and everything! And there's nowhere for me to go and nothing for me to do about it. I just am. I am me. That's it."

Telling it now, writing it at this machine and recalling it sounds so tame and small. Experiencing it, or having it (even the words for what it was are awkward) was totally large. Among other things I experienced myself as big. VERY BIG. E*X*P*A*N*D*E*D, to steal a device from Leo Rosten and Hyman Kaplan.

And from that expanded self came resolves to live life bigger, especially in a bigger place large enough to hold more of what I am, and in a bigger way, more ambitious, doing more things, many more things, in my photography, writing and relationships. I resolved then to GET MY WORK PUBLISHED AND TO

EXPRESS MYSELF. Over and over what came up was, When I express myself I feel good and when I feel good I express myself.

The antithesis of direct experience of the truth is letting someone else tell you what the truth is. If religion has a hollow ring for people who come to it as adults maybe it's because they allow someone else to tell them the way things are and what they should do, rather than asking themselves, "What do I know directly? What experience of God do I have and how must I express it?"

Reading books also does not bring religious experience. In Zen they say, "Burn all the books." Throw out all the scriptures and just go with it. Be open. Let yourself be run over and crushed by the glory of the Lord, if that's your religious experience.

Whatever you do, don't believe. Instead, find something, or some what of God, for yourself. Don't take my word for it. Don't take ANYONE'S word for it. Drop all beliefs and live from what you know and have experienced directly (if you can) rather than what others have told you. Reading scripture is to the truth as your grocery list is to the food. And asking others about the truth is like trying to satisfy your hunger by interviewing the stuffed patrons as they come out of the restaurant. Only you can eat for you. Only you can have your experience of God.

To come together as Jews without a religious experience is ritualism, some of it empty ritualism because a lot of it comes from different times and different places that don't relate to where we are now. (Near the end of this I'll contradict myself. The rituals we shared together at Ruthanne's were beautiful to me.) A lot of people's religion actually is materialism or the life of the body centered on things. Or ancestor worship. What are you really bowing down and praying before? What's your real god?

I'm not saying what it should be. I'm saying how to find out: go "look" and be open to the possibility that you'll find something other than what you expected. Which is scary if you were told, "You're Jewish; the best of all." If you start out with this conception that you're Jewish, then all of that preconceived idea of what you are or what religious truth is will incline you to find certain things and not others. It must exclude Christianity, Islam, and Oriental religions. It's got to. All you can find is what you have already decided to find. We say, "All I know is what I see," when actually all we see is what we know.

That ain't it. That's religion as intellectual experience. It doesn't work. It's sad to watch. Religion comes up empty and becomes something you comply with. You do what the rabbi tells you to do, whether you feel it or not.

SO WHAT ARE YOU, BIG MOUTH?

When someone at the chavurah asked me, "Oh, you mean you're a spirit?" I said yes but I answered too quickly. Saying that suggests I'm a spirit different from somebody else who is a spirit in a universe of separate spirits. That, too, is a misperception. I am not separate from anything.

Several years ago I met a French actor presenting a one-man dramatization of the truth called "Mad About Nothing." He put it well when he had a masked character say, "I'm not in the world. The world is in me." I produced myself from my infinite store of stuff. While I ordinarily experience myself living each moment inside this mortal envelope with a particular name and history, I am not just this meatball. (Nor am I a soy extended ball. Nor a tofu ball. Nor a vegie ball.)

And if I am not a meatball, then let life smash me, crush me and grind me up until I'm as smooth as Grandma Field's meatball pate. I can accept it because I know it's only a change of state.

So what am I, if not a meatball? Take a sunny fall afternoon and write me high, wide and deep against the rich blue sky, vapor trailing white against eternity. I am that.

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A few more things to say to everyone:

About the Kushner book (When Bad Things Happen To Good People): It's one of the best books I've ever read, especially his writing style. But I disagree with him about suffering. He starts with a false premise, the assumption that we suffer because of external events: What makes us happy is fortuitous happenings, good luck. What makes us unhappy is bad luck.

What's missing is recognizing that ordinary happiness comes from getting what we want. And suffering comes from not. If you're a meatball, getting your own way means being the most comfortable meatball you can be. And the purpose of life becomes to make it last as long as you can as comfortably as you can. I disagree with that.

Suffering comes from insisting on getting your own way. The way to happiness is NOT to be clever or beautiful or rich so you can get your own way. Instead, the way to end your suffering is to stop wanting. Then it's all a gift, so that you can be grateful and say, Yes, I'm glad I have all this but I can take it or leave it.

The more we get, the more we want. The more we want, the more we suffer because we lose it all. The people we love die, or they go away. The things that we want get stolen or they break or they wear out and we have to replace them. The best we can hope for is that the pleasure lasts as long as we want. Nobody gets it

to last quite as long as they want. Or hardly anybody does. The way out is to want nothing, so that you always have everything.

People in the group agreed with Kushner that the value of prayer is not to supplicate God in order to get him to intervene in the course of history and make things go our way, but rather to experience community by being in this open state with others. And that what we are actually praying for is the inner resources to meet the challenges of the bad things that happen to us, which makes prayer sound like the Cosmic Rescue Squad, something we do when we're hurting. But not too much of when we are having things go our own way.

What are we doing when we pray? Why are we saying those words if we don't believe that God is the King of the Universe and the One who delivers the goodness of life to us. If we actually believe that God does not answer prayers, then we need to change very much the order of the service to have it reflect our coming together to pray for strength. If God can't do it all, then what's the point of praying to Him as if we believe that He can?