



12

# Shema Israel

Bible Correspondance Course



# Death

### *What is Truth?*

A strange question perhaps, yet one that expresses both our confusion and our skepticism regarding truth. Confusion, because with a multiplicity of religions and a diversity of beliefs around us we may genuinely wonder, “*Where is the truth?*” Skepticism, for it suggests that truth does not exist; in fact, there really is no objective truth.

The Hebrew Bible, the *Tanakh*, answers the question clearly. “*Hashem, God is the truth*” (Jeremiah 10:10; literal translation). For the Bible then, truth does exist; truth *is* association with God Himself. In fact, truth, *Emeth*, in the Hebrew language, is one of the 13 attributes of God. It falls seventh in the list in the exact center of the 13 attributes listed in Exodus 34:6; literal translation, a passage that is recited in the liturgies of Rosh Ha-Shanah Yom Kippur (Jewish New Year, Day of Attonement).

If truth is identified with God’s character, it does not come from us but is to be found outside of us – in God. This recognition implies that in order to find the truth we should not approach it with the preconceived idea that we know what the truth is. Instead, we should approach the truth with a question, “*What is it?*” This is the very same question, in fact, the ancient Israelites asked when confronted with the *manna*, the bread of God in the wilderness. “*What is it?*” they asked, and the question gave the name to this heavenly bread, for the Hebrew word *manna* means “*What is it?*” The meaning of the word *manna* suggests an important lesson regarding how we should approach Biblical truth. We should approach it with the question: “*What is it? What is truth?*” We should approach it with the same humble and honest mindset as the ancient Israelites approached the *manna* in the wilderness, asking “*What is it?*” Asking the question from this frame of reference no longer suggests confusion or skepticism. Instead, it implies sincere questioning from one who expects a true answer from above.

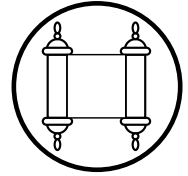
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## Bible Study – Lesson # 12\*

### Death



notes

#### *Lehayyim*

**D**eath strikes and surprises; yet shaken by history, all the more after Auschwitz, the Jew makes a toast “to life,” *lehayyim!* The acute awareness of death calls for the full enjoyment of life. Qohelet recommends this wisdom: Live joyfully . . . *No matter what you do, work at it with all your might. Remember, you are going to your grave. And there isn’t any work or planning or knowledge or wisdom there*” (Ecclesiastes 9:10).

In the midst of the integrity of life looms the burning question: What comes after? Where are we going beyond the big step into silence? Where have our friends and parents gone whose bones lie in the tomb? Did their souls take off to heaven and vanish into eternity, or are they waiting somewhere for the day of resurrection to join recreated bodies? Are their souls traveling from body to body in an infinite journey? For the Hebrew of the Bible, the answer to these questions is both tragic and comforting: nothing survives after death. Yet, on this lucid observation is articulated the hope which runs all risks. *Lehayyim* is more than a toast which calls for present enjoyment out of the anguish of the forthcoming unavoidable event. It is the recognition of the victory of life over death; it is the affirmation of hope in spite of all. But above all, it is the expression of a genuine faith which owes everything to the God who is alive, *hay*.

*\*Unless otherwise noted, all scripture references are taken from the New International Reader's Version of the Bible, Copyright 1998, by the Zondervan Corporation.*

## 1. Why does man die?

*“But you must not eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you do, you can be sure that you will die” (Genesis 2:17). (cf. Ezekiel 18:30; Job 24:19; Jeremiah 31:30)*

- “There is no death without sin.” (*Shab.* 55a)
- “Those who are born will of necessity die ... for perforce were you created, perforce were you born, perforce do you live, perforce will you die.” (*Avot* 4:22)

## 2. What happens when man dies?

*When they die, they return to the ground. On that very day their plans are bound to fail (Psalm 146:4). (cf. Ecclesiastes 3:19-21; 12:7)*

- “Man enters the world with closed hands, as if to say, ‘The world is mine.’ He leaves it with open hands, as if to say, ‘I take nothing with me.’” (*Kohelet Rabbah* 5,14)

**3. How is the state of the dead described in the Bible?**

*Huge numbers of people who lie dead in their graves will wake up. Some will rise up to life that will never end. Others will rise up to shame that will never end (Daniel 12:2). (cf. Ecclesiastes 3:20; 9:10; Job 10:20-22)*

- “The daughters of Rab Hisda said to him: ‘Father, why do you not lie down for a nap?’ He replied: ‘Soon, very soon, the days will come when I shall have my long slumber. Now I ought to increase my knowledge of Torah.’”  
(*Erubin* 64)

**4. Do the dead know or remember anything of what they left behind?**

*People who are still alive know they’ll die. But those who have died don’t know anything. They don’t receive any more rewards. And they are soon forgotten (Ecclesiastes 9:5).*

**5. Do the dead know anything, and do they take part in what happens among the living?**

*No matter what you do, work at it with all your might. Remember you are*

*going to your grave. And there isn't any work or planning or knowledge or wisdom there (Ecclesiastes 9:10).*

**6. Do the dead praise or worship God?**

*People can't remember you when they are dead. How can they praise you when they are in the grave (Psalm 6: 5)? (cf. Psalm 115:17)*

- “The dead have lost the opportunity of obeying the Divine commandments”  
(*Shabbat* 30a).

**7. Where does the idea of the immortality of the soul come from?**

- “The Jewish belief in the immortality of the soul was actually honored from Greek thought, especially from Plato, its principle representative”  
(Immortality of the Soul, *Jewish Encyclopedia*).

**8. Who is the only one to naturally possess immortality?**

*“Look I am the One! There is no other God except me...I raise my hand to heaven. Here is the oath I take. You can be sure that I live forever”*  
(Deuteronomy 32: 39-40). (cf. Psalm 90:2; 1 Timothy 6:15, 16)

## 9. Can the living consult the dead?

notes

*Some will tell you to ask for advice from people who get messages from those who have died. Others will tell you to ask for advice from people who talk to the spirits of the dead. But those people only whisper. Their words are barely heard. So shouldn't you ask for advice from your God? Why should you get advice from dead people to help those who are alive? Follow what the Lord taught you and said to you through me. People who don't speak in keeping with those words won't have any hope in the morning (Isaiah 8:19, 20). (cf. Deuteronomy 18:10-12)*

## 10. What is the only Biblical solution to death?

*"Huge numbers of people who lie dead in their graves will wake up. Some will rise up to life that will never end. Others will rise up to shame that will never end (Daniel 12:2).*

*It will be like that with bodies that are raised from the dead. The body that is planted does not last forever. The body that is raised from the dead lasts forever (1 Corinthians 15:42).*

- “‘I slay and I will make alive; I have wounded and I will heal’ (Deuteronomy 32:39). From this verse we may learn the doctrine of resurrection.” (Pesahim 68)

- *Amidah*: “You, Lord, will raise the dead; You are powerful enough to save.”
- The *Kaddish*: “May God’s great name be exalted and sanctified in the world which will be renewed, and where God will revive the dead and raise them to eternal life.”

## 11. How will resurrection happen?

*I myself will see him with my own eyes. I’ll see him, and he won’t be a stranger to me. How my heart longs for that day!* (Job 19:27). (cf. Ezekiel 37:6-10; 1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-44)

- “On ‘*Let men sprout up in towns like country grass ...*’ (Psalm 72:16 literal translation) R. Hiyya ben Joseph stated: ‘The just in the time to come will rise ... [This is deduced] ... from a grain of wheat. If a grain of wheat that is buried soon sprouts up ... how much more so the righteous must who are buried’” (*Ketubot* 111b).

## 12. What will happen to evil and its supporters?

*“You can be sure the day of the Lord is coming. My anger will burn like a furnace. All those who are proud*



*will be like straw. So will all those who do what is evil. The day that is coming will set them on fire,” says the Lord who rules over all. “Not even a root or a branch will be left to them (Malachi 4:1).*

*They marched across the whole earth. They surrounded the place where God’s people were camped. It was the city he loves. But fire came down from heaven and burned them up (Revelation 20:9).*

**13. Will the wicked burn “eternally” in the Gehinnom (hell)?**

*Those who are evil spring up like grass. Those who do wrong succeed. But they will be destroyed forever (Psalm 92:7). (cf. Jeremiah 7:32-33)*

- “Everlasting punishment” does not mean everlasting punishing; it is the definitive effect that is “everlasting” (see Isaiah 34:10; Jude 7).
- “There will be no Gehinnom in future times” (*Rosh Ha-Shanah* 17a; *Ned.* 8b).

**14. What Biblical examples attest to the historical reality of resurrection?**

*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth didn’t have any shape. And it was empty. Darkness was over the surface*

*of the ocean. At that time, the ocean covered the earth. The Spirit of God was hovering over the waters (Genesis 1:1-2).*

*Elisha turned away. He walked back and forth in the room. Then he got on the bed again. He lay down on the boy once more. The boy sneezed seven times. After that, he opened his eyes (2 Kings 4:35).*

*The dead man came out. His hands and feet were wrapped with strips of linen. A cloth was around his face. Jesus said to them, "Take off the clothes he was buried in and let him go" (John 11:44).*

**15. What will ultimately happen to death?**

*He will swallow up death forever. The Lord and King will wipe away the tears from everyone's face. He will remove the shame of his people from the whole earth. The Lord has spoken (Isaiah 25:8). (cf. Hosea 13:14)*

*Then Death and Hell were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death (Revelation 20:14).*

- "Then came the Blessed Holy One and slaughtered the Angel of Death, that slew the slaughterer, that slaughtered the ox" (*Passover Haggada*).

## ***To Live, to Die, and Then?\****

*The mystery of human destiny decoded in the ancient Bible*



notes

### ***Real Life***

**T**o really live is to engage all the dimensions of our being into life. Such a holistic concept of life is Biblical, for man and woman, their whole beings, were created by God.

This implies that the human being, permeated by the breath of God, cannot be fragmented. The story of Creation specifies: “*The Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being*” (Genesis 2: 7). Both the breath of life and the dust are components of the human being. Deprived of either of these elements, man would not be a living being. Man is either whole, or he is not.

The body, the soul, ethical behavior, relationships with neighbors, relationship with God – everything for the Hebrew is vital. Nothing is of lesser value. Everything plays its role in the making of the human person. In the Bible, man is an unfragmented whole; nothing can be discarded as less important, for everything is related. Thus, the ethical behavior of a person is directly related to his spiritual condition (Proverbs 3: 3, 4). Even the exercise of the intellect can be beneficial to the health and beauty of the body. “*My son, preserve sound judgment and discernment, do not let them out of your*

\* Jacques Doukhan, “To Live, to Die, and Then?” Shabbat Shalom, August 1997, 13-17.

*sight; they will be life for you, an ornament to grace your neck” (Proverbs 3:21, 22).*

On the other hand, evil and sin have the opposite effect on the body: *“My strength fails because of my iniquity and my bones waste away” (Psalm 31:10, NKJV).* The wisdom of the Bible has been confirmed by recent discoveries in psychosomatic medicine. It is no longer a novelty to speak of the relationship between the physical and the mental. There are numerous examples of physical illnesses derived from psychological causes.

The perfect human being would consequently excel in the integration of all his faculties, be they physical, mental, or social. But the ideal of the Bible is not a Nietzschean hero, or the formation of a Spartan elite, as supported by Auguste Comte, Alexis Carrel, and the racist philosophies.

Highly intelligent or athletic persons do not attain the Biblical ideal until they have reached the equivalent proficiency in ethical and religious matters. In fact, the Biblical definition of intelligence has nothing to do with I.Q. *“If you really want to become wise, you must begin by having respect for the Lord” (Psalm 111:10; Proverbs 9:10).* *“If you really want to gain knowledge, you must begin by having respect for the Lord” (Proverbs 1:7).*

The Bible adds yet another dimension, the law of God, the fear of God and the sacred. *Respect for the Lord is like a fountain that gives life (Proverbs 14:27).*

And the commandments of God bring peace (*shalom*) and health to the person (Psalm 119:165).

The Bible develops a whole new concept unknown to Antiquity, that of holiness. All the laws of health and cleanliness are based on that concept and performed only in reference to God and His holiness (Exodus 22:31; Leviticus 11:43-45; 20: 25, 26). Likewise, are the laws governing the relationships between neighbors. “*Love your neighbor as you love yourself. I am the Lord*” (Leviticus 19:18). “*The same law applies whether he is an outsider or an Israelite. I am the Lord your God*” (Leviticus 24:22).

Everything has a religious purpose, from the development of physical and mental faculties, to the commandment to love one’s neighbor, to ethical behavior. *Have respect for God and obey his commandments. That’s what everyone should do* (Ecclesiastes 12:13).

Religion permeates the life of the Hebrew. It is the common denominator which unites all the aspects of a person’s life. Holiness applies to the entire person, both body and soul. For the Hebrew, it is impossible to be morally sound without also being physically, mentally, and spiritually sound. Therefore a stupid and unlearned man cannot in the Biblical sense be truly moral. As the ancient rabbis used to say: “Justice is impossible for the ignoramus.”<sup>1</sup>

Today, more than ever, people need to be reminded of the strong unity of their being.

Under the influence of Greek philosophy, particularly that of Plato, the Judeo-Christian religions and modern philosophers have adopted and reinforced the disassociation of the body with the soul. This has resulted in the denial of the body and its health laws at the expense of what was believed to be the soul.

Too many prejudices clutter the mind and fragment the being:

- *The intellectual is a nerd, unable to develop social skills. He is skinny, clumsy, and unadapted.*
- *The athlete displays an open disinterest in matters of the intellect; he leaves that to his skinny manager.*
- *The believer should not display too much interest in life, be too athletic, or too intelligent, for this will only make it harder to give it all up for God. Thinking too much is dangerous, especially along the lines of modern trends of thoughts which are all nihilistic anyway. Philosophy is Satan's tool to uproot faith.*

However, the Bible reveals that life encompasses all dimensions of the human being. Real life postulates the harmonious development of all faculties, physical, mental, and spiritual. It is the awareness of the totality of one's being.

Real life is to be all one can be.

### ***Real Death***

**T**he reality of life becomes all the more acute when faced with the reality of death. The human being is a whole. That which was true on the level of existence is also true in the face of death. All aspects of life are yielded to the angel of death. The body, the soul, the intellect, all dies.

The destiny of humans is linked to their essence. What they shall become depends on what they are. Because humans are dust, they shall return to dust (Genesis 3:19). Death is the lot of humans.

The Biblical story of our origins is clear on this matter. Life depends on God. In turning away from God, humans threaten their own existence. *“But you must not eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you do, you can be sure that you will die”* (Genesis 2:17). In disobeying, man and woman tore themselves from the tree of life, and death became their destiny (Genesis 3:23, 24). Whether or not the story is metaphorical is not the issue. The intention of the author is to teach us that life is not inherent in our nature. Human beings depend on an external Source of life. If they cut themselves off from that

Source, they die. Man and woman disobeyed and consequently became mortal. Indeed, to disobey God is an act that denies God His sovereignty as the Creator, and thus affects the totality of our existence. The Bible parallels disobedience with sin. And sin is the origin of death: *“Melted snow disappears when the air is hot and dry. And sinners disappear when they go down into their graves”* (Job 24:19). *“Everyone will die for his own sin”* (Jeremiah 31:30). *“People will die because of their own sins* (Ezekiel 18:4).

For the Bible, sin is the determining agent in the process of death which devours man. Death is not a punishment concocted by God *a posteriori* to the sin. The sinful act carries within itself the formula of death. Sin, immorality, evil, and disobedience to the commandments of God, have a destructive effect on the body and on the whole being. Because of the holistic nature of human beings, corruption of mind leads to corruption of body. Death is total. Its state is described by the Bible as silence and nothingness. The author of Ecclesiastes makes the same distinction between life and death: *People who are still alive know they’ll die. But those who have died don’t know anything. They don’t receive any more rewards. And they are soon forgotten. Their love, hate and jealousy disappear. They will never share again in anything that happens on earth* (Ecclesiastes 9:5-6). Later, the sage concludes: *No matter what you do, work at it with all your might. Remember, you are going to your grave. And there isn’t any work or planning or knowledge or wisdom there* (Ecclesiastes 9:10). Likewise, the



Psalms, that most popular book of funeral services, declares: *Dead people don't praise the Lord. Those who lie quietly in the grave don't praise him* (Psalm 115:17). *People can't remember you when they are dead. How can they praise you when they are in the grave* (Psalm 6:5)?

We now understand why the Bible is so serious about condemning the various necromantic practices, the cult of the dead in pagan Antiquity (Psalm 106:28, 37; Deuteronomy 18:9-14; Leviticus 19:31). For the prophet Isaiah, consulting the dead was the climax of absurdity: *Some will tell you to ask for advice from people who get messages from those who have died. Others will tell you to ask for advice from people who talk to the spirits of the dead. But those people only whisper. Their words are barely heard. So shouldn't you ask for advice from your God? Why should you get advice from dead people to help those who are alive* (Isaiah 8:19)?

But great is the temptation to ignore the emptiness of death, to make believe that it does not exist and to turn it into an illusion. The majority of mankind does not accept the reality of death. The perspective of oblivion is too terrifying, thus the popularity of the idea of immortality of the soul. From prehistory to our time, from mystical religion to rational philosophy, this belief is attested to and appears in the most unexpected forms.

In Judeo-Christian circles, this concept filtered in with Hellenistic trends of

thought. The soul was defined as an entity independent from the body. Thus upon physiological death, the spirit would be allowed to go back to the world of spirits and angels. As related in the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, “the Jewish belief in the immortality of the soul was actually borrowed from Greek thought, especially from Plato, its principal representative.”

In Oriental philosophies, the soul is considered a part of the totality of the Universe and survives the human body to reappear in another animal or human body, through the process of transmigration.

On the periphery of religious circles, the occult has also contributed to the dissemination of this concept. At the moment of death the human soul retires, wrapped in its envelope, an individual spark in the cosmic fluid. Thus, with the assistance of mediums, it is possible to communicate with the deceased, who come back momentarily as pale shadows of what they used to be. This experience is often disappointing and leads to depression. The seduction of the occult is especially strong in our times. Since the nineteenth century, its popularity has grown and spread around the civilized world.

Outside of religious debate, materialist philosophies have also flirted with the idea of the immortality of the soul. While discarding the concept of an actual immortal soul, the materialists nevertheless retain the idea of immortality and believe that the soul will join the Infinite upon the death of the body.

Whether it is dualistic or materialistic, the conclusion is always the immortality of man. In the dualistic approach, the body and soul are split up, to ensure that at least one will survive the other. In the materialistic approach, it becomes a must to immortalize substance. Thus man struggles with the concept of immortality. It's extremely improper today to speak of an austere death which rots both the bones and the soul.

This obsession with immortality is rooted in our anguish. Although our civilization lives in the shadow of total extinction, it is not just a barren earth we fear but a barren sky. Because "*God is dead,*" humans elevate themselves, their universe, their culture, their church and their political party, to the level of eternity. The immortal-soul concept, stemming from primordial times, is the denial of God's existence. Instead of depending on God, man prefers taking his destiny into his own hands by creating the concept of his own immortality. But in declaring himself immortal, man takes the place of God. This presumption echoes that of the civilization of Babel.

Immortality has been a source of temptation for mankind from the start. "*The serpent said to the woman, 'You will not surely die. . . . you will be like God'*" (Genesis 3:4, 5, NKJV). And man and woman were seduced. Humans, in their pride decided to last, to build forever, to become God. For the one implies the other. To declare man immortal is to simultaneously reject God, take His place, and give man the status of sinlessness. Triple blasphemy!:

- First, immortality is the prerogative of God (Deuteronomy 32:40; Psalm 90: 2).
- Second, man was created mortal, biologically dependent on God.
- Third, by cutting themselves off from God, humans found themselves in the hands of death.

*And beyond death, there is nothing.*

### ***Real Awakening***

**T**he *only* solution to our mortal condition, according to the Bible, is resurrection. Not only is the notion of immortality of the soul unknown in the Bible, but it also contradicts the Biblical message of resurrection. Why believe in resurrection if the soul is immortal?

Joshua Yehudah, initiator of the movement *Unity in Judaism*, refuses to understand immortality without resurrection: “When the notion of immortality penetrated Judaism, it only meant the resurrection of dead bodies from the dust, at the Last Judgment. Even this idea of resurrection did not separate the soul from the body. That separation is, on the contrary, a classical belief in the Greco-Roman and Hindu traditions.”<sup>2</sup>

The notion of resurrection is not a later idea, concocted for the needs of an *oppressed* people in exile. It has been demonstrated, on the basis of Semitic literature and philology, that very ancient Biblical texts,

<sup>1</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficile liberté* (1976), p. 13. (Translation by the author.)

particularly in the Psalms, attest to the belief in resurrection. We have strong reasons to believe that the words “*life*” and “*waking*” refer to eternal life and resurrection (see Psalm 16:10, 11; 17:15, etc.).

The idea of resurrection is a very old one in the Bible and can be found among some of the most ancient Biblical texts. The song of Moses for example, one of the oldest texts of the Bible, testifies to the belief in a resurrection. “*I put some people to death. I bring others to life. I have wounded, and I will heal* (Deuteronomy 32:39). The word “*life*” should be understood as “*relive,*” an allusion to resurrection. The parallelism between the two phrases renders this very well. First, the words “*to bring to life*” are situated chronologically after “*I put to death,*” similarly the healing that follows the wounding. Just as the wound disappears through the healing, death shall disappear through the new life. The Biblical idea of resurrection is not just beautiful words of poetry, but an event that occurs in real life. The resurrection of the son of the Shunammite (2 Kings 4:17-37) shows that such a miracle is not impossible. The tenacity of the mother’s faith confirms this; she does not let the prophet go until her son is brought back to life again. The experience of resurrection is neither strange nor inconceivable for the Israelite. On the contrary, occurrences of it are disseminated all over the Biblical pages. The world, the universe and its people have already experienced this miracle. They were raised up from nothingness. Israel has gone through this experience. It was brought out

of death and slavery to life and freedom, from Egypt to Canaan.

So what is to guarantee that *I* shall be resurrected – the real me and not some diminished version of my being?

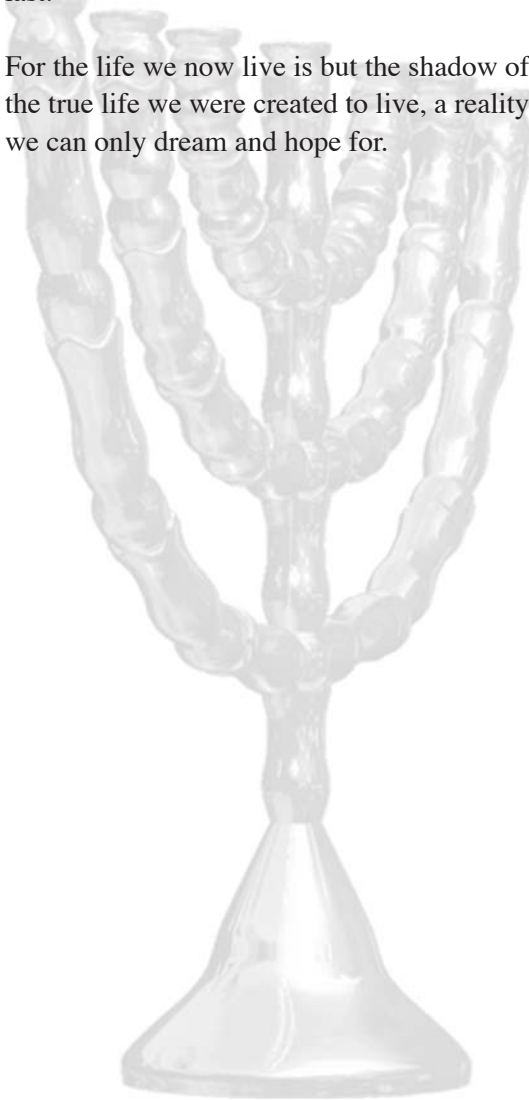
The Bible gives an answer to this question by comparing death to sleep and resurrection to waking up. “*Huge numbers of people who lie dead in their graves will wake up* (Daniel 12:2). This imagery not only describes the unconscious state of death, but also reassures us that our identity will be recovered; the resurrected one is not somebody else; it is the same person that first went to sleep.

The Bible does not give us the “how” of resurrection and does not go into the details of its mechanism. But one thing is certain, we ourselves shall be there. *I know that my Redeemer lives. In the end he will stand on the earth. After my skin has been destroyed, in my body I’ll still see God. I myself will see him with my own eyes. I’ll see him, and he won’t be a stranger to me. How my heart longs for that day* (Job 19:25-27)! It is the totality of our being that shall be resurrected, body and soul, heart and mind.

But resurrection is more than a mere return to life, the way things were before death – a return to our former wretched condition. From the surface of our skin to the depth of our bones, from the heart to the blood, from the power of the lungs to the strength of our

muscles, from intelligence to the senses,  
we shall again rise up to life, our potential  
finally released, our body and soul free at  
last.

For the life we now live is but the shadow of  
the true life we were created to live, a reality  
we can only dream and hope for.



notes

