

Introduction: Body

American and Classical Jewish Perceptions of the Body

THE TOPIC of this volume, the body, might seem as objective as any topic can be. After all, biologists can describe the features of the human species and the ways they distinguish humans from nonhumans quite precisely. Moreover, researchers can describe typical patterns of development from birth to death. There is a range of what are considered to be “normal” human traits. For instance, there are average weight and height ranges for men and for women, and people falling outside either of those ranges are considered to be atypical. Furthermore, there are always cases that test the borders of what we generally consider normal. Although most humans, for example, are either male or female, some have characteristics of both. Most humans have two legs, but some are born with only one or lose one or both of their legs during life. Most human beings are born with their own internal organs, but some share one or more organs with a conjoined twin. Still, even with all these variations, we might claim that the human body is as concrete as tables or chairs.

But the human body is not nearly as matter-of-fact as that. Different cultures train us how to perceive our bodies as well as how to reach moral judgments about the way we treat them. To illustrate this, let's compare prevailing American perspectives on the body with a classical Jewish view. Without delving into the complexities of either point of view, according to American thought and law, I own my body. I may not use it to harm someone else; and so, for example, if I have an infectious disease, the government may put me under quarantine and insist that I stay in my house for a period of time. As long as I do not harm anyone else, however, I may be as scrupulous or as careless in the care of my body as I choose. In fact, as the *Nancy Cruzan* decision of the U.S. Supreme Court held, any adult may refuse all medical treatment. Government or medical authorities may try to stop me from committing suicide; and, as a pair of U.S. Supreme Court decisions held, I do not have the constitutional right to procure aid in committing suicide or to help someone else do so. Short of that, however, I have complete authority to determine how much I eat, exercise, wash, and sleep.

Jewish Choices, Jewish Voices: BODY

In American thought, the purpose of my body is the pragmatic one of supporting the various activities of my life. As a result, I have a duty to engage in proper diet, exercise, hygiene, and sleep for pragmatic purposes—so that I will feel good, look good, and avoid health problems; cost my employer, health insurer, or family less in health care; participate with friends in sports and other physical fitness activities; and enhance my ability to get jobs.

The broad outlines of Judaism's view of the body are substantially different. Along with my parents, God is a co-creator of my body. In the Rabbis' understanding of the process, however, my parents contributed only the physical materials out of which I came to be; it was God who breathed life into that matter. So God is the creator of my life and, as its creator, God owns my body throughout my life and even in death. If this connection between creation and ownership may not seem obvious to moderns, it is partially because of the Industrial Revolution, which divided the tasks of creation of most things in our lives among many different people. Consider, however, those areas of our lives where only one individual or a small group of people create something for illustrations of how creation confers ownership—for example, the painter of a painting, the composer of a piece of music, or the author of a book.

As owner of my body, God can and does make demands as to how I use it. I may not, for example, commit suicide because that would be destroying that which does not belong to me, as well as diminishing the image of God in the world, for each of us is created in the image of God. I may take reasonable risks in living my life, but not extraordinary risks, for “endangering [oneself] is prohibited more stringently than violating the [other] prohibitions [of the Torah]” (Babylonian Talmud, Hullin 10a). Exactly where that line is drawn admits some variation, for some people are more able to handle some risks (e.g., in skiing) than others, and some rabbis interpreting Jewish law demand more caution than others (e.g., in responding to the question of whether a Jew may smoke). In the end, though, I have a fiduciary relationship with God with respect to my body—that is, God entrusts it to me for the duration of my life on the condition that I take care of it. So, for example, I may not eat a half gallon of ice cream every night of the week even if I want to do so and do not care about the pragmatic results—that I will gain 100 pounds in no time and thereby endanger my health and cease to look good or feel good. Conversely, I have a positive duty to God to practice habits of proper

diet, exercise, hygiene, and sleep, whether or not I want to do so. Along these lines, Jewish law prescribes that I must live in a town where there is a physician, for otherwise I could not obtain the expert help I need to avoid and overcome illness. Furthermore, I must do what the doctor orders to maintain my health. I may choose among several viable medical alternatives; and in the last stages of life that may include withholding or withdrawing machines, medications, and—according to some—artificial nutrition and hydration. But I must have regular checkups, consult a doctor if I get sick, and do what is medically advisable. The goal of taking care of my body in Judaism is, as Maimonides (an important twelfth-century rabbi, doctor, and philosopher) put it, so that I can be in a position to fulfill the Torah's commandments. Bad health habits and illness impede my ability to do that. Because the goal of my life is to live in covenant with God and thus to fix the world, I must take care of my body in order to enable myself to accomplish those tasks. Because that is the goal, age and experience are prized.

Even this brief overview of how American and Jewish traditions regard the body illustrates how different they are and how important it is to consider ultimate viewpoints and values when thinking about how we use our bodies. This lesson is embedded in the very word “religion.” *Lig* comes from the Latin word for “connection,” suggesting that religions—and many secular philosophies as well—are designed to link us to our family, our community, the broader human community, the environment, and to what transcends human experience, imaged in the Western religions as God and in the Eastern religions in other ways. The prefix *re* suggests that religion “binds (us) again” to all the people and communities in our life, presumably after moments of disconnection. Such moments are especially common in young adults, who often leave behind their family’s religious moorings, only to reconnect later, once they have achieved a greater sense of identity and independence.

Every religion provides a broad perspective, a “Grand Canyon view,” as it were, about who we are and who we ought to be. Although most religions or secular philosophies overlap to some extent, they exhibit a remarkable range of values. Even regarding something as basic as rules about homicide, views range from complete pacifism on one end of the spectrum, to idealizing military exploits on the other.

So cultural perspectives, even about things as concrete and factual as the body, greatly influence how we feel about and act toward our body.

Furthermore, the fact that American and classical Jewish views of the body differ as much as they do means that American Jews may need to choose between the teachings of these two traditions with which they identify when the views conflict. For many, that will not mean always preferring one over the other. Rather, it will mean assessing each tradition's approach to a given issue in order to decide which to choose, or sometimes, balancing one against the other in order to adopt a position that respects both or lands somewhere in between. The value of such comparisons is that they give American Jews an opportunity to learn from both these inherited traditions so that they can harvest from them as they form their own, mature moral thinking about significant issues in their lives.

Male and Female Bodies

Human bodies, of course, are gendered. This fact immediately raises a whole set of issues regarding sexual activities, but this volume will not deal with sex; that will be the topic of a separate volume in this series.

The gendered quality of human bodies raises a number of issues concerning the similar and different ways in which men and women perceive their bodies. Both men and women these days worry about obesity; but for reasons not well understood, it is primarily women who suffer from anorexia and bulimia. Both men and women want to be fit, but it is primarily men who care more about bulging arm and leg muscles. Both men and women, especially in their twenties and thirties, want to look sexy; but because biology distinguishes the sexual anatomy of men and women, this translates into very different concerns for men and women.

From the time of the very earliest written sources, the factor of human gender has also produced literature and law about how each gender understands and interacts with the other. The very first chapter of the Torah says, literally, "And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them." (Genesis 1:27). Although that could be read to mean that God created humankind to be both male and female from the beginning, the Rabbis, reading the number and gender of the nouns and pronouns literally, suggest that God first created one person who was androgynous. The second chapter of Genesis, however, asserts that God first created a male human being from the dust, and then created a female from the man's side in order to be his helpmate. This second account, and the Garden of Eden story that

follows in chapter three, assert that man is first in the order of Creation and is designed/meant to reign over woman. So even the opening chapters of Genesis give us conflicting understandings of human gender and of their proper relationship.

How men and women should relate to each other is a very old theme, and it is an ongoing and pervasive one. Indeed, male–female relationships affect a multitude of areas in life, including, among others, how men and women think about members of their own gender in contrast to those of the opposite gender, how they speak to each other (can you tell dirty jokes or use swear words with equal abandon when members of the opposite sex are present?) and treat each other (is chivalry really dead?), what they look for in a mate or in a partner at work, how they date, and the expectations that men and women have of each other in marriage and in child rearing.

Until very recently in both American and Jewish law, and still today in some quarters, these presumptions about each gender had direct ramifications for both American and Jewish law. The presumptions about males and females affect public policies, like eligibility for jobs and leadership positions, and people’s private lives, like legal and ritual forms of marriage and divorce and rules for deciding child custody disputes.

Although society has always made distinctions between men and women, since the twentieth century—especially since Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963)—such gender distinctions have come under intense scrutiny as feminism has challenged the legitimacy of making distinctions on the basis of gender alone in shaping employment, law, or public policy. Even restricting marriage to a man and a woman is being increasingly challenged in both American and Jewish circles.

New attitudes toward gender roles are immensely liberating for both men and women, for now each person is “free to be you and me,” as the popular song from the 1970s put it—that is, free to aspire to any position, free to redefine the duties of marriage in partnership with one’s spouse, and so on. But discarding traditional definitions of what it means to be a man or a woman can raise challenging questions for both men and women about their own gender identity. Their answers also affect how they raise their sons and daughters.

As gendered beings, we are deeply affected by all of these old and new male–female issues. It therefore should be no surprise that even when the issue at hand is not directly about how men and women interact with

members of the opposite sex, it often has a gendered component, one that we must be aware of if we are going to treat the particular moral issue we are discussing adequately.

Although it is important to recognize the role of gender in one's moral calculus, it is also important not to exaggerate it. Gender is not always pertinent. To pretend that issues of gender underlie absolutely every moral problem distorts matters just as much as claiming that gender plays no role in such problems. The trick is to remember that we are both human and gendered. Sometimes the focus is on our common humanity; other times, we are separated by our genders.

Multiple Classical and Modern Jewish Perspectives

Finally, in addressing the moral matters in this book and the others in this series, it is important to remember that contemporary American Jews balance not only their Jewish and American identities but also the classical Jewish tradition and multiple, modern expressions of it. To say honestly and accurately that “Judaism says . . .” is hard enough when both speaker and listener (or writer and reader) agree that there is only a single version of classical Judaism. But this claim to a monolithic Judaism is disingenuous: Both the Bible and the Talmud resonate with many, many voices articulating often diverse points of view. The very feistiness of the tradition, its argumentativeness and respect for differences of opinion is, in our view, one of its chief attractions and an important source of its wisdom.

If one is trying to articulate the assertions of modern Judaism, then one has to be especially careful. It is not just by accident that there are four separate movements within North American Judaism—alphabetically: Conservative, Orthodox, Reconstructionist, and Reform (with Renewal Judaism in the process of emerging as yet another approach). We cannot legitimately speak about “Jewish bioethics,” “Jewish sexual ethics,” or “Jewish business ethics” as if there were a single, unambiguous perspective on these subjects. We must instead talk more humbly about “*a* Jewish approach” rather than “*the* Jewish approach,” and then demonstrate that the position we are taking is rooted in Jewish sources, concepts, and values, making legitimate our claim that our position is indeed a Jewish approach. Recognizing this reality has led us in this and every other volume to include a variety of authors with many different Jewish beliefs and approaches to comment on the issues we have raised.

This is not to say that either classical or modern Judaism is incoherent, that anything goes. On many issues, in fact, it is fairly easy to describe positions held by most Jewish authorities, past and present. This holds true even for some distinctly modern issues, such as embryonic stem cell research. The official positions of all four modern Jewish movements not only permit this research but actively encourage it. On some other matters, we find only two or three positions that have divided Jews since antiquity. It is only on a small number of issues that Jews differ radically among themselves; no one position can claim to be mainstream. Such wide diversion usually occurs vis-à-vis the cutting-edge moral issues of a given era, like the ones of the last generation that dealt with how to respond to revolutionary medical advances and to changing gender roles, and the ones emerging in this generation, including the status of homosexual relations and issues of privacy and security raised by the Internet and other technological advances.

As we now explore some important issues raised by our relationship to our own physicality, we turn to ancient, medieval, and modern Jewish perspectives to guide us in making our decisions. One of the great strengths of the Jewish tradition is that it encourages each of us to make this tradition our own. Toward that end, the tradition has preserved multiple positions on any given issue. Even when rabbinic authority prefers one to all others, it nevertheless presumes that Jews will continue to argue about whether and why this should be the official stance. Just as Abraham, Moses, Jeremiah, and Job all argued with God, Jews continue that noble tradition—and argue with each other as well.