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Ethics Sigi Ziering

This year our Sigi Ziering column focuses on the ethics of kashrut. Each month an esteemed guest columnist will wrestle with what Jewish texts and our tradition teach us about the food we eat; the preparation of food; the people who prepare our food; the food and restaurants that are deemed kosher. This column is sponsored by Bruce Whizin and Marilyn Ziering in honor of Marilyn's husband, Sigi Ziering, of blessed memory. Visit shma.com to view the series and responses.

Irene Lehrer Sandalow, director of outreach and education at the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs, jcua.org, works to educate, engage, and mobilize the Jewish community in the social justice work of JCUA.

A Prescription for an Ethical Religious Practice

IRENE LEHRER SANDALOW

Standing in Postville, Iowa, I was faced with a fiercely rumbling stomach and a personal decision: ethics vs. halakhah.

It was June 2008, and I had traveled to Postville with some of the staff and leaders of the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs, a social justice organization that has advocated on behalf of immigration reform. We were planning a march and rally in solidarity with the families and workers who were victims of both the largest immigration raid in U.S. history (at that time) and of serious labor abuses by the Agriprocessors, Inc. kosher meat-packing plant.

As a Jew who observes kashrut, I was unable to join my colleagues eating at a non-kosher restaurant. Even in this small Iowa town, a number of kosher restaurants were located nearby. But they were owned by the Rubashkin family, the owners of Agriprocessors. Wouldn't it be unethical to patronize a restaurant owned by the owners of Agriprocessors? For the first time in my life, I was forced to choose between observing kashrut and following my ethical convictions. The nation's observant Jews were being forced to make that same decision.

The reading of Isaiah on Yom Kippur is a yearly reminder of how ritual law and ethical practices need to complement one another. Isaiah admonishes the Jewish people for abiding by the laws between God and mankind while being indifferent to the suffering surrounding them. As it is written: "Will you call this a fast, and a day acceptable to the Lord? [...] Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the

homeless poor into your house?" (Isaiah 58: 4-7)

Isaiah's words send a strong message. Practicing Jewish laws and rituals, without being guided by ethical principles, is akin to wearing glasses without the prescription lenses. While frames are essential to hold the lenses, we should not focus excessively, or vainly, on the frames. Keeping kosher is essential to my Jewish practice, as frames are to my glasses, but rigorously following the laws of kashrut should not outweigh our efforts toward creating a more ethical society.

The Jewish response to the crisis in Postville has been encouraging. It demonstrates the rising consciousness among American Jews that our ethics and values need to be vigorously upheld. The Orthodox Union devotes vast resources to safeguard the technical aspects of kashrut; should we not safeguard the ethical vision of our forbears? Our institutions — even the kashrut industry, which includes meat processing and packaging plants, shops, restaurants, etc. — must protect workers and defend human rights. If Jewish ethics and social justice are central to our identities, we must make them central to our schools, synagogues, federations, shops, factories, and foundations.

Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai tells a parable of a man in a boat who drills a hole under his seat. Ignoring the protest of the other passengers, he claims that the hole is not their concern because it is under his seat. That limited vision of Agriprocessors' role in the larger community is the essence of its corruption and is what led the

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The Mystery of the Body

ANN LANDOWNE

*God formed the human of dust from the soil,
God blew into his nostrils the breath of life
and the human became a living being.*

The mystery of the body begins with the synthesis of dust and the intimate breath of life formed in the image of God.

In the first chapters of the Torah we are presented with a dilemma. The body is physical and made from the earth, but it is also imbued with the God-given *nish'mat hayim*, the breath of life, and created in the image of God, *b'tzelem Elokim*. We are part of the physical world but our physicality is a reflection of the Divine image, and the atoms and molecules of our being hum with a God-given life force.

From a scientific perspective the body can be understood as a complex and elegant system perfected over the millennia through the processes of evolution. Our bodies, when functioning well, are able to handle a multitude of tasks without requiring any conscious effort or control. Our body temperature, the ability to fight off infection, the precise balance of oxygen and carbon dioxide in our bloodstream, and even our ability to coordinate desire and intention through the seamless melding of thought and action are just a few examples of the myriad functions of the body. The morning prayer *Asher Yatzar*, reminds us of the largely unconscious and wondrous functioning of the body.

Blessed are You, Eternal our God, who formed the human body with wisdom and placed within it a miraculous combination of openings and organs...if only one of them should be opened or blocked at the wrong time, it would be impossible to exist and


stand before You.

It is hard for us to imagine the number and variety of processes that occur within us. The trillions of cells in hundreds of different varieties, operating in a coordinated fashion are us. We are the sum of these many separate biological entities.

This leads to a difficult question: How does consciousness emerge from this mass of biological material that is our bodies? Is consciousness the physical manifestation of cells and neuronal pathways acting in concert? A wave frequency? A property of a positive feedback loop? Or is it related to a spark of the Divine, the breath of life and the undying soul?

Science cannot begin to answer how neurobiological processes in the brain cause consciousness. Lewis Thomas, the noted physician and self-proclaimed science watcher speculated about the fate of consciousness after the physical death of the body. He wondered about the possibility of consciousness continuing to exist in some form after the death of the body.

"There is still that permanent vanishing of consciousness to be accounted for. Are we stuck forever with this problem? Where on earth does it go? Is it simply stopped dead in its tracks, lost in humus, wasted? Considering the tendency of nature to find uses for complex and intricate mechanisms, this seems to me unnatural. I prefer to think of consciousness as somehow separated off at the filament of its attachment, and then drawn like an easy breath back into the membrane of its origin, a fresh memory for a biospherical nervous system."

An easy breath, the breath of life, returned to its source, the source of all being. 

Discussion Guide

1. Is it necessary to resolve the unknown?
2. What do the early chapters of the Book of Genesis teach us about mystery?
3. What is the relationship between awe and mystery?

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company to its eventual downfall.

In the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community in Belgium where I grew up, we were always careful not to desecrate God's name through improper behavior. Keeping kosher connects me to the ancient community that established a covenant with God to uphold responsibilities toward both God and humanity. *Kiddush haShem*, the sanctification of God, can be put faithfully into practice only when the ethical and the ritual are inextricably connected. 