

To Dust You Shall Return: Our Alienation from Death and the World

By Bradley Shavit Artson

Looking through the window of my synagogue study, I enjoy a vista of a dense, tree-covered, sloping hill and valley that my suburban community has preserved as green space. Still sporting the wild plants that originally graced it, that valley and hill ground me in the larger purpose of my work—consciously living with the reality of God's creation, cultivating gratitude in the Creator of all this teeming life, and guiding others to understand their spiritual place, both as people and as Jews. I take great comfort in that view, because it elicits—through good times and bad—the majesty, richness and continuity of life. The occasional sighting of a mother coyote with her twin pups reminds me that we are less distant from other living things than we might like to assume, and that simply being in the world connects us to something vast and beautiful.

From that same window, past the hills to the nearby road, I occasionally spot the mutilated bodies of possums, cats, and birds struck by the cars that race by with such reckless haste. Adjacent to the lush, thriving vegetation, the concrete straight-jacket of our transportation—a resource that makes much of our living possible—regularly claims the lives of the denizens of the woods. Life and death, woods and pavement jostle side-by-side, linked in a dance in which each player takes its turn, in which no one partner can hope to dominate forever. Life, then death, then life, then death follow each other in a cycle, sketching a pattern greater than any individual can ever hope to transcend.

As a rabbi, I'm used to watching that cycle flow by. Funerals, b'nai mitzvahs, baby namings, hospital visits, and ritual circumcisions form the web and woof of my calendar. During Torah readings, the very basis of Jewish living, we pray for the sick, recall the dead, bless newlyweds and name new generations of babies. As with the view from my study, so too the view from the sanctuary: life and death, biology and culture, nature and artifice are intertwined in our religion, as they are in life.

My congregational life throws me into the thick of life's tangles, making all moments of the life cycle contemporaneous and inseparable. An awareness of life's vastness and relentlessness is nothing new: I've driven from a funeral to a brit milah and finished the day with a wedding party followed by a Shiva minyan. Life, before my eyes, parades whole and haphazardly. I imagine it must look that way to God, too. But, it is only recently that I have noticed my panorama, begun to consider its implications, to read the world, as it were. Only recently, immersing myself in the literature of environmental ethics, have I begun to see the trees for the forest, for all forests. Only recently have I opened myself to feeling my place in creation as a religious act, as a source for knowing God in a deeper, more nuanced way.

That new way has led to an unanticipated connection between the way our culture denies death (and hence cowers in paralyzing fear of it) and the way we also blind ourselves to creation (and hence are terrified—and contemptuous—of the realities of life on the planet Earth). I believe that our obsession with denying both death

and planetary considerations, the pretense that we live forever and that we can use the world's riches in any way we please, emerges from the same underlying insecurity and responds to a particularly human shallowness that threatens both the quality of life and our ability to function unimpaired in the world.

Permit me a rabbinic illustration: many of my adult congregants report that they have never been to a funeral, even well into mid-life. As a society, we have so successfully quarantined death from life that one can reach forty without personally seeing a casket or comforting a mourner. Most congregants don't want to think about the inevitability of death, which means that most refuse to make any preparations in advance (which, in turn, means that the bereaved are forced to focus on some gruesome business decisions during the time of their sharpest grief).

While Jews—along with other Americans—routinely distance themselves from death and dying, Judaism, as a religion, has always insisted on an intimacy between the living and the dead that would shock many moderns. Jewish law insists that the dying are not to be left alone, that no one should have to die without their loved ones and community on hand every step of the way. The corpse is to be bathed and clothed by members of that community (generally volunteers), and burial is traditionally quick and simple: dressed in a shroud, the remains of the dead are buried directly into the ground, without coffin, without flowers, without anything interfering in the return of the body to the earth. Mourners are to escort the remains to graveside, and the immediate family and friends consider it an act of love, a privilege, to bury their loved one themselves. A Jew, having died, is to be embraced by the earth and the community at the same time, in a harmonious partnership between creation and covenant. The God of Torah is also the Source of Life.

That integration is no longer the norm. In fact, in many places it isn't even a possibility. The primary factor for many funeral parlors is the condition of the lawn (itself an unnatural import in most locales). In order to preserve the surreal quality of cemetery lawns, bodies are not only placed inside coffins, but those coffins are then lowered into almost air-tight cement boxes. When I first started working as a rabbi, the funeral homes often used what they called a bell liner—a concrete cover shaped like a bell that simply fit over the casket. While its primary purpose was to prevent the collapse of the grave with the passage of time, at least the bell liner allowed direct contact between the earth and the casket. Increasingly, however, the funeral directors use a two-piece concrete box that resembles nothing more than a giant shoe box. The bottom piece rests in the grave before lowering the coffin into it, and the top—conveyed by crane—settles heavily above the casket after the mourners have already left. That way they don't have to witness the final indignity—their loved one's remains are hermetically sealed inside walls of concrete forever: the final deception.

At the last funeral I performed, just after a cleansing rain that left the skies crystal blue and the ground sated and damp, I asked the funeral director why they used this new concrete box instead of the bell liner. I was told that "most families don't want to see the casket lowered in water." Fear of death and separation from creation coalesced in a burial that precluded the reunification of earthly remains with the earth, shattering the comfort that might have come from knowing that this death would lead to new life, that this body would provide the basis for new life and new beginnings.

Our fear of death and our desire to disguise it has created something truly terrifying. Our blindness to creation and its rhythms has produced a practice unnatural and unnerving. Even in death, a wall of concrete now blocks our loved ones from a more wholesome unity with the Earth and with life's regeneration and resurrection.

Both our panic and our audacity spring from the same source, just as insecurity is often the lurking motivation of the bully. We humans, terrified to recognize our own dependency, our own creatureliness, bully the world with our swaggering denial of death, with our supposed freedom to dominate the world and all it contains. But our bravado rings false. Just as the brutality of the bully only re-imposes a terrible loneliness and a self-fulfilling sense of being misunderstood, our futile manipulation of nature and our desperate attempts to deny death can only deepen our misery, our isolation, and the very dependency we sought to avoid in the first place.

Are we trapped, then, within an ever-accelerating cycle of fleeing our fears/pretensions and being further enmeshed by them? Is there no alternative to our alienation from our natures and all nature?

Denying reality will never provide us comfort. Instead, the intrusion of the inevitable keeps us in need of an ever more powerful and desperate illusion, one which must fail in its turn as well. As our illusions languish in succession, the realities underlying our fears only grow more gripping and implacable.

Rather than denying reality, an effort doomed from the start, a more fruitful approach would suggest opening ourselves to the possibility of beginning with reality and grounding ourselves (literally and ideologically) within the fertile soil of God's creation. Instead of shielding ourselves from death, we can understand the end of physical existence as an intrinsic part of life, one with value for ourselves, our progeny, and our planet. Rather than shutting ourselves behind walls of concrete, or living our lives behind walls of any kind, we can open ourselves to the world in which we live, the one from which we borrow and to which we must, inevitably return.

Life, larger and more encompassing than any particular expression of living, than any one embodiment of its vitality, is a process that connects us to each other, to past and future, and to all created things. It is primal, it eludes both thought and word, it transcends language and culture. Its sheer energy, force, and drive are both terrifying and liberating. We take up the very elements that had been used to sustain earlier living things, and some day relinquish our hold on those resources so that new life may flourish in its time. Our willingness to propagate and our love for the generations yet to come impels a willingness to mortality, to providing the resources to sustain the young lives we love, in whom we see our hopes, our dreams and salvation.

The very scope of life is shattering. Yet, in being overwhelmed, we are also liberated from the horrible burden of assuming control of a universe beyond our grasp, of a domination that enslaves us and endangers us even as it seduces us into greater extremes and terror.

We cannot control the world, try as we already have. We cannot govern the cosmos, making decisions of life and death, of necessity and value, when so much of the complexity of life and its interrelationships eludes our understanding and snares us in the very web we seek to weave. In asserting a false control, like a fly seeking to escape a spider, our ever more desperate remedies fling us closer and closer to our end. In our growing danger, our rising panic prevents the patience, the calm so necessary for vision, perspective, and comfort.

Where can we look, then, for our help? To whom can we turn for that broader vision and timeless perspective?

If we start by acknowledging our embeddedness in creation and our dependence on the Creator, we may hope to abandon our futile attempts to master the world through coercive manipulation or brute force. Einstein taught us that the position of the viewer alters what is viewed; that we are, ourselves, within creation. His insight cautions us against the deception of mastering creation, since our efforts must simultaneously shift the complex equations and surroundings that control our very lives.

Because we cannot step outside of life to view it from a neutral place, because there is no external base on which to place the fulcrum to lift the world, our first reality (and our last) is one of belonging, of symbiosis. We are the world, at least in part. We reflect the divine image of God, but we do so as creatures, not as gods. Whatever comfort may be ours must issue from that recognition, from that humble sense of place.

Admitting God as our Creator and the Creator of all, allows us—as partners with God in maintaining creation and as creatures fashioned by God to live in the world—to be ourselves: to seek more realistic and modest goals with which to establish meaning in our lives and significance for our deeds.

We can rise to our potential if we recognize that our mandate is but to maintain and to shepherd God's creation. Just as the Torah and Jewish law only authorizes doctors to heal and to comfort, so humanity, as the physicians of creation, work authentically and faithfully when we sustain the functioning of a system too complex to master and too beautiful to control. Our success is to be measured by how well we can care for the least among us and for the world in which we live. We succeed when we maintain community or establish a new fellowship, a communion with those who we previously rejected as "other" or as "outside."

Death loses some of its sting if our more modest sense of self displaces the arrogant delusion of being essential, of omnipotence: I do, indeed, need the world and humanity, but they do not need me. I need creation as the garden in which to exult, to grow, to play, work, struggle, learn, and sing. As a part of creation, there is a sense in which creation needs me—but only to the degree that I am a willing participant of that creation. Once I separate myself from the world, once I sever my embeddedness in creation, than I set myself up against it and creation no longer needs me. I make myself an alien, requiring the reinforcement of concrete to hold my delusions in place.

A religious vision of the world—as God's handiwork—and of humanity—as God's caretakers and the physicians of creation—allows us to transcend our crippling fear of death and our deadly alienation from creation. We are a part of the world, not apart from it, and our lives are the shimmering waves of an endless sea. We flow from it, and return to it, and in that cycle of tide and tow, of ebb and flow, we leave a mark precisely to the degree that the sea continues, unimpeded, on its way.

We die to new life, for new life. And in death we are embraced by the earth, and by God, if we but have the courage to open our arms.

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