

When Does Life Begin?

This is a question that is currently being debated in Congress, the courts, television talk shows, and even at the water fountain because of the recent interest in stem cell research. It was also the subject of hot debate back in the early 1970s when the United States Supreme Court was trying to reach a decision regarding abortion on demand. It seems however, that the question has never been settled in the minds of most people, and of course it must be if we are ever to enter the impending debates on bioethical issues with any degree of intellectual and moral integrity.

For Orthodox Jews and Christians who believe that the Psalms were divinely inspired, there should be no difficulty in answering that very vital question. David wrote in Psalm 51:5, "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me."

Human life consists of a both physical body and an immaterial soul. All other life forms whether animal or vegetable consist of merely a physical body. All bodies, human, animal, and vegetable eventually die and disappear; undergo decay. All souls, once they have been placed into a human body by the Creator, continue to exist eternally either in Heaven or Hell. It is the soul that gives life to our human bodies. When the soul departs, physical life ceases, and the body begins to disintegrate.

The soul is the seat of emotion, personality, intellect, and will. It is the life giving soul, not the physical body that is tainted by sin. Thus when David says that he was "sinful from the time my mother conceived me"; it goes without saying that his soul, and thus his life, was necessarily present at conception. In Ezekial 18:4 God tells us, "For every living soul belongs to me, the soul who sins is the one who will die."

When God speaks of the death of the soul here, He is referring to the soul's eternal separation from Him. That occurs if that particular soul's sin has not been atoned for by the death of Christ. Only those souls that have received Christ by faith have appropriated that atonement of their sin. The word atonement in Hebrew, *kaphar* means to cover. In Psalm 32:1 David wrote, "Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered."

Life, which begins at conception, thus consists of two components; the physical (body), which is temporary, and the spiritual (soul), which is eternal. Spiritual existence is further divided into two types based on destiny; one called eternal life, where the soul, existing within a glorified body, resides in Heaven, and the other called "death" which is an eternal existence apart from God in a place of eternal pain, loneliness, regret, despair, and fear. The Bible speaks in many

places about the continuance of life beyond the time of our physical demise. I cite but three.

II Corinthians 5:1 reads, "Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven." The "tent" referenced here is our physical body, while the "building" and "house" refer to our glorified heavenly body in which our eternal soul will reside.

The apostle Peter reiterates the point when he says "I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body, because I know that I will soon put it aside." (II Peter 1:13-14) Peter knew that he would soon leave the "tent" and go to Heaven. The implication here is that the real Peter, and the real you and I, are to be found not in the physical substance of the body, but in the immaterial reality of the soul.

The Bible also says, "man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgement." (Hebrews 9:27)

The dying once is physical, and all eventually experience that. The facing of judgement for believers is unlike that which non-believers will face. Believers will appear before the judgement seat of Christ where their works will be judged, whether good or bad. (II Corinthians 5:10). The sins of believers have already been judged at the Cross-of-Calvary where Christ paid the penalty of death for each of His elect. Unbelievers will face the Great White Throne judgement seat (Revelation 20:11-15) and then suffer eternally for their unrepented and unatoned for sin. In each case a living soul is facing some kind of judgement.

In the Shakespearean play *Hamlet* the young prince was contemplating suicide, having just discovered that his mother and her lover had plotted his father's death. Hamlet, in the midst of a quandary, uttered those now famous words, "To be or not to be; that is the question?" He had erroneously surmised that having committed suicide, he would cease to exist. He was wrong. Once we become, when sperm penetrates egg, and that first cell begins to divide, we become for all eternity; we will always "be". Hamlet's question should not have been **whether to be** but rather **where to be**. That is a question that every human being should be asking themselves.

I'm sure that there will be government commissions appointed to study the question, "When does life begin?" That commission will no doubt consist of clergy, lawyers, philosophers, ethicists, politicians, judges, scientists, and physicians who will spend many hours pondering, proposing, contemplating, pontificating, and theorizing over the answer. It is doubtful that any one of them will even think to ask the advice of the Author of life, the **only** One that has the real answer; an answer that is only to be found exclusively in the pages of His Holy Writ. But since you and I do know the answer, it behooves us to inform

others. We can do that with the mouth, the pen, and the E-mail. We can call the talk shows, write to our representatives in Congress, and to the editors of our local newspapers. We can expound on this truth at the water fountain and on our break from the production line. We can encourage our kids and grandkids to discuss the matter in their classrooms or better still, make the issue a subject for an essay or term paper. However, if we remain utterly silent on this issue, we may have to answer for our silence at the Judgement Seat of Christ.

Dr Chuck McGowen