

RABBINIC ATTITUDES TOWARD DEATH

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements  
for the Master of Arts in Hebrew Literature Degree  
and Ordination

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion  
New York, N. Y.

March 15, 1966

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### Thesis Forward

Moses said to Aaron, "what do you see, my brother? What is death?" "Up to now and nothing else can I tell you," he responded, "for the cloud of glory arises and covers me." But Moses continued calling, "Aaron, my brother, what is death? What is the death of the righteous like?"....

(Yalkut, Ch. Masa, sec. 787)

This thesis is dedicated to the joys of life which we can know, and to my wife who has helped me to know them.

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### Introduction

Could it be that death is the end, an abrupt and final cessation, and all that we do is but a struggle which ceases, null and void when we depart? Is there nothing more after our bodily disintegration?

These questions and the implications springing from them have plagued and confounded man from the beginning of time. He has courageously sought answers, not only to satisfy his inquisitive mind, but also to soothe his anxious spirit, a spirit which thrusts forward toward its finality and hopes to widen into eternity. Are we here only to suffer and die; and if so, why are we here at all?

Writers throughout the ages and up until our modern day have delved into these questions and attempted to give an answer satisfying to themselves and the context of their age.

Rabbinic thought is discussed extensively in the body of my thesis, but modern thought has attempted to broaden the earlier thinking by supplementing the concise thought of these fathers with elaborations of identity and personality factors of modern times. What gave comfort to our fathers is not always sufficient to console us, and the endless search for meaning continues.

Human death is a universal and recurring phenomenon. Every culture has its own inherent values, ideas, beliefs and practices. An individual learns the orientations of his culture toward death...and develops a conception of the meaning of death.



Many, if not most societies throughout the world, do not regard death as an inevitable fact of life, but rather construe it as being the result of accident, negligence, or of malice on the part of "sorcerers." Many see death as a gain for the deceased, an improvement in his prospects--yet for us (today) death is an inevitable, tragic reality, and the fate of the deceased is by no means as clear and as certain as it may once have been...<sup>1</sup> Each man will be forced to meet the Angel of Death without defense or argument, and will feel the taste of dying.

Man thus feels a need to constantly examine himself and search for the meaning of life and death.

As a living being endowed with consciousness, man feels a deep need to examine himself. This, in turn, leads to the search for a reasonable interpretation of life and death. Man tries to understand the meaning of his innate actions and the sources of the feelings that precede and accompany them.<sup>2</sup>

Even though man has sharpened his mind through the ages, immeasurably enlarged the number of his possible experiences, and added insight upon insight, the secret of death has still remained a perplexing mystery.

Death is for man a dark fate, the thief in the night, it is an emptying, an ending. This simultaneity of fulfillment and emptiness, of actively achieved and passively suffered end, of full self-possession and complete dispossession of self,...<sup>3</sup>

No human experience will ever be able to reveal whether death is truly a pure perfection or a pure end of the man who died.<sup>4</sup> Death is indeed hidden from the experience of man.

Rollo May takes the approach that death teaches us to appreciate life. We are limited in time, and therefore that time is given meaning, existence takes on immediacy and vitality.

If any human being is to grasp what it means to exist, he must confront the fact that at any moment he may cease to exist, and that death will inescapably arrive

for him at some unknown moment in the future.

Without this consciousness of non-being, existence is vapid, unreal and characterized by a lack of concrete self-awareness.

With awareness of non-being, however, existence takes on vitality and immediacy, and the individual experiences a heightened consciousness of himself, his world, and the others around him.

The distinctive feature of a human being's relation to death, is more than the fact of death itself, it is man's capacity to know that he himself will die and to exist in the light of this fact.<sup>5</sup>

And not only is death a means of giving vitality and direction to life, but man's death binds him with the Divine Will and gives purposefulness to his life.

Death asks for our identity. Confronted by death, man is compelled to provide in some form a response to the question, who am I?

Traditionally this has been answered within the framework of sacred doctrine. Man was God's creature, after His image, his life thus is an act of Divine Will.

Thus death is a personal matter between God and himself. The very purposefulness of his death placed him at the center of existence and elevated him above all other creatures as the principal subject of creation. As part of the divine plan--death could be confronted openly (as a natural phenomenon).<sup>6</sup>

There are many arguments as to the causes of the phenomenon of death. We have on the one hand the proponents of the attitude that death cannot occur without sin. This point of view is prevalent among the Rabbis.

Adam sinned and therefore brought death upon himself. However, others feel that each man is responsible for himself and only his own sins can cause his demise. (There are persons who feel that we all die because of Adam's original sin.)

Another point of view expresses the belief in hereditary death. Even though sin may not be hereditary, death was conceived as a penalty imposed upon Adam. All men, including the innocent (personified in Moses) must therefore suffer death.

Others uphold that man was created mortal.

Whether the fall of Adam occurred or not, man would have met the same fate. Adam's sin made death painful and terrible, whereas otherwise it would have been a natural and joyful incident in man's career.

The fall of man is also considered to be the cause of early death. Man is not immortal but if he would live sinlessly, his capacity for life would be extended.

Levi Olan attempts to explain this diversity of popular belief.

There is a strong tradition that God created man knowing that he is destined to die; the Rabbis say that the angel of death was created on the first day, long before Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden. While death is the inevitable destiny of every human creature, it is at the same time a punishment for sin and rejection of God's commandments. Failure to obey God is punishable in many cases with death, but it is always premature death. Living the good life is to be rewarded with a long life, aging in health and peace and then being gathered to the fathers.

No matter what the outcome is as far as the meaning behind death, God will always remain supreme, extolled and hallowed. If man suffers, the fault must lie within him, for God is never deprecated.

In arguments used by traditional theologians, what man calls evil sometimes turns out to be good in God's eyes.

And suffering, pain and death occasionally end up as the consequences of man's erring belief or behavior, and are therefore just punishments. Invariably and inevitably, the divine image is sustained and it is man who is diminished....Consciously or not, Jewish justifications of God's ways are torn between two ideas that they wish to maintain equally; the sovereignty of God and the dignity of man.<sup>8</sup>

This thought is carried out throughout the discussion of death. Life is not an end in itself but must be lived under a sense of responsibility to the Giver. The Torah and commandments remain our guide throughout life, and our Creator is continually praised for giving us the opportunity to obey them. The major change at death is that we lose the opportunity to obey the commandments, and that God reclaims our souls.

What I have attempted to do in this thesis is to extract Midrashim from the various Rabbinic sources which handle the fragile question of death and dying. My major source of material was Gross's 'Otzar Agadah' under the major heading 'אגדה'. In the organization of the paper I have tried as much as possible to let the text speak for itself, or, in Dr. Borowitz's words, "be true to the text." The chapters are assembled under the various divisions which I found to be emphasized in the Rabbinic texts.

Where Christian sources corroborated or elucidated the Jewish viewpoint, I have assimilated them also into the body of my paper, and have utilized a similar technique with regard to psychological and philosophical points of view.

I have rarely interjected my own feelings regarding

death, but have kept my focus within the context and framework of the Rabbinic theology, trying to immerse myself within the boundaries of their thought.

Although eschatology and the Olam Haba has not been discussed within the confines of my subject, unquestionably, beliefs in this area would shape and influence the attitudes toward the phenomenon of death. Belief in the eternity of the soul is stressed, and certainly this implies some form of immortality, but the specifics of this after life would engender an entirely different approach, too complex and massive for a paper of this nature. Or, as Hayim Schauss points out:

In the first century official sanction was given to many popular beliefs. The outlook on death had been changed by the belief in a future life in heaven and the resurrection of the dead with the coming of the Messiah. The majority of the Jews, followers of the Pharisees, believed death was not the total extinction of man's life.<sup>9</sup>

The paper has thus been focused as much as possible, in view of the vast areas of possible thought and discussion, to the preparation for and the act of dying itself.

The Rabbis seem to contemplate certain topics more than others, and there are logical influences which arise regarding the meaning of these perpetual calls to man.

There is of course the possibility that the reason a theme is discussed scantily is not due to its insignificance but rather because it already is generally accepted and thus need not be emphasized.

To reiterate, a Rabbinic thesis must speak from within

the Rabbinic context, thus certain ideas which may seem superstitious or unrealistic today, must be presented without explanation or comment, since they are a part of the collective philosophy of the time. Therefore, we must view the totality of ideas as part of a grand tradition, great enough to encompass many diverse and varied opinions on a difficult, intimate and poignant theme.

Introduction

1. 'Death and Identity.' Robert Fulton. 'Bereavement and Mental Health,' Edmund H. Volkart, p. 277.
2. Counselling the Dying. M. Bowers, and E. Jackson, p. 119.
3. On the Theology of Death. Karl Rahner, p. 48.
4. Ibid., p. 49.
5. American Handbook of Psychiatry. Silvano Arieti (ed.). 'The Existential Approach,' Rollo May, p. 1021 (f).
6. Death and Identity. Robert Fulton, p. 3.
7. Great Jewish Ideas. Simon Noveck (ed.). 'The Nature of Man,' Levi Olan, p. 171.
8. Ibid., 'Suffering and Evil.' Harold M. Schullweiss, p. 198.
9. The Lifetime of a Jew. Hayyim Schauss, p. 229.



## CHAPTER I

Sin and DeathA. Adam and His Sin

In their attempts to explain the cause of death, the Rabbis continually resorted to sin as the determining factor. According to our tradition, if a man could live without sinning, he would never die (e.g., Elijah). Others say he would still experience death, but by avoiding sin he could live a full, healthy life, and die of natural causes. However, whichever interpretation is offered, there seems to be a strong correlation between sin and death in the attitudes of the Rabbis.

Closely bound up with the idea of sin causing death, are an abundance of Midrashim revolving around the story of Adam and Eve. First, man, by eating the apple and thereby committing the first sin, caused death to enter into the world. While some Midrashim see each man paying a debt for the original sin and dying; other interpreters attempt to dispel this notion, and present the more traditional attitude, that each man dies for his own sins.

There is a variety of opinion on the part of the Agadah with regard to death. Some think that Adam and Eve, his wife, brought death into the world because of the first sin, when they trespassed God's command and ate from the tree of knowledge.

Others say Adam and Eve died because of the sins of the coming generation. And others say death was appointed to come into the world even before creation. 'And darkness was on the face of the days.' This is death.<sup>1</sup>

George Foote Moore also points out the various ideas and



attitudes developed through the Adam and Eve story.

1. Without sin, there would be no death, is a natural inference from the story of the fall of Genesis.
2. Adam's sin involved all his posterity, the righteous as well as the wicked in death, is the consistent teaching of the Rabbis.<sup>2</sup>

We find many instances in the Midrash where the origin of death is ascribed to Adam, Eve, or the Serpent. In all of these cases the main point being developed is that without the original sin, man would not be compelled to confront death.

'These are the generations of heaven and earth,' because when God created his world, there was no Angel of Death in the world, on this account is it spelt fully. (The Hebrew word 'Toldot,') denoting that life was to be full, never to be terminated by death), but as soon as Adam and Eve sinned, God made defective all the 'toledot' mentioned in the Bible (defective since death would end it).<sup>3</sup>

Even men who did not sin were obliged to die because of Adam's sin.

Amram was one of the four who were immaculate, untainted by sin, over whom death would have had no power, had mortality not been decreed against every single human being on account of the fall of the first man and woman. The other three that led the same sinless life were Benjamin, Jesse, and Chileab.<sup>4</sup>

And:

We find that many righteous men died, not for their sins, but only for the sin of the first man, or for the instigation of the serpent (הַחֹמֶה הַיָּסוּס), for it was the counsel of the serpent that led Eve to eat from the tree of knowledge and death was decreed on the world.

(Dying) for the sin of the 'urging of the serpent' are thought to be, Benjamin, son of Jacob, Amram, father of Moses, Jesse, father of David, and Caleb, son of David.<sup>5</sup>

The serpent appears in other Midrashin in the same context:

(God said to the serpent) Through thee (but for the serpent, there would have been no death), my creatures go bent with grief, over their dead, so thou too, upon thy belly shalt thou go.<sup>6</sup>

The serpent went to the woman and said, Behold I touched it but I did not die, thou mayest touch it and thou wilt not die. The woman went and touched the tree and she saw the Angel of Death (Sammael) coming towards her. She said, Woe is me, I shall now die; but behold I will cause him to eat with me, if we shall die, we shall both die, and if we shall live, we shall both live... (Adam said) What is this that thou hast given me to eat that my teeth should be set on edge. Just as my teeth were set on edge, so shall the teeth of all generations be set on edge (pay the penalty of death because of the sin).

Blame is also focussed on women, because of Eve's sin.

Why do (the women) walk in front of the corpse (at a funeral)? Because they brought death into the world, they therefore walk in front of the corpse.<sup>8</sup>

Adam is held responsible for the death of Moses. Even righteous men who follow all of the commandments must experience death, because of God's decree issued upon the first man.

Moses pleaded, Master of the Universe, there are 36 transgressions punishable by extinction enumerated in the Torah, for the commission of any one of which a man is liable to be put to death. Have I then transgressed any one of them? Why dost thou decree death upon me? God replied, you are to die because of the sin of the first man who brought death into the world.<sup>9</sup>

When the Holy One created first man he led him around the Garden of Eden. I have created all of you, be careful not to corrupt and destroy my universe, for if you corrupt it, there is no one to repair it after you. Not only that, but you will cause death to befall that righteous man (Moses).

To what may Moses be likened. To a pregnant woman shut up in a prison. She gave birth there to a son, reared

him there and died. After a while the king passed by the entrance to the prison, and as he passed, the son began to cry, My lord, king, here was I born and here I grew up. For what sin am I kept here, I do not know. He answered, for your mother's sin. So was it with Moses.<sup>10</sup>

The implication of the Adam and Eve story is that without sin men would have lived forever.

Nowhere in the Bible is death regarded as a real evil, except from the point of view that man, being of divine origin, should have had, like any other heavenly being, access to the tree of life and have lived forever.<sup>11</sup>

In order to prove the statement that if he were sinless Adam would have lived forever, the Rabbis draw an allusion to Elijah. George Foote Moore quotes the 'Pesikta':

Should a man ask you, If Adam had not sinned and had eaten of that tree, would he have lived and endured forever? Answer him, There was Elijah, who did not sin, he lives and endures forever.<sup>12</sup>

And,

Elijah did not sin, and (thus) lives and endures forever. (Elijah did not die, but was taken to heaven in a whirlwind.)<sup>13</sup>

Like Elijah, just as he did not experience the taste of death, so (Adam) too was not meant to experience death (but for his sin).<sup>14</sup>

The Midrash hints at another means by which Adam could have avoided death. (Although the real purpose of this Midrash is probably an impetus motivating study)

If the first man had studied Torah, perhaps he would not have died.<sup>15</sup>

An opposing tradition to man's dying for the original sin, emphasizes the fact that every man is responsible for

his own actions and died for his own sins.

Death came in with Adam, but every man has deserved it for himself, his descendants die in consequence of his sin, but not for the guilt of it.<sup>16</sup>

Adam takes total blame for his own death.

They said to the first man, 'who caused your death.' He said to them, 'I caused it.' They said to him, 'didn't God do this to you?' He said to them, 'Has v'shalom!' It is like a sick man that was sent to bed, he went to see the Doctor, and he ordered him, 'such and such a thing, eat, and such and such a thing, don't eat, for it is bad for you and dangerous to your life. He ate (anyway) and was near death. They said to him, perhaps the Doctor did this to you? He said to them, I did it to myself. For if I listened to what he commanded me, I wouldn't be dying... They said, didn't the Holy One make you die? He said to them, no, I did it to myself.<sup>17</sup>

However, we cannot ascribe to Adam blame for the deaths of all men.

The righteous are punished with death for slight transgressions. This is in order that Adam might not be called to account by them, as it says 'The Lord will not suffer the soul of the righteous to famish.' (Prov. 10:3) This is the reason why it says 'because ye rebelled against my word. (Num. 20:24) (God would not suffer Adam to bear the mortification of thinking that he alone was responsible for the death of the righteous.<sup>18</sup>

All the righteous men that are to spring from him, and against whom death is decreed, will not depart this life without beholding the presence of the Shechinah, and they will reprove Adam by saying to him, 'You have brought mortality upon us.' Adam will answer them, 'as for me, I have only one sin to my account.' (Not even Moses, who had four sins.)<sup>19</sup>

Judaism rejects the suggestion that man is a sinner at birth because he is stamped with the fall of Adam. While there are scattered statements in rabbinic literature which suggest the belief that in the sin of the first man all human beings come into life with an original sin, Ezekiel reflects the major view of the tradition: 'the soul that sinneth it shall die.' (Ezek. 18:4)

The sin in the Garden of Eden may have brought physical consequences, death accepted by some sages as the most serious...He may be burdened by the fruit of wrongdoing of his forefathers, but Judaism does not assent to the doctrine that a man can do a wrong for which he is not personally responsible. That man is happy, according to the tradition, whose hour of death is like the hour of birth--that is, free of sin.<sup>20</sup>

Another interpretation is that man dies so that he will always fear the Lord.

R. Judah said: By rights the first man should have lived and endured forever (Koheleth declares that what God makes lasts forever), why then was the penalty of death imposed on him? 'God hast so made it, that men should fear before him.'<sup>21</sup>

Adam was a trustworthy man and showed fear of the Lord. However, his descendants might have acted in a different manner if they were presented with life eternal.

Adam's death is attributed not to his own sin, but to that of some of his descendants. Adam hadn't deserved death, but it was decreed, because the Holy One foresaw Nebuchadnezzar, and Hiram would pronounce themselves Gods.<sup>22</sup>

No matter what rationale might be given, the Rabbis were acutely aware that death was an ever present and unavoidable reality. Man is dust and returns to the dust.

He collected the dust of the first man from the four corners of the earth. Because, the Holy One said, if a man should come from the East to the West, or from the West to the East and his time comes to depart from the world, then the earth should not say, 'The dust of thy body is not mine, return to the place whence thou wast created. But this teaches, that in every place where a man goes or comes, and his end approaches whence he must depart from the world, thence is the dust of his body and thence it returns to the dust, as it is said, 'For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.'<sup>23</sup>

## B. The Penalties of Sin

George Foote Moore defines sin as:

Fundamentally, any departure from the divinely revealed rule of life, whether in the sphere of morals or of religious observance, whether deliberate or unwitting.<sup>24</sup>

Sin thus is a deviation from the way of God, and as the Midrash elucidates, punishable by death.

Man is in a dilemma, because he must adequately explain the reasoning behind death, yet he cannot cast any aspersions upon God. He must uphold God's dignity, by espousing the idea that if man suffers there must be just cause. If he dies a death, shorter than would be brought on by natural causes, he himself must somehow be at fault. The basic answer to this problem is that he must have transgressed the law, or, more plainly, 'sinned.'

Christianity carries this idea one step further, stating that since all men are sinners, death becomes an escape from the evil world.

Tatian, one of the early Church fathers, says:

Under the conditions of human existence death must be regarded as a good, because it delivers men from a life of steady deterioration and endless sinning... For death is not only the wages of sin, it is also the end of sin's dominion, the line that God draws to keep the arc of tragic existence from becoming an endless revolving circle of tragic existence.<sup>25</sup>

Although Judaism does not see escape from sin and death as a good, there is a major tendency to see death and suffering as the 'wages of sin.'

If a man sees that painful sufferings visit him, let him examine his conduct.<sup>26</sup>



The New Year is the time when man's deeds are weighed by God.

Three Books are opened (in heaven) on New Year, one for the thoroughly wicked, one for the thoroughly righteous and one for the intermediate...The thoroughly wicked are forthwith inscribed definitively in the book of death.<sup>27</sup>

It is sin and wickedness which cause death.

In a certain place there was once a lizard which used to injure people. They came and told R. Hanina b. Dosa. He said to them, show me its hole. They showed him its hole, and he put his heel over the hole, and the lizard came out and bit him and it died. He said to them, see, it is not the lizard that kills, it is sin that kills.<sup>28</sup>

And if a man sins, he must take the consequences, no matter how excellent his past record of actions had been.

It once happened that a certain scholar who had studied much Bible and Mishnah and had served scholars much, yet died in middle age. His wife took his Tfilim and carried them about in synagogues and schoolhouses and complained to them, my husband who read (Bible), learned (Mishneh), and served scholars much, why did he die in middle age? And no man could answer her. On one occasion, Elijah was a guest at her house, and she related the whole story. How was he to thee in the days of menstruation? He ate and drank with me (after the flow) and it did not occur to him. Said Elijah, blessed be the Omnipresent for slaying him, that he did not condone an act of the Torah (he showed us unfair favoritism because of the man's learning).<sup>29</sup>

Just as the 'earth abideth forever,' so the Bible should have stated that the 'generation' abides forever. Earth, according to tradition, was created for man and not vice versa.

But a generation, because it does not abide by the commands of the Holy One, decays, whereas the earth, which abides by the command of the Holy One (by producing fruit annually) does not decay.<sup>30</sup>

Another Midrash tries to pinpoint the place in History where Israel went astray and sinned, thus bringing death upon them.

When Israel stood at Sinai and received the Torah, the Holy One blessed be He, said to the Angel of Death: 'Thou hast power over all the heathen but not over this people, for they are my portion, and just as I live forever, so will my children be eternal! Yet, you refused (to remain loyal) and corrupted your deeds and said to the calf, 'This is thy God O Israel,' (Ex. 32:4) and for this reason, 'ye shall die like men.'<sup>31</sup> (Ps. 82:7)

Rabbi Amni said:

There is no death without sin. And since there is no righteous man in the world that does (only) good, and doesn't sin (Eccl. 7:2) therefore all men are compelled to die.<sup>32</sup>

And he also said,

There is no death without sin, nor do sufferings come without iniquity.<sup>33</sup>

Several of the Rabbis disputed Rabbi Amni's statement, and challenged the idea that one must sin to die.

The ministering angels asked the Holy One, why didst thou impose death upon Adam? Said he to them, I gave him an easy command, yet he violated it. But Moses and Aaron fulfilled the whole Torah, yet they died. 'There is one event to the righteous and to the wicked (Ezek. 18:20). Eleazar said, Moses and Aaron too died through their sin, for it is said, 'because ye believed not in me (Num. 20:12), hence, had ye believed in me, your time had not yet come to depart from the world.'<sup>34</sup>

The last sentence of the quote clearly shows that even without their sins the time for death would still come. 'Thus the refutation of R. Amni is (indeed) a refutation.'<sup>35</sup>

When a man dies, people feel compelled to find a cause



for his death. They search his past life to locate the source of the corrupt act which brought about his death. For this reason, whenever God takes a seemingly good man, in the Bible, his sins are listed, so that the populace will know that they were guilty of no other iniquity or transgression than the ones expressed.

Rabbi Eleazar of Modin said: Come and observe what concern was felt by the Holy One, blessed be He, at the death of Aaron's sons, for on every occasion when he mentions their death, he also mentions their offense. Why all this? To acquaint you with the facts, so that people might have no pretext for saying that they had been acting corruptly in secret, and that it was on account of this that they died.<sup>35</sup>

Rabbi Eleazar also said:

Come and see how dear the righteous are before the Holy One, for in every place where their deaths are mentioned, their sins are mentioned. Why? In order not to give an opening to others to say, their deeds were secret therefore they died. Thus, in four places the death of the sons of Aaron is mentioned and there they mention the sins, to make known to you that it was but for this alone. And how much the more so when the Holy One is angry with his righteous ones.<sup>37</sup>

The Midrash lists the reasons for which God brings man near to death.

For the 40 years we learn that he (God) did not rebuke them but brought them near to death, thus with Jacob, our father, he didn't rebuke his sons but brought them near to death. Our Rabbis taught, for four things God doesn't rebuke man but brings him near to death. 1) In order that he shall not rebuke him and then have to go and rebuke him again. 2) That he not see his neighbor and embarrass (wrong) him. 3) That there may be in his heart nothing against him (his neighbor). 4) That he might separate himself from one who argues, thus bringing (the other) to the hands of peace.<sup>38</sup>

In connection with sin causing death, the Rabbis discuss

the influence of the evil eye and the "Yetzer Ha Ra" which lures man into sinning.

The opportunity to sin may come from without but it is the response of the 'evil impulse' in man to it that converts it into a temptation. Yetzer Ha Ra is a tempter within--a kind of malevolent second personality. Throughout man's life, from infancy to old age, it pursues its deadly purpose, patiently biding its time. If it can bring about his fall in the first 20 years, it does it, or 40, 60 or 80--to the very day of his death. It is man's implacable enemy, no kind of sin to which it doesn't instigate men, lead them to transgress God's commandments...In Sifre, God says, My sons, I created for you the evil impulse, I created for you the law as an antiseptic.<sup>39</sup>

Kaufman Kohler emphasizes the fact that man can overcome the impulse and live.

For the rabbis, the sensuous desire of the body is a tendency toward sin (Yetzer ha-ra). The weakness of the flesh may cause a straying from the right path, but man can turn the desires of the heart toward the service of the good. Man can assert his divine power of freedom by opposing the evil inclination with the good inclination.<sup>40</sup>

In the text we see,

Reb Tanhuma said, in the name of Rabbi Eleazar, 'The Lord will take away from thee all sickness.' (Deut. 7:15) 'All sickness' means the evil eye. In the opinion of R. Eleazar, 99 people die from the (evil) eye to 1 by the hand of heaven.<sup>41</sup>

Dying by the 'hand of heaven' refers to death of a perfectly natural cause, with no contributory factors. All men must constantly ward off sin in order to live the long life, and be ever conscious of their tendency to err.

'And the living will lay it to his heart,' these are the righteous who set their death over against their heart. And why do they beat upon their heart? As though to say, All is there. (Death being the consequence of sin, the righteous beat their heart as the source of evil longing.)<sup>42</sup>

The Midrash emphasizes the fact that in most cases it is sin that causes death. However, eternal life is not suggested as the alternative. (In spite of several isolated references to Elijah's living forever). The point they are trying to stress for the reader is very simply that a good life assists a man in reaching a healthy age and dying of natural causes.

The Holy One said, if I create him of the celestial elements he will live (forever) and not die; if I create him of the terrestrial elements, he will die and not live (in a future life). Therefore I will create him of the upper and of the lower elements (his body of the earth and his soul of the heaven), if he sins he will die, while if he does not sin he will live. ('live and not die' implies a full life, with the soul returning to heaven).<sup>43</sup>

Even though man has the capacity to live a full life, the majority of men die for their sins, or it is explained, 'their sins cause them to die before their time.'<sup>44</sup>

And:

Though a plague last seven years, no one dies before his time.<sup>45</sup>

The Rabbis discuss sin in general terms as causing death, but very rarely do they point specifically to any one sin which is especially harmful. However, even though deviation from the laws is a sin, some Rabbis do keynote certain negligences.

Rabbi Yose said, a man dies through idleness only, as it is said, 'and he expired and was gathered unto his people.' (Gen. 49:33). If he were standing on the rooftop or at the seashore and fell and died, his death would be the result of idleness only.<sup>46</sup>

This seems especially harsh, however, another Midrash

cites a more pressing problem for the Rabbis.

The sons of Aaron died...because they had no children and in connection with this death is mentioned. Thus 'And Nadab and Abbahu died'...and they had no children. (Num. 3:4) Abba Hanina said, it was because they had no wives, for it is written, 'And he shall make atonement for himself, and for "his house"' (Lev. 16:6) and his house signifies his wife.

Although the Midrash doesn't explicitly state the idea that a man lives on through his children, judging from other Midrashim discussing this thought (in Ch. dealing with children) we can draw this conclusion. If a man who is alone dies, he is dead, but if he has offspring, he lives; thus, by Rabbinic logic, not having children is a sin which legitimately causes death.

## Sin and Death

1. Otzar Yisrael. J.D. Eisenstein, p. 194.
2. Judaism. George Foote Moore. Vol. I, p. 475.
3. Midrash Shmot Raba. Ch. 30, sec. 3.
4. Legends of the Jews. Vol. II, p. 259.
5. Op. cit. J.D. Eisenstein, p. 196.
6. Midrash Bereshit Raba. Ch. 20, sec. 5.
7. Pirke de Rabi Eliezer? Ch. 13
8. Midrash Bereshit Raba. Ch. 17, sec. 8
9. Midrash Davarim Raba. Ch. 9, sec. 8.
10. Midrash Koheleth Raba. Ch. 7:13 (Eng. p. 196)
11. Jewish Encyclopedia. Vol. 4 'Death.' Kaufman Kohler, p. 483a.
12. Judaism. George Foote Moore. Vol. I, p. 474.
13. Midrash Vayikra Raba. Ch. 27, sec. 4.
14. Midrash Bereshit Raba. Ch. 21, sec. 5.
15. Yalkut Reubeni. Ch. Bereshit
16. Op. cit. George Foote Moore. Vol. 1, p. 476.
17. Midrash Thilim-Shucad Tov. Solomon Buber. Ch. 92, p. 412.
18. Midrash Bamidbar Raba. Ch. 19, sec. 18.
19. Ibid. Ch. 19, sec. 18.
20. Great Jewish Ideas. 'The Nature of Man.' Levi A. Olau, p. 173.
21. Midrash Koheleth Raba. Ch. 3, sec. 2.
22. The Rabbinic Mind. Max Kadushin, p. 53; Midrash Bereshit Raba. Ch. 9, sec. 5, p. 66.
23. Pirke de' Rabbi Eliezer. Ch. 11, p. 77.
24. Op. cit., George Foote Moore. Vol. I, p. 493.
25. The Shape of Death. Jaroslav Pelikan, p. 25.

26. Berachot. 5a.
27. Rosh Hashonah. 16b.
28. Berachot. 33a.
29. Shabat. 13a.
30. Midrash Koheleth Raba. (Sec. 1:4)
31. Midrash Shmot Raba. Ch. 32, sec. 6.
32. Shabat. 55a.
33. Midrash Vayikra Raba. Ch. 37, sec. 1.
34. Shabat. 55b.
35. Ibid., 55b.
36. Midrash Vayikra Raba. Ch. 20, sec. 8.
37. Pesikta Zutra. Ch. Pinchos, p. 61, col. 1.
38. Ibid., ch. Davarim, p. 68, col. 2.
39. Judaism. George Foote Moore. Vol. I, p. 481.
40. Jewish Theology. Kaufman Kohler, p. 215.
41. Midrash Vayikra Raba. Ch. 16, sec. 8.
42. Midrash Koheleth Raba. Ch. 7, sec. 2.
43. Midrash Bereshit Raba. Ch. 8, sec. 11.
44. Otzar Yisrael. J.D. Eisenstein, p. 194.
45. Sanhedrin. 29a.
46. Avot d' Rabi Nathan. Ch. 11, p. 6.

## Chapter II

### Early Death

If death is the consequence of sin, early death is explainable; however, when the sufferers are mere children or young scholars, the rabbis reach almost an impasse in their explanations. This is a difficult problem to explain adequately and a very sensitive area of comment.

R. Samuel b. Nahman said, 99 die of heat to one by the hand of heaven. The Rabbis said, 99 die through (their own) neglect to one by the hand of heaven.<sup>1</sup>

Death is inevitable, yet an early death seems to be the individual's fault rather than an act of heaven. Since this is the case, then why do scholars die young?

It is not because they are adulterous, and not because they rob, but because they break off from studying Torah, and engage in idle conversation.<sup>2</sup>

There was a disciple in the neighborhood of R. Alexandric who died in his youth, and R. Alexandria said, had this scholar wished he could have lived! (if he had lived uprightly). R. Johanan said, perhaps he is one of those of whom it is said, Behold he putteth no trust in his holy ones. That (scholar) was one who had rebelled against his teachers!<sup>3</sup>

R. Johanan presented another point of view, that God must put his trust in his Holy Ones!

If not in his holy ones, in whom will he put his trust? One day he was going on a journey and saw a man gathering figs; the man was leaving those that were ripe and taking those that were unripe. So he said to the man, aren't the ripe ones better for picking? He replied, I need them for a journey, these will keep, but the others will not keep.<sup>4</sup>



In spite of this opinion, the general consensus throughout the Midrash expresses the idea that when a scholar dies, he must have committed some transgression.

There was once a certain man who begrudged his companion his learning. His life was cut short and he passed away.<sup>5</sup>

And:

It was said that R. Akiba had 12,000 pairs of disciples, from Gabbatha to Antipatris and all of them died at the same time because they did not treat each other with respect.<sup>6</sup>

We still are confronted with the dilemma of childhood death. The death of scholars is perplexing yet explainable within the framework of sin and neglect, however, young children have not had the opportunity to err in such magnitude as to deserve death.

Children enjoy a certain immunity from sin, on account of their undeveloped physical condition. Indeed, the death of children is mostly explained as an atonement for the sins of their parents or their grown-up contemporaries.<sup>7</sup>

In the Talmud we read:

Our Rabbis taught: Children die as a punishment for (unfulfilled) vows: this is the view of R. Eleazar b. R. Simeon. R. Judah the Nasi said: For the sin of neglect of Torah.

R. Eleazar b. R. Simeon and R. Judah the Nasi both are in agreement that the death of the young is induced by a fault on the part of the parents.

R. Tabuth tells a story about a man who brought this fate upon his children.



Once he (a man) came to a place called 'Kushta' (truth) in which no one ever told lies, and where no man ever died before his time.\* Now he married one of their women, by whom he had two sons. One day his wife was sitting and washing her hair, when a neighbor came and knocked at the door. Thinking to himself that it would not be etiquette (to tell her that his wife was washing herself) he called out, 'She is not here.' (As a punishment) his two sons died. People of the town came and questioned him, 'What is the cause of this?' He related what had happened. 'I pray thee,' they answered, 'quit this town, and do not incite Death against us.'<sup>8</sup>

And children can also be taken as an atonement for the entire generation.

R. Joseph said, When there are righteous men in the generation, the righteous are seized (by death) for the (sins of the) generation. When there are no righteous in a generation, school children are seized for the generation.<sup>8</sup>

Other Midrashin attempt to discount the idea that children are seized for the parents' sins. The children die only if they sin also and perpetuate the neglects of the parents.

It says in Deut. 24:16, 'The children shall not be put to death for the fathers. Every man shall be put to death (only) for his own sin.' But it says in Ex. 20:5 that 'God visits the sins of the fathers upon the children.' This means that He does so only if they hold to the deeds of their fathers. But does it not say: 'And they shall stumble on through the agency of the other' (Oev. 26:37)? So are they not all responsible one for the other? Only if one could have prevented the other's misdeeds and if he did not do so.<sup>10</sup>

Some children die not because of the father's sins but on the contrary, because 'God deals strictly with his loved ones.

\*As a side note, although Kushta, if there were such a place, is sometimes thought to be Luz, if there were such a place, chances are they are not one and the same. For in Luz 'no one dies, whereas in Kushta, the text states, 'no one dies before his time.'<sup>9</sup>

There was a pious pit-digger called Nehunya. His daughter fell into a pit, but was rescued. R. Hanina b. Dosa foretold her rescue, for he said, 'Would it be possible that a child of this pious man would suffer in respect of the very occupation of her father?' 'Nevertheless,' said R. Abba, 'his (Hanina's) son died of thirst,\* because... God deals particularly strictly with those near to him.'

Whatever twist of logic we might employ to explain an early death, all must agree that it is an especially lamentable occurrence.

We find that the death of youths is considered as grievous as the destruction of the Temple; for it is written, 'The Lord hath trodden in as a winepress' (the Temple) the virgin daughter of Judah, and in the same say, 'He hath called a solemn assembly against me to crush my young men. (Since both are mentioned in the same verse, they are equal tragedies.)<sup>12</sup>

And:

What is the difference between the death of young men and that of old men? R. Judah said: When a lamp goes out of itself and good for the wick, but if it does not go out of itself, it is bad for itself and bad for the wick.

R. Abbabu said, When a fig is gathered at the proper time, it is good for itself and good for the tree; but if it is gathered prematurely, it is bad for itself and bad for the tree.<sup>13</sup>

Elisha ben Abuyah went so far as to conclude that since the young die, there can be no judge or justice in the world.

(He once) observed a child climbing a tree to gather eggs from a nest in obedience of both his father's request and the cited Scriptural ordinance (Deut. 22:6), saw the youngster fall and die. The shock of the death of such an innocent who dutifully followed the prescriptions of the Torah led this 2nd Century Rabbi to the painful conclusion 'there is no judge and no justice.'<sup>14</sup>

(See Kiddoshin 396 and Hullin 142a)

\*Ta'anit 24b points out Hannina's prowess as a rainmaker.

Another example also illustrates that it is possible to die young without sinning, but presents a new idea, in that the extra years are allotted to another 'worthy' and extends his lifetime.

R. Joseph asked, is there anyone who passes away before one's (allotted) time? Yes, as in the story by R. Bibi b. Abaye who was frequently visited by the Angel of Death. (Once) the latter said to his messenger, 'Go, bring me Miriam, the women's hairdresser.' He went and brought him Miriam, the nurse. Said he to him, I told thee Miriam the women's hairdresser. He answered, If so I will take her back. Said he to him, Since thou hast brought her, let her be added (to the dead). R. Bibi b. Abaye said to him, have ye permission to act thus? He answered him, is it not written, 'But there is that is swept away without judgment?...He then asked him, but after all, what do you do with her years? (the remaining years which she should have continued to live). He replied, if there be a Rabbinic scholar, who over- looks his hurt, I shall give them to him in her stead. 15

Another line of thinking proposes the idea that death of the young is not necessarily a tragedy, but a free choice of God, and possibly even for the best. We are here on earth by the will of God, and thus he has the choice to request our souls whenever he pleases.

In hot weather, a rabbi delivered his discourse to his disciples under the shade of a fig tree. They noticed that each morning the owner would pick his ripened figs. 'Perhaps he fears that we will pick his fruit,' they thought and they moved to another place. The owner begged them to return. Believing that they had moved because his presence annoyed them, he resolved not to pick the fruit. In the evening they beheld the figs dropping from the tree, spoiled by the heat of the sun. The disciples then appreciated why it was necessary for the owner to pick them in the morning.

The rabbi said, The owner of the fig knows when his fruit should be picked, lest it be spoiled. Thus does God know when to summon His righteous children before they are spoiled. This is the reason why many good and gracious persons are sometimes called by God in their early manhood. 16

When Rabbi Bun died, Rabbi Zeira eulogized as follows: 'To what is the case of Rabbi Bun like? To a king who has hired workmen for his garden, and he observes that one of them works expertly and efficiently. He calls him over and walks with him about the garden. In the evening when the king pays his workmen, he gives to the capable man the same pay as to the others. The latter protest to the king, "But he worked only two hours and we have worked for 8." "True," answered the king, "but he has accomplished more in two hours than you in 8." ...Rabbi Bun had labored in the Torah during his 28 years more than another fine student in 100 years. Therefore God summoned him to walk with Him. May "the sleep of the diligent worker be sweet."' (Eccle. 5:11)<sup>17</sup>

Several Midrashim see children as a "loan" from God, and death as safely returning the deposit.

R. Meir sat discoursing on a Sabbath afternoon in the House of Study. While he was there, his two sons died. What did their mother do? She laid them on the bed, and spread a linen cloth over them. R. Meir came home and said to her, 'Where are my sons?' She replied, 'They went to the House of Study.' He said, 'I did not see them there...' Then she said, 'early today a man came here and gave me something to keep for him, now he has come back to ask for it again. Shall we return it to him or not?' He replied, 'He who has received something on deposit must surely return it to its owner.' She replied, 'Without your knowledge I would not return it.' Then she took him by the hand, and brought him up to the bed, and took away the cloth, and he saw his sons lying dead upon the bed. He began to weep... Then his wife said to him, 'Did you not say to me that one must return a deposit to its owner? Does it not say, "The Lord gave, the Lord took, blessed be the name of the Lord"?' (Job 1:21) So she comforted him and quieted his mind.<sup>18</sup>

And:

when the son of Rabbi Johanan b. Zakkai died his students entered to comfort him. Rabbi Eliezer entered, sat before him and said, Rabi, I desire to say one thing to you. He said to him, 'Speak.' He said, 'Adam had a son and he died and he received comfort... Also you should be comforted. He said to him, 'Is it not enough that I am sorry for myself, but you remind me (also) of the troubles of Adam...?'

R. Eleazar ben Arach entered...He said, I shall tell you a parable. What is the situation like? To a man that was given a deposit by the king. All day he would weep and cry, saying, 'Oh my, when will I get back this deposit safely. Also you, Rabbi, you had a son, who studied Torah, Prophets and the Writings, Mishnah, Law and Aggadah, and he departed from the world sinless. And now you should receive comfort for you return the loan safely. Rabbi Johanan said to him, Eleazar, my son, you have comforted me.<sup>19</sup>

One Midrash types the different ages of death.

If one dies under 50 years old, that is death by (קצץ) (cutting off) at 60, that is by the hand of heaven, at 70 it is the death of the hoary head, at 80 it is the death of a vigorous man.<sup>20</sup>

The early death in the case of sinners is understandable within the Rabbinic context. However, according to traditional belief, a good man should live long and happily. In spite of the theology expressed, the Rabbis were still very much aware of the uncertainty surrounding the day of one's death.

Moses and Aaron once walked along with Nadab and Abihu behind them. Then Nadab said to Abihu, 'Oh, that these old men might die so that you and I should be the leaders of our generation. But the Holy One said to them, 'We shall see who will bury whom.' Thus men say, many an old camel is laden with the hides of younger ones.<sup>21</sup>

## Chapter II

### Early Death

1. Midrash Vayikra Raba. Ch. 16, sec. 8.
2. Avot di Rabbi Nathan. Ch. 26, p. 112.
3. Hagigah. 5a.
4. Ibid.
5. Avot di' Rabbi Nathan. Ch. 16, p. 82.
6. Yebamoth. 62b.
7. Aspects of Rabbinic Theology. Solomon Schechter, p. 254.
8. Sanhedrin. 97a.
9. Shabat. 336
10. Sanhedrin. 276.
11. Yebamoth. 121b.
12. Midrash Koheleth Raba. Ch. 1, sec. 44.
13. Midrash Bereshit Raba. Ch. 62, sec. 2.; Midrash Shir Ha Shirim, Ch. 6, sec. 2.
14. Great Jewish Ideas. 'Suffering and Evil.' Harold M. Schulweiss, p. 197.
15. Hagigah, p. 17a.
16. A Treasury of Comfort. Sidney Greenberg, p. 154. From Midrash Shir Ha Shirim, Ch. 6, sec. 2, Midrash Bereshit Raba, Ch. 62, sec. 2.
17. Ibid., p. 158; also, Midrash Shir Ha Shirim, Ch. 1, sec. 2.
18. Midrash, Prov. 31:10.
19. Sefer Ha Agadah. H.N. Bialik
20. Moed Katan. 28a.
21. Sanhedrin. 52a.



## CHAPTER III

## The Angel of Death

All of the sources confirm the fact that the Angel of Death is incapable of acting independently of a decree from God, and yet even with this secondary status he still wields strong influence over the minds and imaginations of the early Rabbis.

The Angel of Death had a clearly defined role, and once he undertook his mission as the agent of God, man was helpless in any effort to revoke this decree.

Although there are cases cited where certain righteous men have escaped the 'sword' of the Angel of Death temporarily, postponement is a very rare gift.

The Angel of Death is mentioned frequently in the Midrash and the Talmud, yet some modern writers are so skeptical that our ancestors could have believed in him, that they have attempted to reinterpret the materials, sifting out the thoughts which they find offensive.

The writers who spoke of an arch adversary or Satan, conceivably did not do so because they believed in the existence of such a power, but in speaking of the forces that make for sin, they almost inevitably used familiar terms of current phraseology.

He later draws another parallel which equates the Angel of Death, Satan, and Evil Desire with an impulse within the nature of man.

According to some ideas death is a fallen angel and identical with the Serpent in Eden. His name is Sammael, "the drug of God," a reference to the 'gall' on his

sword (P ) Satan, the Angel of Death, and Evil Desire, are one and the same. In other words, it is ignoble impulse alone that tempts and destroys.<sup>2</sup>

George Foote Moore also pointed out the relationship between these terms in the Rabbinic literature.

Personified as the tempter, evil impulse may be identified with Satan, and since by their arts they cause the death of the sinner, they can by a further association become the angel of death...It is nothing strange, therefore, that in parallel passages Satan and evil impulse interchange.<sup>3</sup>

The Talmud itself is aware of this insight, and one passage states, "Satan, Yetzer and the Angel of Death are one."<sup>4</sup>

He comes down, leads astray, goes up and accuses; then comes down and takes away the soul.<sup>5</sup>

Or we find the Yetzer acting out the same role as the Angel of Death:

He accustoms man to sin and kills him.<sup>6</sup>

The Angel of Death became a frightening figure to the men living in these early centuries, and the literature reflects this great fear both in the awe with which they discuss him and the descriptions of his person which appear throughout the texts.

The popular imagination, having established an extensive empire of evil spirits, it followed as a matter of course that the Angel of Death who impersonated the 'summum malum' was exalted to the position of sovereign and endowed with supreme power.<sup>7</sup>

It is said of the Angel of Death, that he is full of eyes. When a sick person is about to depart, he stands above his head-pillow with his sword drawn out in his hand, and a drop of gall hanging on it. As the sick person beholds it, he trembles and opens his mouth (in fright). He then drops it into his mouth. It is from this that he



dies, from this that (the corpse) deteriorates, from this that his face becomes greenish.<sup>8</sup>

In other sections, the Angel of Death is described as being "all eyes," however, if necessary he can take on disguises in order to deceive men into yielding their souls. For example, in one place he appears as a beggar seeking alms (Moed Katan, 23a).

Rabbinic literature also refers to Satan as the head of an army of six demons and destroyers (his lieutenants). These are Keref (Indignation), Af (Anger), Hemah (Wrath), Mashhith (Destroyer), Meshabber (Breaker) and Mekaleh (Annihilator).<sup>9</sup> Once again this army seems to link the Evil Yetzer or the destructive impulses of man with Satan.

Among this array of demons and evil spirits a constantly recurring name is Sammael. He is sometimes referred to as the greatest prince in heaven, or the Chief of all the Satans.

Sammael, the wicked angel, the chief of all the accusing angels, was awaiting the death of Moses every hour, saying, 'When will the time or the moment arise for Moses to die, so that I may descend and take away his soul from him?' There is no-one among the accusing angels so wicked as Sammael. (לשון אשם ופריה)<sup>10</sup>

Sammael is described as a twelve-winged creature who took his band of creatures and descended to earth immediately after the Lord had created the world and its inhabitants. He then searched out the serpent, who had a propensity to do evil. The serpent's appearance was like the form of a camel and Sammael mounted its back and began to ride. Then together they proceeded to induce Eve to commit the first sin.<sup>11</sup>

Sammael-Satan is both seducer and destroyer. He it is who is to be held responsible for having brought death into the world, and ever since that time he has been the arch-adversary of man, tempting him to sin, and subsequently denouncing him before God. He sprang to earth on the back of the serpent, appearing in the form of a camel, and coming to Eve he enticed her to eat of the fruit of the Tree of Life.<sup>12</sup>

In another Midrash Sammael is given awesome characteristics.

In the seventh heaven was an angel different in appearance from all the others and of frightful mien. His height was so great, it would have taken 500 years to cover a distance equal to it, and from the crown of his head to the soles of his feet he was studded with glaring eyes at the sight of which the beholder fell prostrate in awe. This one, is Sammael, who takes the soul away from man.<sup>13</sup>

A.P. Bender attempted to find the derivation of the name Sammael. He suggests that it would be a compound form of "Sam" and "El" (translated as supreme poison). Another possibility is that the name is derived from the Hebrew word 'Samoul' (translated as 'left'), representing the evil inclination which turns man away from the right path. If this interpretation is correct, it would be identical with the supposed root of Satan, or 'Satah'--also meaning 'to turn away.'

He also posits the interpretation that the root is 'Sama' (translated 'blind'). Sammael is the element in man that makes him blind, and prevents him from seeing the truth.<sup>14</sup>

One major limitation of the role of the Angel of Death is that he can stay only in the place and at the time determined by God.

The destroying angel is not a demon, but a messenger of the divine will.<sup>15</sup>

George Foote Moore makes the same observation and writes,

An angel who sooner or later visits every man is the Angel of Death, who consequently, filled a larger place in men's thoughts than the rest, and is the subject of many stories. He comes only on an order from God, and executes his commission impartially on the righteous and the wicked, no plea or remonstrance avails.<sup>16</sup>

The Angel of Death fulfills God's decree, and although men may attempt to revoke the decision or even try to escape, God will intercede and support his Angel.

When the time arrives for man to quit this world, the angel appears and asks him, do you recognize me? Yes, but why dost thou come to me today, and thou didst come on no other day? 'To take thee from the world, for the time of thy departure has arrived.' Then man falls to weeping, and his voice penetrates to all ends of the world, yet no creature hears his voice...But the angel reminds him, did I not tell thee that thou wert formed against thy will, and thou wouldst be born against thy will, and against thy will thou wouldst die?<sup>17</sup>

In the above quotation, the Angel's statement is sufficient to remind man of his role, but in the case of Moses, God intercedes.

And all the congregation saw that Aaron had died, but when Moses and Eleazar came down from the mountain, they gathered all the congregation and asked them, 'Where is Aaron?' And they answered him: 'Dead.' They said to them (Moses and Eleazar), 'How is the Angel of Death able to attack (man) for "he stood and the Angel of Death was stayed." As it is written, "he stood between the dead and the living and the plague was stayed." (Num. 17:13) If you understand it, good, and if not we explain it to you. At that time Moses stood in prayer and said, Master of the World, bring me forth from suspicion (doubt). Immediately the Holy One opened a cave and showed them, as it is written. "And the people saw that Aaron had died." (Num. 20:29)<sup>18</sup>

And the story of Joshua ben Levi is a classic example of God's demanding that all mortals die:

When R. Joshua b. Levi was about to die, the Angel of Death was instructed to go. When he came, the Rabbi said, 'Show me my place' (in Paradise). 'Very well,' he replied. 'Give me your knife,' the Rabbi demanded, (since otherwise) 'you may frighten me on the way.' He gave it to him. On arriving there he lifted him up and showed him (his place). The latter jumped, and dropped on the other side of the wall (of paradise). He seized him by the corner of his cloak, but the Rabbi exclaimed, 'I will not go back.' 'Return my knife,' he said to him, but the Rabbi would not return it. A 'bat kol' went forth and said to him, 'Return the thing to him, for it is required for the mortals' (to die).<sup>19</sup>

When the Angel of Death comes, he finds the man assigned and kills him, for in his presence all men become equal.

What difference does one place or another make to the Angel of Death?<sup>20</sup>

And we also find:

Raba while seated at the bedside of R. Nahman saw him sinking into slumber (death). Said he to Raba, 'Tell him (the Angel of Death), Sir, not to torment me.' Said Raba, 'Are you, Sir, not a man esteemed?' (to make your appeal directly). Said R. Nahman to him, 'Who is esteemed, who is regarded, who is distinguished, (before the Angel of Death)?'<sup>21</sup>

Once the Angel of Death makes his appearance, man has no alternative but to die. No man has the ability to avoid him, or to postpone his death to a later and more convenient time.

No man has the power to say (to the Angel of Death) wait for me until I have made up my accounts or until I have set my house in order and then I will come.<sup>22a</sup>

The Angel of Death does not say, seeing that this man is king we will grant him one or two days more. On that day there is no respecting of persons. The proof is this: Throughout his life David is referred to as king... When, however, he was approaching death, Scripture no longer mentions his kingship. Whence this? For it is

said, "Now the days of David drew nigh that he should die." (I Kings 2:1) No one can appeal against him (the Angel of Death), no one can lodge a protest against him. So, after all the greatness which Moses had enjoyed, when the day of his death came, he could not hold it back. Forthwith God said to him, "Behold, the days approach that thou must die." (Deut. 31:14)22b

Another Midrash delves more deeply into Moses' attempt to drive away the Angel of Death, and gives us a running dialogue between them.

The Angel of Death came to Moses and said to him, 'God has sent me to you for you are to depart this life today.' Moses replied, 'Go away hence, for I desire to praise God.' As it is written, "I shall not die but live, and declare the works of the Lord." (Ps. 118:17) Thereupon the Angel of Death said to him, 'Moses, why do you give yourself airs? There are sufficient things on the earth to praise him....He then came a second time. What did Moses do? He pronounced over him the Ineffable Name and he fled...When he came to him a third time, Moses said, "Seeing that this is from God, I must now resign myself to God's will, as it is said, "The Rock, His work is perfect." (Deut. 32:4)23

And as the last example of man's helplessness before the Angel of Death, we read,

"There is no man that hath power over the wind." (Eccle. 8:8) The Rabbis say, a man has no power over the wind of the Angel of Death to make him withhold it from him... "Neither hath he power over the day of his death." A man cannot say to the Angel of Death, 'Wait for me until I make up my accounts and then I will come.'24

There is an exception to the general rule that man cannot postpone his death. Several Midrashim illustrate the fact that while a man is studying, the Angel of Death has no power over him. The Angel must then devise some artifice to lure him away from his studies momentarily so he can snatch his life away.

On the day when David's soul was to be at rest, the Angel of Death stood before him but could not prevail against him, because learning did not cease from his mouth. 'What shall I do to him?' he said. Now there was a garden before his house, so the Angel of Death went to, ascended, and sat in the trees. David went out to see, but as he was ascending the ladder, it broke under him. Thereupon he became silent (from his studies) and his soul had repose.<sup>25</sup>

A similar story is told about R. Hisda.

He was sitting and rehearsing his studies in the schoolhouse and the Angel of Death could not approach him, as his mouth would not cease rehearsing. He perched upon a cedar of the schoolhouse and as the cedar cracked under him, R. Hisda paused and the angel overpowered him.<sup>26</sup>

And:

A messenger was sent for Rabbah b. Nahmani but the Angel of Death could not approach him, because he did not interrupt his studies. In the meantime, a wind blew and caused a rustling in the bushes, which he imagined to be a troop of soldiers. 'Let me die,' he exclaimed, 'rather than be delivered into the hands of the state.' As he was dying a Heavenly voice cried out, 'Happy art thou, O Rabbah b. Nahmani, whose body is pure, and whose soul has departed in purity.'<sup>27</sup>

In the previous examples the Angel of Death made use of distractions in order to take the subjects' minds off their studying. However, in the case of R. Hiyyah, the Angel of Death resorted to impersonation of a beggar in order to lure him away from his books.

As for R. Hiyyah, he (the Angel of Death) could not gain access to him. So one day he adopted the guise of a poor man and came and rapped at the gate, saying, 'Bring me out some bread.' They (others) brought out some bread to him. Said he then to R. Hiyyah, 'Don't you, sir, treat the poor kindly?' 'Why not, sir, (you also) treat kindly this man (standing outside)?' He (R. Hiyyah) opened the door to him, whereupon, showing him a fiery rod, he made him yield his soul.<sup>28</sup>



Confusion arises with regard to the relationship between the Angel of Death and the righteous people who follow the Torah. If the Torah teaches life how can the Angel of Death hold equal sway over these people and the heathens?

One writer attempts to handle this problem by stressing sin as the cause of death.

The Holy One said, Should the Angel of Death come before me saying, 'Wherefore then have I been created?' I will reply, I have created thee as the ruling power over the heathen nations, but not over my people, for as soon as Israel accepted the Torah, God adorned them with His own glorious splendor. R. Simeon b. Yohai said, He gave them weapons on which was engraved the Ineffable Name, and as long as this sword was in their possession, the Angel of Death could exercise no power over them. But when they sinned, God deprived them of these good things.<sup>29</sup>

Another explanation of why death occurs even though we have the Torah, is that the decree of death preceded the gift at Sinai. However, words of Torah do postpone the Angel of Death.<sup>30</sup> And:

When Israel stood before Mount Sinai and said, "We will do and obey" (Ex. 24:7), at that moment God called to the Angel of Death and said to him, Although I have appointed thee as executioner with universal sway over my creatures, thou hast no power over this people.<sup>31</sup>

Another Midrash more explicitly limits the power of the Angel of Death to the wicked and saves the righteous.

The Holy One said to Gabriel, Go and set a Taw (ט) of ink upon the foreheads of the righteous, that the destroying angel may have no power over them, and a taw of blood upon the foreheads of the wicked that the destroying angel may have power over them. (ט = people who fulfill Torah, כ to ט)<sup>32</sup>



These verses speak of righteous people in general. However there is another story which deals specifically with an individual who converses with the Angel of Death.

He asked him (the Angel of Death) who are you? And the latter answered, I am God's messenger. He asked him, Why are you looking strange? He replied, on account of the talk of human beings who say, "This and that we will do, and yet not one of them knows when he will be summoned to die... R. Simeon said to him, show me my end. He replied, Neither over you nor over the likes of you have I any dominion. Often God finds delight in your good deeds and grants you additional life. As it is said, "The fear of the Lord prolongeth days." (Prov. 10:27)<sup>33</sup>

Another case where the Angel of Death leaves emptyhanded is found in a Midrash on the Akedah.

While Isaac was lying on the altar bound as a sacrifice, the Angel of Death took his stand opposite him, and said, as soon as Abraham lays his hands on Isaac and slays him, I shall take his--Isaac's--soul. But when he saw that all the angels were pleading for Isaac's life, he remarked, 'This man has no enemy and I will therefore do him no harm.'<sup>34</sup>

As a general statement it can be said that there is a trend of thought which feels that benevolent acts ward off the Angel of Death, whereas if one doesn't perform righteous acts, he makes his appearance with his sword drawn.

David's sins were too great, and his atonement was not complete (commentary from 1979), therefore, the angel took his sword, and wiped it in David's talls, and David saw his sword (of the Angel of Death). All of his limbs trembled until the day of his death. As it says, and David wasn't able to go before him, to explain it to God, because of the flow of blood, from the sword of the Lord's angel.<sup>35</sup>

Throughout the Talmud one gets the impression that the 4th century Rabbis had a familiar and intimate relationship with the Angel of Death. R. Simeon's conversation with him while walking on the road is one example. However, there are numerous other stories which relate this closeness.

R. Bibi b. Abaye was frequently visited by the Angel of Death.<sup>36</sup>

Earlier we cited a case where Raba was sitting at the bedside of R. Nahman and discussing his good relationship with the Angel of Death, and another also reveals this intimacy.

R. Seorim, Raba's brother, while sitting at Raba's bedside, saw him going into sleep (dying). When he said to his brother, 'Do tell him (the Angel of Death) not to torment me,' R. Seorim replied, 'Are you, Sir, not his intimate friend?' Said Raba, since my mazzal (destiny) has been delivered (to him) he takes no heed of me.<sup>37</sup>

Another more elaborate example of the Angel of Death paying a visit is found when R. Phinehas makes arrangements to dine with Rabbi.

When he arrived, he happened to enter by a gate near which were some white mules. At this, he exclaimed, 'The Angel of Death is in this house. Shall I then dine here?' When Rabbi heard of this, he went out to meet him. 'I shall sell the mules,' said Rabbi. R. Phinehas replied, 'Thou shalt not put a stumbling block before the blind' (Lev. 19:14)... 'I shall hamstring them.' 'You would be causing suffering to the animals...' Rabbi was thus pressing him persistently when there rose up a mountain between them. Then Rabbi wept and said, 'If this is (the power of the righteous) in their lifetime, how great must it be after their death.'<sup>38</sup>

The Angel of Death is, according to Midrashic belief, barred from the city of Luz. For some reason, men in this

city are not susceptible to the Angel's 'sword' and only die when they tire of life and walk outside the city limits.

Even the Angel of Death has no permission to pass through it, but when the old men there become tired of life, they go outside the wall and then die.<sup>39</sup>

All of the references to the Angel of Death have not been exhausted in this chapter, as many of them are embedded in another major theme of my research (e.g., Decree of God). The city Luz also appears in other sections (as well as the city of Kushta--'truth') in relation to the Angel of Death.

The Angel of Death in Rabbinic literature serves the necessary function of reclaiming the soul of man. He can only act when God gives the order, but he can have an intimate relationship with certain Rabbis.

Whether men of this period actually believed in the Angel of Death as a reality, or whether he was limited to folklore, or, as Morris Joseph states, "an example of current" phraseology is a difficult question to answer. But one thing is certain. The Angel of Death does come alive for us in the pages of the Talmud, and through him as a center point, many of the problems of man and the contradictions revolving around death are discussed and resolved. For example, the righteous must die as well as the wicked, although sometimes postponement is granted. The Torah cannot keep man alive forever because the decree of death preceded Sinai, and also,

In line with Jewish belief that death constitutes a necessary part of creation, the Angel of Death is said to have been created on the first day, long before the fall (death preceding original sin).<sup>41</sup>

## Angel of Death

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#### CHAPTER IV

##### The Death of the Righteous

The suffering and death of the wicked is easily explained within the Midrashic framework, but those that uphold God's Torah, study fervently, and perform good deeds throughout their lives, should, according to traditional belief and logic, live long, happy lives, or even live forever. The Rabbis had a difficult task in attempting to reconcile the death of the righteous.

Our Rabbis were acutely aware of the fact that no matter how soothing and comforting a set of beliefs might be, they must always take into account the reality which surrounds them, and certainly it appeared that the righteous were as susceptible to death as the wicked.

A variety of arguments are presented by the Rabbis in an attempt to explain the death of the good man, ranging from their dying to atone for others, to requesting death by their own mouths.

Another point of view is that death has been decreed upon all men by God. (This thought will be discussed more fully in another chapter.)

One account attempts to smooth over the experience of death and give continued power to the righteous even after their departure.

R. Hanina ben Hama asserted, 'The righteous are more powerful after death than in life, for it is written, "And it came to pass as they were burying a man, that behold they spied a band, and they cast the man into



the sepulchre of Elisha; and as soon as the man touched the bones of Elisha, he revived and stood up on his feet.' (II Kings 13:21)

The writer interprets this quotation as meaning that in his lifetime Elisha had to exert himself both by action and prayer in order to raise the dead, while after his death his mere touch revived a dead man. This proves, according to the Rabbinic logic, that the righteous are greater and more effective after death than in life.

There is a trend of thought running throughout the Midrash, that the reward of the righteous is concealed from them until after their death. It might appear to the average man that the wicked prosper as much as the good men, but the Rabbis discount this idea and show that the righteous do receive their deserved reward. The scene of fulfillment is transferred to heaven and the Rabbis draw up contrasts between the wicked and the righteous when at the end of life they present themselves to their creator.

The Holy One does not confer his name upon the righteous in their lifetime, but after their death.<sup>2</sup>

And:

When the righteous die, their days cease and they are alive....Even in their deaths they are exalted by the Holy One.<sup>3</sup>

A contrast is also drawn between them in a more descriptive fashion, by citing a reference to the ministering angels in heaven receiving their new guests.



R. Eleazar said, when a righteous man departs from the world he is welcomed by three companies of ministering angels. One exclaims, 'Come into peace,' the other exclaims, 'He who walks in his uprightness,' while the third exclaims, 'He shall enter into peace; they shall rest on their beds.'

When a wicked man perishes from the world he is met by three groups of angels of destruction. One announces, 'There is no peace, saith the Lord, unto the wicked,' the other tells him, 'He shall lie down in sorrow,' while the third tells him, 'Go down and be thou laid with the uncircumcized.'<sup>4</sup>

The righteous do not have to experience death before being notified of their reward. According to some of the Rabbis, even before their actual death, the Holy One informs them of the treasures stored up for the future. This expectation probably served very beneficially in alleviating the fear of death; for the righteous wouldn't have to wait anxiously anticipating their fate. They knew that at the last moment of life or even before, they could expect the joys of being confronted by God himself and told the good news.

The entire reward of the righteous is kept ready for them for the Hereafter and the Holy One shows them while yet in this world the reward he is to give them in the future, their souls are satisfied and they fall asleep (die).<sup>5</sup>

A comment on the same theme interprets the Biblical verse, "strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laugheth at the time to come." (Prov. 31:25)

What is the meaning of 'at the time to come'? That all the reward of the righteous awaits them in the world to come, whence, 'she laugheth at the time to come' (knowing the reward in store for her). The story is told that when R. Abbahu was about to depart from this life, he beheld all the good things that were stored up for him in heaven, whereat he rejoiced and said, 'All these for Abbahu!'<sup>6</sup>

And:

Ben Azzai explained, "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints." (Ps. 116:15) When does God show the righteous all the precious things he has stored up for them? Just before their death, as it says, 'When the saints are about to die.' (This verse is not a Biblical quote but a Midrashic interpretation of the verse.) And when they see (the reward) they rejoice. Hence, 'And she laugheth at the time to come.'

Abbahu, when he learns of the reward in store for him, informs his disciples of the occurrence. He gives them a charge to continued study, and tries to erase any doubts from their minds that learning and study might be in vain.

You find that in the hour of death, God shows to those who study the law the reward they will receive. It happened that when R. Abbahu was passing out of this world, God showed him 13 rivers of balm, and as his death approached, he began to say to his disciples, 'Happy are you who busy yourselves with the Law.' They said, 'Our master, what dost thou see' (that thou sayest this). He told them of the rivers of balm, These has God given me, and I had thought I had labored in vain, for nothing, and vainly had I wasted my strength, but truly my judgment is with the Lord, and my reward with my God.

Aaron and Moses, favorites in God's eyes throughout the Midrashic lore, are informed of their deaths even earlier than other men. Since they are such honored men, they are given time to settle their accounts and "bequeath their crowns to their children."

'Aaron shall be gathered' (Num. 20:24). This teaches that the righteous are informed of the day of their death, so that they shall bequeath their crowns to their children... Why was Moses told 'Aaron shall be gathered'? This may be illustrated by the parable of a king who had two financial officers. These did nothing without the king's knowledge. One of them had a fine field on the king's estate, and the king required it. The king

said, 'Although it is my domain, I will not take it away before informing them. So also said the Holy One, blessed be He; These two old men, both righteous, never did anything without my knowledge. Now therefore, when I am about to take them away, I must not do so before letting them know.<sup>9</sup>

Simeon the Righteous discovers the year of his death by a method of induction. He doesn't experience contact with the Holy One directly, as in the other examples, but intuitively senses his death on the Day of Atonement.

In the year in which Simeon the Righteous died, he foretold them (the Rabbis) that he would die. They said, Whence do you know that? He replied, On every Day of Atonement an old man, dressed in white, wrapped in white, would join me, entering (the Holy of Holies) and leaving with me, but today I was joined by an old man dressed in black, wrapped in black, who entered, but did not leave with me.<sup>10</sup>

When the righteous man dies he is brought face to face with the Holy One in order to receive his reward. Although there are limited references to the righteous confronting the Holy One per se, this theme is discussed extensively under the section dealing with judgment after death.

When a righteous man departs from the world, the ministering angels say to the Holy One, Sovereign of the Universe, the righteous man So and So is coming, and He answers them, Let the righteous man come, go forth to meet him.<sup>11</sup>

Another account describes the Holy One's actions in choosing the righteous ones, by combining and interpreting a string of Biblical quotes.

"My love is gone down to his garden, to the bed of spices," etc.... "My beloved refers to the Holy One,

blessed be He, "To his garden" refers to the world, "to the bed of spices" indicates Israel, "To feed in the gardens" indicates synagogues and houses of study, "and to gather lilies," to take away the righteous in Israel.<sup>12</sup>

The Midrash also points out that the spirits of the righteous return to the Lord, whereas the spirits of the wicked remain in "a courtyard of the dead."

Once the angel draws the soul out of a man's body, he dies right away, but his spirit comes out and sits on the tip of the nose until the body begins to decay. As decay sets in, the spirit cries to the Holy One, where am I to be taken? Immediately Dumah takes the spirit to the courtyard of the dead, to join the other spirits. If the man was righteous, he passes from dwelling place to dwelling place, until he beholds the face of the Presence.<sup>13</sup>

In the above quotation Dumah is alluded to as a messenger of God.

In front of the courtyard runs a brook, and beyond the brook lies an open field. Every day (twilight) Dumah lets the spirits out, and they eat in the open field, and drink at the brook. Why is the guardian of the spirits called Dumah? Because he guards 'the silent,' who eat but do not speak.<sup>13</sup>

In the same section, Dumah is also referred to as being the name of a courtyard for the spirits of the dead (Hazar-maveth).<sup>14</sup>

When drawing a contrast between the wicked and the righteous, the Midrash makes it very clear that each man began life with equal opportunity. The Lord gives each man a clean spirit and he should strive to return it at the end of life equally pure. (This idea is discussed also under good

deeds and the soul of man.)

Our rabbis taught, "And the dust return to the earth as it was, and the spirit return unto God who gave it! Render it back to him as he gave it to thee, in purity, so do thou (return it) in purity. This may be compared to a mortal king who distributed royal apparel to his servants. The wise among them folded it up and laid it away in a chest, whereas the fools among them went and did their work in them. After a time the king demanded his garments. The wise among them returned them to him immaculate, (but) the fools among them returned them soiled. The king was pleased with the wise but angry with the fools. Of the wise, he said, 'Let my robes be placed in my treasury and they can go home in peace,' while of the fools he said, 'Let my robes be given to the fuller, let them be confined in prison.' Thus too with the Holy One, Blessed be he, concerning the bodies of the righteous he says, 'He entereth into peace, they rest in their beds,' (Isa. 52:2)...concerning the bodies of the wicked, He says, 'There is no peace, saith the Lord, unto the wicked.' (Isa. 53:22)<sup>15</sup>

God welcomes the righteous after they die and have successfully completed their journey through life. However, not only does the Lord give them his glory, but the angels too come forward as a reception committee.

When a righteous man departs from the world, three groups of ministering angels welcome him with the greeting of peace. The first says, 'Let him enter into peace,' the second, 'Let them rest in their beds,' and the third, 'Each one that walketh in his uprightness.' Nor is it sufficient reward for the righteous that their death is affected by (God's) glory, as it says, 'The glory of God shall gather thee in' (Isa. 58:8), but the angels eulogize them with expressions of peace.<sup>16</sup>

Man is not alone when he grieves over the death of the righteous. Even in Heaven, God feels the loss of mankind and cannot restrain his tears. The deaths of these select groups of men is one of the most grievous things that can happen before the Holy One.

We find that the demise of the righteous is more grievous before the Holy One, blessed be he, than the 98 curses mentioned in Deuteronomy and the destruction of the Temple. In connection with the curses it is written, 'Then the Lord will make thy plagues wonderful,' (Deut. 28:59) and in connection with the Temple it is written, 'Therefore is she come down wonderfully.' But in connection with the demise of the righteous it is written, 'Therefore behold, I will again do a marvelous work among the people, even a marvelous work and a wonder.' (Isa. 29:14)<sup>17</sup>

And:

R. Judan asked, for what reason was the death of Aaron recorded in close proximity to the breaking of the tablets? Simply this, to teach that Aaron's death was as grievous to the Holy One, Blessed be he, as the breaking of the tablets.<sup>18</sup>

The loss of the righteous man was so significant to the community that people felt they were irreplaceable, and at the same time Midrashim developed which stressed that they are replaced. Although these seem to be contradictory points of view, actually they are directing themselves to the same problem. The righteous were the strength of the group and their loss was felt by everyone; thus they mourn the loss (no replacement) and at the same time bolster hope (they are replaced).

As the palm tree, if uprooted, cannot be replaced by one equally good, so the righteous cannot be replaced when they die. As it is said, 'But wisdom, where shall it be found? And where is the place of understanding?' (Job 28:12)<sup>19</sup>

A scholar was the most cherished member of the community and his loss was most heavily felt.

Our rabbis taught, if a man and his father and his teacher were in captivity, he takes precedence over his teacher, and his teacher takes precedence over his father...A scholar takes precedence over a king of Israel, for if a scholar dies, there is none to replace



him, while if a king of Israel dies, all Israel are eligible for kingship.<sup>20</sup>

The righteous are so dedicated that even in death the needs of the community are their foremost concern.

Moses said to the Lord, come and see the praises of the righteous, for when they depart from the world they neglect their own needs and are busy with the needs of the congregation (group).<sup>21</sup>

The righteous and great ones of each generation seem to be an exclusive society limited in membership. They very rarely overlap according to the Midrash, but when each dies, God sees to it that another replaces him. The great men of each generation must die in order to make room for their successors. Probably another consideration not directly expressed in the Midrash is that great men need the situation that makes them great, and only when the predecessor dies is there an opportunity for someone else to rise to the occasion.

When R. Akiba died, Rabbi was born, when Rabbi died, Rab Judah was born, when Rab Judah died, Raba was born, when Raba died, R. Ashi was born.

This teaches that a righteous man does not depart from the world until (another) righteous man like himself is created, as it is said, 'the sun riseth, and the sun goeth down.' (Eccle. 1:5)<sup>22</sup>

R. Berekiah interprets the Biblical verse "the sun also riseth" in a similar manner. He said,

Do we not know that the sun riseth and sets. What it means, however, is that before the sun of one righteous man sets, He causes the sun of another righteous man to rise. On that day that R. Akiba died, Rabbi (Judah Ha Nasi) was born.<sup>23</sup>

And we also find a reference to the heroes of Biblical



# Jewish history.

Had Abraham gone on living, how could Isaac have come into authority? And Jacob? And Moses?...and David and Solomon?<sup>24</sup>

Another Midrash alludes to the idea that a leader needs his power, and two leaders together would create confusion of authority.

R. Ashi caught sight of him in the market place (The Angel of Death). Quoth he, grant me 30 days' respite and I shall revise my studies...He came again on the 30th day; quoth he, what is the urgency? He replied, R. Huna b. Nathan is close on your heels (waiting to succeed you) and 'No sovereignty encroaches upon the sphere of another, even to a hair's breadth.'<sup>25</sup>

And:

R. Nahman said to R. Isaac: What is the meaning of the verse 'And it came to pass when Samuel was old' (I Sam. 8:1)? Did Samuel ever reach old age? He lived only for 52 years...R. Johanan said, Old age came prematurely upon him, for it is written, 'It repenteth me that I have set up Saul to be king. (I Sam. 15:11) Samuel complained, Sovereign of the Universe! You have made me equal to Moses and Aaron...so too let not the work of my hands come to naught in my lifetime. The Holy One replied, How shall I act? Shall Saul die? Of this Samuel will not approve. Shall Samuel die young? People will speak ill of him (saying he died young on account of his sins). Shall neither Samuel nor Saul die? The time has come for David to reign and one reign may not encroach on another, even by a hair's breadth. Thereupon the Holy One said, I will make him prematurely old.'<sup>26</sup>

One explanation of why the righteous suffer and die is as an atonement for the sins of their generation, or even of past generations.

The death of every righteous man effects atonement for his generation, not only that, but a righteous man may 'be taken' by God in order to be an atonement for a sinful generation.<sup>27</sup>

And in the text we see:

R. Joseph said, When there are righteous men in the generation, the righteous are seized (by death) for the (sins of the) generation, when there are no righteous in a generation, school children are seized for the generation.<sup>28</sup>

And an example of suffering for the wickedness not of the present but of past generations:

The great sin of the sons of Jacob was never forgiven, so that each generation of Israelites had to bear its share of suffering as an atonement. The death of the '10 martyrs' especially was a partial payment of this debt. These great men suffered for the crime of the 10 sons of Jacob.<sup>29</sup>

The righteous must be suffering for the sins of others because otherwise there could be no reasonable explanation for their undeserved afflictions.

The atonement of suffering and death is not limited to the suffering person. The atoning effect extends to all the generation. This is especially the case with such sufferers as cannot either by reason of their righteous life or by their youth possibly have merited the afflictions which have come upon them. (Death of the righteous atones.) They are caught (suffer) for the sins of their generation.<sup>30</sup>

And we find:

R. Samuel b. Nahman said, (God is) like a king who had an orchard in which he planted rows of nut trees and apple trees and pomegranates, and which he then handed over to the care of his son. So long as the son did his duty, the king used to look out for good shoots wherever he could find one, and take it up and bring it and plant it in the orchard. But when the son did not do his duty, the king used to look out for the best plant in the orchard, and take it up. So when Israel do their duty to God, He looks out for any righteous person among the other nations and attaches them to Israel. But when Israel do not do their duty to God, He picks out any righteous and upright and proper and God-fearing man among them and removes him from their midst.<sup>31</sup>

Death was decreed against the righteous to give them peace, according to the Midrash, but also because they have chosen to die in order to atone for the wicked and not on their own account. Since this is the case, the wicked must be punished twofold: once because they did not atone and live righteously; and secondly, because the righteous have been compelled to deflect their punishment and die also.

Why was death decreed against the wicked? Because as long as the wicked live they anger the Lord, when they die they cease to anger him...

Why was death decreed against the righteous? Because as long as the righteous live they must fight against their evil desires, but when they die they enjoy rest.

Death was decreed to reward the righteous in double measure and to punish the wicked in double measure. To reward the righteous who had not deserved to experience death, yet did accept the experience of death, 'Therefore in their land they shall possess double' (Isa. 61:7) and to punish the wicked, since the righteous had not deserved death, yet accepted it on their account, therefore, 'And destroy them with double destruction,' (Jer. 17-18)<sup>32</sup>

Another explanation of why the righteous as well as the wicked must die, deduces the fact that if only the wicked die, no one would be wicked. Everyone would feign righteousness, not for the merit of good deeds, but primarily to escape death. Thus we would have false and dishonest intentions accompanying seemingly righteous acts.

R. Jonathan said, he should have decreed death for the wicked but not for the righteous. But the reason is, lest the wicked perform fraudulent repentance...saying, Surely the righteous live only because they treasure up religious acts and good deeds, so shall we lay up a store of religious acts and good deeds, and as a result their performance of such would be with ulterior motives.<sup>33</sup>

The righteous request death for themselves, and if they didn't make this request they would never die. Even though the Midrash discusses the righteous wanting death, it does not delve into the reasons for this wish. The problem for them in these Midrashim is not the purpose of the death of the righteous, but only an explanation of the experience of death itself.

Were it not for the righteous asking to die with their own mouths, they would never die. How? As Abraham said, 'I am dust and ashes.' (Gen. 18:27)<sup>34</sup>

Several Midrashim draw a comparison between the deaths of the righteous and the wicked and try to bring out the sadness when the good die.

The death of the wicked is suited (becoming) to them and suited to the world, to the righteous (death) it is evil to them and evil to the world.<sup>36</sup>

And:

The death of a pious man is a greater misfortune to Israel than the Temple's burning to ashes.<sup>37</sup>

Sometimes the righteous are taken first by the Angel of Death, although no explanation is given.

Once permission has been granted to the Destroyer (Angel of Death) he does not distinguish between righteous and wicked. Moreover he even begins with the righteous, as it says, 'And I will cut off from thee the righteous and the wicked.' (Ezek. 21:8)<sup>38</sup>

The majority of Midrashim view the death of the righteous as a tragedy, however, Rabbi Meir, in his well known statement, tries to interpret it in the context of everything happening for the best:

The righteous do not fear the day of death, and not only this, but some think that death is for the good. In his teachings, Rabbi Meir wrote, 'very good-' *shen dig* is (*shen dig*) death is good, and David reflected on his death and said "Shirah" (song).<sup>39</sup>

Further hope for the righteous is given in another Midrash which dispels death for the righteous. They are even thought to inherit eternity, each one receiving according to his deeds and his individual merit.

R. Simeon b. Lakish said, The days of the righteous die, but they themselves do not die. It does not say, 'And David drew near to die,' but 'Now the days of David drew near to die.' (I Kings 2:1)<sup>40</sup>

And:

Every righteous man has an eternity of his own. This may be compared to the case of a king who enters a city accompanied by generals, governors, and soldiers, though they all enter by the same gate, everyone is accommodated in accordance with his rank. Even so it is that although all experience the taste of death, every righteous man has an eternity of his own.<sup>41</sup>

## The Death of the Righteous

1. Hullin, 76.
2. Tanhuma, Ch. Toldot 17.
3. Yalkut, sec. Samuel I, p. 169.
4. Ketuboth, 104a.
5. Midrash Bereshit Raba, Ch. 62, sec. 2.
6. Midrash Shmot Raba, Ch. 52, sec. 3.
7. Ibid., Ch. 52, sec. 3.
8. Rabbinic Anthology, Montefiore and Lowe, p. 214, quoting  
"Tanhuma" Bereshit 1:7.
9. Midrash Bamidbar Raba, Ch. 19, sec. 17.
10. Yoma, p. 396.
11. Ketuboth, p. 104a.
12. Midrash Shir Ha Shirim, Ch. 1, sec. 2.
13. Midrash to Psalms, Ch. 11, sec. 6, p. 166
14. Ibid., Ch. 11, sec. 6.
15. Shabat, 152b.
16. Midrash Bamidbar Raba, Ch. 11, sec. 7.
17. Midrash Echa Raba, Ch. 19 (p. 11, English)
18. Midrash Va'Yikra Raba, Ch. 20, sec. 12.
19. Midrash Bamidbar Raba, Ch. 7, sec. 1.
20. Horayot, p. 13a.
21. Pesikta Zutra, Ch. Pinchas, p. 61.
22. Kidushin, p. 72b.
24. Midrash Psalms, 116:6 (English version, p. 226)
25. Moed Katan, 28a.
26. Taanit, 5b

27. "The Rabbinic Mind," Max Kadushin, p. 318
28. Shabat, 336.
29. Legends of the Jews, Louis Ginzberg. Vol. 5, p. 329.
30. Aspects of Rabbinic Theology. Solomon Schechter, p. 310
31. Midrash Shir Ha Shirim Raba. Ch. 9, sec. 5.
32. Midrash Bereshit Raba. Ch. 9, sec. 5.
33. Ibid., Ch. 9, sec. 5.
34. 6<sup>th</sup> 18, P<sup>te</sup> 25 Ch. 117, p. 477.
35. Also, Midrash Psalms, 116:6, p. 226 (English).
36. Sifre', Ch. 491 p. 220.
37. Legends of the Jews. Louis Ginzberg. Vol. III, p. 191.
38. Baba Kama, p. 60a.
39. Otzar Yisrael. J. D. Eisenstein, p. 194.
40. Midrash Bereshit Raba. Ch. 96, sec. 1 (P. 92, English)
41. Midrash Vayikra Raba. Ch. 18, sec. 1.



## CHAPTER V

### The Value Of Good Deeds

When the Midrash mentions 'the righteous man' they are referring to an exemplary individual who has lived a life dedicated to helping and leading others, as well as being astute in Jewish learning. In most instances, the 'righteous' are a select category of great men. However, the text also refers to men who have performed mitzvot (good deeds) throughout their lives. Every man in the society, regardless of his station in life, can potentially perform good deeds. As inconsequential in the community as he might be, each person has the capacity to nurture a 'good name.' The Midrash therefore abounds in examples of people lengthening their lives by acts of kindness, or studying avidly for the sake of leaving a good and respectable name when they die.

'A time to be born and a time to die.' From the time of birth is the time to die. From the hour a person is born it is decreed for him how many years he is to live. If he is worthy, he completes his years, but if he is unworthy they are reduced in number for him. As it is written, 'The fear of the Lord prolongeth days, but the years of the wicked shall be shortened.' (Prov. 10:27).

The Rabbis say, If he is worthy the number is increased for him, but if he is unworthy they are reduced in number for him. As it is stated, 'Behold, I will add unto thy days 15 years.' (Isa. 38:5)<sup>1</sup>

There are other examples in the Midrash where good deeds protected the individual whose life was in jeopardy.

Benjamin the Righteous was in charge of the community charity chest. A woman came and said, master take care of me. He said, there is nothing in the charity chest.

Master, she said to him, if thou dost not take care of me, thou wilt be the death of a widow and her seven sons. He thereupon gave her money from his own funds.

Some time after, Benjamin fell sick and lay in bed in pain. Said the ministering angels to the Holy One, Master of the Universe, thou hast said, 'One who saves a single soul in Israel, is as though he had saved a whole world.' How much more so Benjamin the Righteous, who saved a widow and seven sons. Forthwith they beseeched mercy for him, and his (death) sentence was torn up. And 22 years were added to his life.<sup>2</sup>

And:

Among the many benevolent deeds of Elijah, special mention ought to be made of his rescue of those doomed by a heavenly decree to fall into the clutches of the Angel of Death. He brought these rescues about by warning the designated victims of their impending fate, and urging them to do good deeds, which would prove a protection against death.<sup>3</sup>

R. Akiba's daughter, also averted a death which had been decreed upon her by God. The astrologers had informed R. Akiba that on the day she entered the bridal chamber, she would receive a fatal snake bite.

On that day she took a brooch and stuck it into the wall and by chance it penetrated into the eye of a serpent. What did you do? her father asked her. A poor man came to the door, and there was none to attend him, so I took my portion and gave it to him. You have done a good deed, said he to her. Thereupon Akiba lectured, 'but charity delivereth from death' (Prov. 10:2) and not merely from an unnatural death, but from death itself.<sup>4</sup>

Even when a man commits a misdemeanor, if he has good deeds to his credit, they can sometimes outweigh the misdeed and save him from death.

If a man sat idle all week and did no work, and took consecrated funds which he happened to have at home to buy food, he is mortally guilty in the sight of heaven.

But if he were a laborer engaged in the building of the Temple, even if he had been given consecrated funds for his wages, and took some to buy food, he would escape death.<sup>5</sup>

Or sometimes the misdeeds get the balance.

There was a family in Jerusalem, the members of which used to die at the age of 18. They came and told R. Johanan b. Zakkai. He said to them, perhaps you are of the family of Eli, of whom it is said 'and all the increase of the house shall die young men.' (I Samuel 2:33) Go and study Torah that ye may live. They went and studied Torah and lived.<sup>6</sup>

In the above verse, studying Torah and performing good deeds are considered to be synonymous. The Midrash almost takes it for granted that a true student of Torah acts in a way which reflects his learning.

Samuel said to Rab Judah, Open your mouth and read the Torah, open your mouth and learn the law,<sup>7</sup> that your studies may endure and you may live long.

R. Nehunya b. Na-Kahana, when asked by his disciples how he accounted for his long life, responded, 'I never gained honor by the disgrace of my neighbor, and the curse of my neighbor never came upon my bed, and I was generous with my money.'<sup>8</sup> In short, his right actions accounted for his long life.

The Midrash contains several paradigms which point out in abbreviated and cryptic form the advantages of good deeds in avoiding death.

Death is near you and far from you, as well as far from you and near you. (Note: Death is near when it is decreed by God, but it can be averted by good deeds, and when it is to take place in the distant future, wickedness can bring it near.)<sup>9</sup>

And:

He who wants to live, (can find life) through the tongue, (note: by study of Torah), he who wants to die (can find death) through the tongue.<sup>10</sup>

Alexander the Great put a question to the elders of the South:

What shall a man do to live? They replied, 'let him mortify himself' (note: 'kill himself' with study and hard work); what should a man do to kill himself? They replied, let him keep himself alive (note: indulge in luxuries).<sup>11</sup>

Good deeds are not only instrumental in avoiding death, but they also have merit for their own sake. The most important goal of man on earth is the performance of mitzvot, so that when he dies he leaves a good name behind. In fact, the time of death is even a happier occasion than the time of birth if a man lives a good life.

Rabbi Levi said, It can be compared to two ocean-going ships, one leaving the harbor and the other entering. While everyone was rejoicing over the one that was setting out on her voyage, few seemed to hail with pleasure the one arriving. Seeing which, a wise man then reflected: 'I see here a paradox, for surely, people should not rejoice at the ship leaving the harbor, since they know not what conditions she may meet, what seas she may encounter, and what winds she may have to face. Whereas everyone ought to rejoice at the ship that has returned to the harbor, for having safely set forth on the ocean and having safely returned.'<sup>12</sup>

Other Midrashin reflect this same thought.

When a man is born, all should cry, but when he dies everyone needs to be happy, because they know he has gone forth in peace from the world.<sup>13</sup>

And:

The Holy One does not call the righteous man holy until he is laid away in the earth. Why not? Because the inclination to evil keeps pressing him. And so God does not put His trust in him in this world till the day of his death.

Even the patriarchs, until they died, and their tombs were sealed with the topstone, even they were not called 'holy.'<sup>14</sup>

'A good name is better than precious oil.' (Eccle. 7:1)...

When precious oil falls upon a corpse it gives forth a rank smell...but when a good name rests upon a dead person it does not become rank. "And the day of death then the day of one's birth." (Eccle. 7:1) The day on which a great man dies is better than the day on which he was born; because none knows, on the day of his birth, what his deeds will be, but at his death, his good deeds are published unto all, and for this reason is 'the day of death better than the day of one's birth.'<sup>15</sup>

Abraham once questioned the value of good deeds; since the wicked as well as the righteous man meets the same fate. Commenting on Ecclesiastes 2:15, he says:

I have been called 'king' and the wicked Nimrod is called 'king.' Both alike died; in that case, why was I the more wise?...When adversity befalls Israel, they cry, 'Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, thy servants' (Ex. 32:13); but do the heathen nations (in their distress) cry, 'Remember the deeds of Nimrod!?' (The wise man lives in the memory of others.)<sup>16</sup>

A funeral oration delivered during Talmudic times illustrates that death can be a good, if one has lived his life meritoriously.

Weep for those who are mourning and not for the one whom we lost; for he came to his rest and we remained moaning.<sup>17</sup>

Since life is for a short period, we should make the best of it, according to Midrashic thought, by serving mankind well.

R. Berekiah said, it is written: 'A time to be born and a time to die.' (Eccle. 3:2) Surely we know that there is a time when a man is born, and a time when a man dies? What it means is, happy is the man the time of whose death is like unto the time of his birth; just as at the time of his birth he is free from sin, so too at the time of his death he is free from sin. In this way, 'Blessed shalt thou be when thou comest in, and blessed shalt thou be when thou goest out.' (Deut. 28:6)<sup>18</sup>

The Midrash contains an illustrative story of a fox who squeezes his way through a small hole into a beautiful garden. He eats to his heart's content but discovered that he was too heavy to escape through the hole. He fasted several days and finally left the garden, the same as when he had entered. The fox cast a farewell glance at the scene and said, 'O garden, charming art thou, delicious are your fruits, but what have I now for all my labor and cunning?'

So it is with man. Naked he comes into the world, naked must he leave it. After all his toil therein he carries nothing away with him, except the good deeds he leaves behind.<sup>19</sup>

No happiness of this life can be compared to heavenly bliss, but the highest that a man can achieve is living a religious life in this world.<sup>20</sup>

Since our end is death, and we can take nothing with us, we should be all the more concerned with a good name, according to the Midrash:

All must die, and death must come to all. Happy then that man who departs this world with a good name.<sup>21</sup>

The end of man is to die, and the end of beast is to be slaughtered, and all are doomed to die. Happy is he whose labor was in the Torah and who has given pleasure to his Creator, and who departed the world with a good name.<sup>22</sup>



Even if a man leaves possessions to his children, he is not certain whether they will be put to good use, whereas good deeds and a good reputation always remain.

Rab said to R. Hamnana, my son, according to thy ability do good to thyself, for there is no enjoyment in nor will death be long in coming. And shouldst thou say, 'I will leave a portion for my children,' who will tell thee in the grave? The children of men are like the grass of the field, some blossom and some fade.<sup>23</sup>

The end of man's conduct is that all proclaim his deeds, (saying) 'So and so was right-living, so and so was God-fearing... For when a man departs from the world, the Holy One, blessed be He, says to the ministering angels, 'See what his fellow men are saying about him.' (If they say) that he had been right-living and God-fearing, his bier at once flies up into the air.<sup>24</sup>

Even after his death men continue to reflect on the righteous man's deeds.

If a man is passing between groves and he knows that a righteous man is buried there, he must reflect upon his deeds.<sup>25</sup>

Good deeds are the highest goal of man on earth, but these deeds are not only left behind when man passes away. According to Midrashic interpretation, the deeds also accompany man after death and even precede his arrival into his final judgment. The Holy One is made fully aware of how each man performed his duties on earth. (To be discussed more fully in the chapter dealing with Judgment after death.)

Man has a limited time on earth with which to prove himself, before he enters the finality of the state we reach through death.

With death man's time of trial and probation comes to an end, and his existence enters into a final state in which his basic attitude as regards his salvation can no more be changed.<sup>26</sup>

And in the Midrash:

A man has three friends in his lifetime, and they are, his sons and his household, his money, and his good deeds. At the hour of a man's departure from the world, he gathers his sons and household and says to them, 'Save me from "Din Hamavet"' (Judgment of Death). They answer, 'No one can prevail over the day of death.... He has his money brought and says, 'save me from the judgment of death...' He then has his good deeds brought, and says, 'save me from the judgment of death,' and they answer and say, 'go in peace, before you go, we will precede you.'<sup>27</sup>

Worthiness in Death becomes very meaningful to the Rabbis, and there is strong emphasis upon meeting the Creator with a good record. Early Christianity also showed concern with being worthy when we approach God. Origen said:

Death becomes precious for us, if we are saints of God, and if we are not unworthy to die. The vision of eternity makes sainthood in this present life important, being 'not unworthy to die,' means recognizing this present life, the arc of existence, as a decisive part of the parabola of experience.<sup>28</sup>

And in Jewish tradition:

When R. Johanan was departing from the world, he said to those who were to attend to his burial, bury me in dun-colored shrouds, neither white nor black, so that if I stand among the righteous I may not be ashamed, and if I stand among the wicked, I may not be confounded.

When R. Josiah was taking leave of this world, he asked those who were standing around him to summon his disciples, and he said to them, bury me in white shrouds because I am not ashamed through my deeds to meet my maker.<sup>28</sup>

R. Joseph, the son of R. Joshua b. Levi became ill and fell into a trance. When he recovered, his father asked him, 'What did you see?' 'I saw a topsy-turvy world,' he replied, 'the upper (class) underneath and the lower on top.' He replied: 'My son,' he observed, 'you saw a clear world. And how are we (situated) there?' 'Just as we are here, so are we there. And I heard them saying, "Happy is he who comes hither with his learning in hand."<sup>30</sup>

Another Midrash sees good deeds not only as accompanying man, but even more so, as his shield against punishment in the world to come.

The Rabbis said to R. Hamnuna Zuti at the wedding of Mar, 'please sing us something.' He said to them, 'Alas for us that we are to die.' They said to him, 'what shall we respond?' He said to them, 'Where is the Torah and where is the Mitzvah that will shield us?'<sup>31</sup>

Rabbi Akiba, when he made his famous decision to continue studying Torah in spite of Roman edicts prohibiting it, used as one of his arguments the fact that we fear dying even while studying; how then would we feel if we stopped? The reason we are alive, according to Akiba and the tradition, is to study Torah.

When Pappos k. Jehudah warned him (against studying Torah) R. Akiba replied, now we are afraid of death, while engaged in the study of Torah, of which it is written, 'For that is thy life and length of days,' (Deut. 30:30) 'how much more should we be afraid of death if we failed to be engaged therein.'<sup>32</sup>

We see men of good deeds die, and often their anticipated reward on earth is not forthcoming. The Midrashic logic thus gives the rewards to the deserving after they die. (Discussed more fully in the chapter dealing with the death of the Righteous.)

That man is mortal should not dismay us, because God's purpose is good, even though man must die to achieve it. Our task is to know that life is good and to make it a blessing by seeking God's will and obeying His commandments. Those of us who have faith may leave the rest to God.<sup>33</sup>

Rabbi, requested his reward in the world to come, and he was received favorably.

Rabbi, at the time of his passing, raised his 10 fingers

towards heaven and said, Sovereign of the Universe, it is revealed and known to you that I have labored in the study of the Torah with my 10 fingers and that I did not enjoy (any worldly) benefits even with my little finger. May it be thy will that there be peace in my (last) resting place.

A voice issued from heaven and said: He entereth into peace, 'They rest in their beds.' (Isa. 57:2)<sup>34</sup>

Each now enters the world pure, but through his deeds on earth he earns a place for himself after death.

It may be likened to a king who entered a province accompanied by generals, commanders, and officers. Although they all entered through the same gate, each went and lodged in a place corresponding to his rank. Similarly, although all human beings experience death, each has a<sup>35</sup> 'Home for himself' (according to his conduct in life).

Thus, all men must toil here without reward or honor, but expecting fulfillment of his share after death.

When does the Torah rejoice? When one toils therein for the last day. This is what the verse means, 'And she laugheth at the time to come.'<sup>36</sup>

The Holy One retrieves his loved ones and gives them their just reward.

When R. Hiyyah b. Avia, was laid to rest, they said to R. Johanan, 'Go and say something in his honor.' He said to them, let Resh Lakish go in, because he was his pupil and he knows his virtues. R. Simeon went and bemoaned him thus, 'My beloved went down to his garden,' the Holy One, blessed be He, knows the good deeds of R. Hiyyah b. Avia and has removed him from the world.<sup>37</sup>

## The Value of Good Deeds

1. Midrash Koheleth Raba. Ch. 3, sec. 3.
2. The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan. Judah Goldin. Ch. 3, p. 31.
3. Legends of the Jews. Louis Ginzberg. Vol. 4, p. 227.
4. Shabat. 1566.
5. Op. cit. Judah Goldin. Ch. 11, p. 60.
6. Rosh Hashonah. P. 18a.
7. Erubin. 54a.
8. Megillah. 28a.
9. Midrash Koheleth Raba. Ch. 8, sec. 16.
10. Arakin. P. 156.
11. Tamid. 32a.
12. Midrash Shmot Raba. Ch. 48, sec. 1.
13. Midrash Samuel. Ch. 23.
14. Midrash on Psalms. Braude. Ps. 16:2, p. 197.
15. Midrash Shmot Raba. Ch. 48, sec. 1.
16. Midrash Koheleth Raba. Ch. 2, sec. 1.
17. Lifetime of a Jew. Hayyim Schauss, p. 236.
18. Midrash Davarim Raba. Ch. 7, sec. 5.
19. Treasury of Comfort. Greenberg. P. 193.
20. Students, Saints and Scholars. Louis Ginzberg. p. 98.
21. Midrash Ruth Raba. Ch. 2, sec. 7.
22. Berachot. 17a.
23. Erubin. 54a.
24. Midrash Koheleth Raba. Ch. 12, sec. 12.
25. Pesikta Rabati. Ch. 12, p. 47.
26. The Mystery of Death. Ladislaus Boros. P. 166.

27. Pirke de'Rabi Eliezer. Friedlander. Ch. 34, p. 256.
28. The Shape of Death. Jaroslav Pelikan. P. 78.
29. Midrash Bereshit Raba. Ch. 96.
30. Pesahim. 50a.
31. Berachot. 31a.
32. Studies in Sin and Atonement. A. Buchler. P. 151.
33. Great Jewish Ideas. 'The Nature of Man,' Levi Olan. P. 172.
34. Ketuboth. 104a.
35. Midrash Koheleth Raba. Ch. 12, sec. 1; and Midrash Bereshit Raba. Ch. 96, p. 926.
36. Midrash Shmot Raba. Ch. 52, sec. 3.
37. Midrash Shir Ha Shirim Raba. Ch. 6, sec. 4.



## CHAPTER VI

## A Decree of God (G'zar Hadin)

The rabbis sometimes discuss the experience of death as being a divine judgment. The reason for man's death is taken out of the realm of sin and attributed to a decree of God that all men must die. This decision is purely in the hands of God and man has no alternative but to submit.

There are many Midrashim which attempt to press God into revoking the decree, most of the time these arguments being placed in the mouth of Moses, the epitome of the righteous man, who more than anyone deserves to escape death. However, in the end, Moses too succumbs to the decree and is quieted.

Lec Baeck discusses Zidduk Hadin, the prayer of the suffering. He says the prayer is

A resolve of man to acknowledge in his suffering, the command of God, (the stress being on that suffering which means death).

Death seems to destroy the value of life, to deny its dignity, it is irrationality, it is negation... But in full foci, here too we have the 'thou shalt' - in spite of all the 'thou must' of fate. Man still reveals his moral freedom, the free yielding acknowledgment of the commanding God.

Certainly this attitude is reflected in the Midrashim dealing with the decree of God, because even though death is unavoidable, man never ceases giving meaning and purpose, as well as value to death!

Morris Joseph stresses acceptance of God's decree, and faith in the wisdom of our Lord.

Life is not to be clung to unduly, or to be yielded up grudgingly. When the Master's call comes, it must be obeyed cheerfully, for since He does everything well, the decree that removes us is as wise and good as the ordinance that places us here...

The Israelite is taught not to desire death, but also not to fear it. If in life he sees the opportunity for service,<sup>2</sup> in death, he discerns the signal for ceasing his labors.<sup>2</sup>

He makes a similar statement in his book.

Death decree is not regarded as a release, yet not awaited with dread. It is the ordinance<sup>3</sup> of God, and therefore the ordinance of perfect wisdom.<sup>3</sup>

The Apocrypha expresses this same point of view, that death is not something to fear.

Do not fear the sentence of death, remember those that went before you and those who come after you. This is the sentence of the Lord upon all flesh and blood, and how can you refuse what is the will of the Most High?<sup>4</sup>

One Midrash tries to point out that some things are elusive to us, and have no logical explanation. One of these enigmas is death, yet it is an enactment of God, and whether we comprehend it or not, it is our obligation to follow it.

'Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? Is it not one?' (Job 14:4)...When the dead body is in the house, the house is clean. But when it comes out, it is unclean. Who did this? Who commanded this? Who decreed this? Was it not the world's Only One?...The Holy One, Blessed be, he says (in answer to all the objections) I have laid down a statute; I have issued a decree! You cannot transgress my decree.<sup>5</sup>

Man argues with the Holy One that if He wants us to really be holy, he must abolish the decree of death. However, God returns a negative answer to man. Death is an absolute decree which is irrevocable.

Lord of the Universe, it is thy desire that we should be holy; well, remove death from us, as it says, 'Art not thou from everlasting?'...We shall not die! But God replied, This is impossible. Thus, O Lord, thou hast ordained them for judgment.<sup>6</sup>

Sinner, or sinless, man must die; that is the decree established by God.

The ministering angels said to God, Why did Adam die? God said, because he disobeyed my command. Then they said, But Moses obeyed thy command. God replied, It is a decree of mine, which falls upon all mankind, for it says, 'This is the law,--when a man dies.' (Num. 19:14)

There are a chain of Midrashim alluding to God's communication with Moses over his approaching death. In the end, Moses too meets the fate of all mankind.

He (Moses) said before him, Master of the Universe, why must I die? It is not good that the people will say that the visible (live) Moses is better than the audible (yet dead) Moses. It is not good that they will say, Moses who brought us forth from Egypt, that separated the sea and brought down the Torah, etc....(died). And (God) said, it is a decree that all men are equal before me.<sup>8</sup>

And:

When Moses heard his doom, he urged every argument to secure a remission of his sentence. Amongst other things he said, 'Sovereign of the Universe, arise from the judgment seat, and sit on the throne of mercy, so that I die not...If thou wilt do this then will I proclaim thy praise before all the inhabitants of the world, as David said, I shall not die but live and declare the works of the Lord. (Ps. 118:17) Then God said to Moses, 'Hear the rest of the verse, "This is the gate of the Lord, through which the righteous shall enter." For all creatures death has been prepared from the beginning.'<sup>9</sup>

Another Midrash elucidates the same thought, of death being decreed from the beginning.

Moses begged God not to hand him over to the sword of the angel of death. 'I do not wish to die, but live and declare the works of the Lord.' God replied, 'this is the gate of the Lord, the righteous shall enter into it,

this is the gate into which the righteous must enter as well as other creatures, for death has been decreed for man since the beginning of the world.<sup>10</sup>

Moses could not pass over into the Holy Land because the decree of his death was sealed.

R. Johanan said, Scripture refers 10 times to the death of Moses... This teaches that 10 times it was decreed that Moses should not enter Eretz Israel, but the harsh decree was not finally sealed until the High Court revealed itself to him and declared, 'It is my decree that thou shalt not pass over!'

What Moses accomplished in the desert was sufficient reward for this world, and therefore he was compelled to reconcile himself to God's justice.

Moses said to the Holy One; Master of the Universe, clear and known to you is the labor and pain I endured that Israel might come to believe in your Name. How much pain I suffered until I established the Torah and commandments in them. I said to myself, as I have known their distress, so shall I know their good days. And now that the good days have come, you say to me: 'Thou shalt not go over this Jordan.' (Deut. 31:2) Behold, you are making a fraud of your Torah... Is this the reward for the 40 years I have labored that they might become a holy and faithful people? He said to him: 'Let it suffice thee.' (Deut. 3:26) Moses continued to plead and beg, to remain in this world, as an animal or even as a bird. But his pleas were answered with the final 'Let it suffice thee' from the master. Then when Moses saw that no creature could save him from the way of death, at that moment he said, 'The Rock, his work is perfect; for all His ways are justice.' (Deut. 32:4)<sup>12</sup>

Even the angel Gabriel pleaded for Moses' life. God finally became firm in his request and Gabriel requested temporary leave from his role of grasping the life of mortals, because he didn't want to take Moses.

God said to Gabriel, Go and bring me the soul of Moses. Gabriel answered the Lord and said, 'Lord, is Moses to die, who has done so many great things beyond numbering?'

And the Lord answered yes, even Adam whom I created died! Gabriel said, God, Adam sinned before you, and you were angered with him, but Moses has found pleasure in your eyes. The Lord answered, yes, Noah found pleasure in my eyes for his righteousness and integrity and even he died. Gabriel answered, but Noah wasn't like Moses... And the Lord said, Also Abraham didn't tire of righteousness and mercy and he died like a man. And Gabriel answered, but Abraham nourished a great people in a settled land, however Moses is greater for he sustained your people in a land of salt, with no bread, or water to drink. And the Lord answered, Gabriel, who is so strong, that he will live and not fear death? Gabriel heard the words of the Lord and ceased pleading for the soul of Moses, and said, Please send forth another hand to take the soul of Moses, but don't send me!<sup>13</sup>

In spite of the interplay between God and Moses over his ensuing death, when it came to Aaron's demise, Moses approached the matter from the opposite point of view.

Aaron's last hour is described as follows, Moses and Aaron had nearly reached Mount Hor, and Moses did not yet find courage to inform Aaron of his approaching death. Finally he said to Aaron, If 100 years from now God would decree thy death, what wouldst thou say? Aaron replied, I would only say the judge is just. Without hesitation, Moses then said, now that thou didst resign thyself to God's will, let us ascend the mount, since God has decreed that thou shouldst die in that place. Reconciled to his fate, Aaron followed his younger brother, 'as a lamb that is led to the slaughter.'<sup>14</sup>

When a man's time comes to die, there is no escape for him. Sometimes even strange mishaps become part of the eternal plan, in carrying out God's requests.

When a man's end has come, all have dominion over him, as it is written, '...they stand forth this day to receive thy judgments, for all are thy servants.' (Ps. 119:91)

Samuel saw a scorpion borne by a frog across a river, and then sting a man so that he died. Thereupon Samuel quoted (Ps. 119:91):<sup>15</sup>

Rabbah quoted the same verse when he heard about a similar circumstance.

(He) was told that a tall man had died... This man was riding on a little mule and when he came to a bridge, the mule shied and threw the man, and he was killed.<sup>16</sup>

There are occasions when one in trying to escape the decree, flees to the exact spot anticipated by the Divine judge.

There were once two Cushites who attended on Solomon. One day Solomon observed that the Angel of Death was sad. 'Why,' he said to him, 'art thou sad?' Because, they (in heaven) have demanded from me the two Cushites who sit here. (Solomon thereupon) gave them in charge of the spirits (people) and sent them to the district of Luz, (to save them from death). When, however, they reached the district of Luz, they died. On the following day he observed that the Angel of Death was in cheerful spirits. Why, he said to him, are thou cheerful? To the place, the other responded, where they expected them from me, thither didst thou send them. (It was decreed that they should die at the gate of Luz.) Solomon thereupon altered the saying, 'a man's feet are responsible for him, they lead him to the place where he is waited.'<sup>17</sup>

Whatever God wills he can make come to pass, and we are at the mercy of his decree.

One does not hurt his small finger (toe) without it being decreed from heaven.<sup>18</sup>

And:

'O Lord thou knowest' (Ezek. 37:3). This may be compared to a bird in the hand of a hunter, who met a man and asked him, is this dead or alive? If you wish, it is alive, and if you wish it is dead, was the reply.<sup>19</sup>

Yet God still finds it difficult to end the lives of the righteous ones.

The Rabbis say, God finds it hard to decree death upon the righteous. Whence this? For it is said: 'Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.' (Ps. 116:15)<sup>20</sup>



In the case of David, the Lord hinted at the time of his death, but any plea for an extension was met by a rebuff.

David spoke before the Holy One. 'Make me know mine end.' He replied, 'It is a decree from before me that a human being is not informed what his end is to be...' David said, 'Let me know how short-lived I am.' He told him, (you will die) 'on the Sabbath.' He spoke before him, 'Let me die on the first day of the week.' He replied to him, 'Already has the time of the kingship of your son Solomon arrived....'21

## A Decree of God

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17. Sukkah. 53a.
18. Hullin. 7B.
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20. Midrash Davarim Raba. Ch. 9, sec. 6.
21. Midrash Koheleth Raba. Ch. 5, sec. 10.

## CHAPTER VII

## Resignation to Death

To the ancient Rabbis the experience of death is inevitable. Although there are several Midrashim which link death with sin, the majority still agree that the time of death is unknown to man, and a good man is still as susceptible to suffering and death as the wicked man. Since death is a certainty, man must live life to the fullest, and always be prepared for the heavenly call.

Another chapter deals specifically with death as a decree from the Holy One, but in his resignation man also indirectly places his future in the hands of God, who has ultimate power in the decision.

The pious Israelite does not look forward with longing to the cessation of life. When the Master's call comes he will be ready for the summons, and he will so live as to be ready for it. He desires life as a space in which he may do the utmost good of which he is capable.

On the other hand, he does not think of the world as his home. It is but a halting place on the journey from one point in eternity to another.<sup>1</sup>

In the philosophy of Cyprian, an early Church father, we see another line of thinking. He recognizes that all, the good and the bad, great and small, must face death. Thus:

Whenever death comes, one consolation is always the vast and brilliant company of those who have suffered the same fate....It is easy to forget that mortality is the common lot of all men, and there is some consolation in realizing this.<sup>2</sup>

Other writers also stress the fact that death is something taken for granted. There is no means of protest, or escape, but one should live well and accept whatever comes.

The limitation of life by (normal, late) death is seen, it is true, as something extremely lamentable, but it is nevertheless taken simply for granted as something against which one does not revolt. The Godly man of the Old Testament meets the irrevocable ordinance of death in perfect resignation.<sup>5</sup>

'Life has a dimension in time whose end is death.'<sup>4</sup> The Midrash expresses even more descriptively the idea that no protest holds against death.

Even if a man were willing to put his tongue in the hinge of the door as the price of being saved from death, he would not be saved.<sup>5</sup>

And we have a terse statement in the Talmud:

A human being lives today, and is dead tomorrow, rich today, and poor tomorrow.<sup>6</sup>

Death seems to be tied up with money in the above passage. There also is an allusion to life itself being equivalent to being rich, and of course death is equated with poverty. Another Midrash also contrasts death with money, in a different sense. It's difficult to get rich, however, death is within the means of every man.

It is a common thing for people to die, but not to become rich. R. Papa said, this is borne out by the common saying, If (you hear that) your neighbor has died, believe it, if you hear he has become rich, do not believe it.<sup>7</sup>

It is also deduced from the Torah that even a sinless man dies, and the incidence of death is taken for granted.

Does that mean, if they had not sinned, they would have been immune from death? But there are written (in the Torah) the chapter about the widow of a man dying with issue, and the chapter about inheritances.<sup>8</sup>

In each case mentioned in the above quote, death is considered a possibility, without sin being anticipated.

Rabbi Hanina takes death so much for granted, that even though he considers it an evil, it is a necessary evil, and thus he accepts it passively. When his daughter died, he didn't weep for her.

Said his wife to him, hast thou sent out a fowl from thy house? (Shall I suffer) two (evils) he retorted, bereavement and blindness?<sup>9</sup>

Death is viewed as 'a natural ordinance' and everyone is aware of his end. Since even the great die, certainly the others must accept this decree.

His work finished, the worker must go and make room for his successor, Abraham for Isaac, Moses for Joshua, David for Solomon.<sup>10</sup>

And:

None can hope to escape death, all know it and affirm with their own mouths that they will die.<sup>11</sup>

When Abraham lost his wife, he naturally was grieved, yet with hands extended, powerlessly, he expressed the inevitable which we must accept.

When Sarah died the whole world mourned. Abraham, instead of receiving consolation, had to offer it to others. He spoke to the mourners and said, My children, take not the going forth of Sarah too much to heart. There is one event unto all, to the pious and the impious alike.<sup>12</sup>

R. Mana was more explicit and expressive about his feelings. He said:

Why do we beat on the heart? (in grief)--to indicate that all are destined for that place (the earth).<sup>13</sup>

R. Zeira presents the same idea, by means of similar bodily expression.

(He) fell to the earth during a (funeral) speech. When an attempt was made to raise him, it was found that he had done so to afflict himself (purposely). 'What is the meaning of this?' he was asked. 'It is thither that we will (all) come,' he replied, in accordance with the verse, 'And the living will lay it to his heart.'<sup>14</sup>

All of us must die and no one knows the time of his death.

Antoninus the younger asked the Rabbi, 'Who will die first, I or you? He answered, 'I will.' His disciples said to him, 'Our master, all the world prays for your good life and you speak in this manner! He replied to them, 'If my time to die comes, what of it? And if the Angel of Death comes to take me, what can one say to him; do not come to me, or I will not come? Not only that, but if it happens so (and I die first) people will say, 'Blessed be the God of the Jews, who even know the time of their death.'<sup>15</sup>

The Midrash emphasizes the death of the Biblical heroes in order to stress that there is no hope in escaping death.

No one can hope that he will not die. Everyone knows in the future they are to die. Abraham said, 'I go childless.' (Gen. 15:2) Isaac said, 'before I die.' (Gen. 27:4) Jacob said, 'I sleep with my fathers.' (Gen. 47:30)<sup>16</sup>

Abraham, Isaac, Jacob are given as examples of righteous men conceding to death. However, even more of the Midrashim dwell on the demise of Moses, as a person caught in the web of mortality.

Moses said to God, must I die after my eyes have witnessed all that glory and all that power? Whereupon God replied, 'Moses, what mighty man is he that liveth and shall not see death (Ps. 139:49)...R. Tanhuma said, 'What mighty man is there like Abraham who went down into the fiery furnace and was saved, and yet afterwards Scripture says of him, 'And Abraham expired and died.'? (Gen. 25:8) What mighty man is there like Isaac who



stretched out his neck on the altar, and yet afterwards Scripture says of him, 'Behold now, I am old, I know not the day of my death.'? (Gen. 27:2) What mighty man is this like Jacob, who wrestled with an angel, and yet afterwards Scripture says of him, 'And the time drew near that Israel must die.'? (Gen. 47:29) What mighty man is there like Moses who spoke with his Creator face to face, and yet afterwards, 'Behold, thy days approach that thou must die.'? <sup>17</sup> (Deut. 31:14)

Another interpretation of the same verse with regard to Moses states:

'The number of thy days I will fulfill, (Ex. 23:26) for behold, Moses performed many commandments and many righteous acts, but finally it was said to him, 'Behold thy days approach that thou must die.'<sup>18</sup>

And:

When Moses was about to depart this world, God said to him, 'Behold thy days approach.' Whereupon Moses replied, Master of the Universe, after all my labor, Thou sayest unto me 'Behold thy days approach.' I shall not die but live, and declare the works of the Lord (Ps. 118:17) Thereupon God said, You cannot prevail (in this matter) <sup>19</sup> 'For this is (the destiny of) all men.' (Eccle. 12:13)<sup>19</sup>

Moses never gave up begging and pleaded with God up until his final moments.

There remained unto Moses only one hour. Whereupon Moses said to God, Master of the Universe, If thou wilt not bring me into Eretz Israel leave me in this world so that I may live and not die. God thereupon said to Moses, If I will not slay you in this world, how can I bring you back to life in the World to Come? And what is more, you make my Torah a fraud, for in my Torah it is written by your hand, 'And there is none that can deliver out of my hand.' (Deut. 32:39)<sup>20</sup>

The Rabbis, commenting on the last 12 verses of the Bible which describe Moses' death, raise the question, How could Moses himself have written the description of his death? And the answer is given in the Talmud, in a beautiful and touching legend: 'God was dictating the story of Moses' death and Moses was writing with a tear in his eye.' He had no choice, God was dictating it.<sup>21</sup>

We must be resigned to the fact that we will die, even if it involves suffering. Everything must be accepted not only as a judgment from God, but also as a means to a greater good.

R. Joshua b. Levi said: He who accepts gladly the sufferings of this world brings salvation to the world.<sup>22</sup>

And:

Happy is the man who when afflicted by sufferings, does not cavil against God's justice. If Job had restrained his wrath when sufferings came upon him, and had not cavilled against God's justice, he would have come to great and praiseworthy qualities...Thou cavillest because sufferings have come upon thee; art thou greater than Adam, the creation of my hands? For the sake of the one decree that he broke I decreed death upon him and upon his descendants, but he did not cavil....Art thou greater than Isaac,...or Moses whom I would not let enter the promised land...Yet they did not cavil.<sup>23</sup>

Life moves quickly and we must not postpone enjoyment or pleasure. Samuel compares life to a wedding feast, which is enjoyed thoroughly, but ends so abruptly.

Samuel said to Rab Judah, Hurry on and eat, hurry on and drink, since the world from which we must depart is like a wedding feast.<sup>24</sup>

Also in the Tanhuma, the writer laments the brevity of life.

Not like the shadow of a wall, and not like the shadow of a tree; but like the shadow of a bird.<sup>25</sup> As it is said, (his days) are as a passing shadow.

A parable in the Talmud teaches us that we must always be prepared for the inevitable. The wise men are those who live life in a worthwhile manner, ready at any moment to meet their maker.

A king summoned his servants to a banquet without appointing a time. The wise ones adorned themselves, and sat at the door of the palace, saying 'is anything lacking in a royal palace (the summons may come at any time). The fools went about their work, saying, 'can there be a banquet without preparation! Suddenly the king desired his servants, and the wise entered adorned, while the fools entered soiled. The king rejoiced at the wise, but was angry with the fools.<sup>26</sup>

In one Midrash the ages of man are reviewed, and 100 becomes the extreme limit, up to which life is a blessing.

Sixty is mature age, seventy, for a hoary head, eighty (is a sign of superadded) strength, ninety is the age for a bending figure, at a hundred, one is as one that is dead, having passed and ceased from the world. (One who exceeds that limit is as one who no more belongs to the world.)<sup>27</sup>

Another point of view ventures the idea that a child's life span may be bound up with his parents, a physiologically sound insight, even in our modern age.

When Isaac reached the age of 123 and was thus approaching the years attained by his mother, he began to meditate upon his end. It is proper that a man should prepare for death when he comes close to the age at which either of his parents passed out of life.<sup>28</sup>

All in all, however, we can never know when death will come. One Midrash illustrates this point very clearly.

Raba said 'Length of life, children and sustenance depend not on merit but (rather on) mazzel (destiny). For (take) Rabba and R. Hisda. Both were saintly Rabbis; one master prayed for rain and it came, the other master prayed for rain and it came. R. Hisda lived to the age of 92 (died 309CE), Rabbah (died 330CE) (only) lived to the age of 40.

In R. Hisda's house there were 60 marriage feasts, at Rabbah's house there were 60 bereavements.<sup>29</sup>

## Resignation to Death

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## CHAPTER VIII

## Death as an Atonement

There is a strong belief in the Midrash that if one repents before death, the experience of death is then sufficient to effect atonement. This belief probably inspired the Rabbinic insistence upon deathbed confessions. Every man sins and therefore confession is a legitimate universal need. Since we never know when death will come, Rabbi Eliezer in his well known statement suggests that we always be prepared. He said:

Repent one day before your death. His disciples asked him, does then one know on what day he will die? Then all the more reason to repent today, he replied, lest he die tomorrow, and thus his whole life is spent in repentance. 'Let thy garments be always white, and let not thy head lack ointment.' (Eccle. 9:8).<sup>1</sup>

The Rabbis toyed with psychology when they discussed the various positions and appearances of a dying man. The way he looks before the final moment can be a key to how he feels about his own integrity and worth.

If the Sages are pleased with one in the hour of his death, it is a good sign for him, if the Sages are displeased with him, it is a bad sign for him. If one's face is turned upward at death, it is a good sign for him, if his face is cast downward, it is a bad sign for him. If he fixes his gaze on men, it is a good sign for him, if he fixes his gaze on the wall, it is a bad sign for him. If (at death) one's face is bright it is a good sign for him, if one's face is overcast, it is a bad sign for him.<sup>2</sup>

Death is sometimes seen as a sentence, and needing a confession.



Our rabbis taught, if one falls sick and his life is in danger, he is told, make confession,<sup>3</sup> for all who are sentenced to death, make confession.

Since death is an atonement for all sins, the period immediately before it approaches is a suitable time for confession.

Rabbi Nathan establishes the rule that all who are about to die require confession.<sup>4</sup>

The Modern Jew in the last hour confession says:

'O may my death be an atonement for all the sins, iniquities, and transgressions of which I have been guilty against thee.<sup>5</sup>

Modern psychology presents certain cases where deathbed confessions proved sufficient to somehow alleviate anxiety, or somatic symptoms and spur the individual into health. It is an accepted premise that death can be induced or at least hastened by lack of a will to live, or even internalizing and repressing feelings and thoughts. A confession can thus alleviate these tensions. Judaism points out this same thought in their traditional beliefs.

When a Jew is dying he is counselled to make a full confession of his sins to God. His friends tell him that many persons who recited such a confession under similar circumstances did not die in consequence, while others have passed away without embracing the precious opportunity afforded them for repentance. Possibly through the merit of unreserved confession,<sup>7</sup> complete recovery will be vouchsafed to the sufferer.

However, if one does succumb, the death atones for his sins.

'This iniquity shall not be expiated by you till you die,'  
--death cleanses from sin. (Isa. 22:14)

And:

All the prophets prophesied in their lives. Samuel prophesied in life and after death. Samuel said to Saul, if you will listen to my counsel to fall on the sword, your death will atone for you, and your fate will be with mine.<sup>8</sup>

A prisoner on his way to execution once tried to prove his innocence by requesting that his death not expiate his sin.

It once happened that a man who was being taken to be executed said, if I am guilty of this sin, may my death not atone for any of my sins,<sup>9</sup> but if I am innocent, may my death expiate all my sins.

We also find an interpretation of Deut. 21:7,

'Forgive your people,' these are the living, that 'you have redeemed,' these are the dead.<sup>10</sup>

One must hearken to the Lord, in order to effect atonement. The Rabbis interpret (Deut. 28:1) as follows:

When shall he hearken to his teaching? Rabbi Judah said, in the hour that he is to depart from the world, as it is said, 'the end of the matter, all having been heard.'

The death of the righteous effect atonement not only for themselves but for others as well.

Rabbi Abba b. Abina enquired: For what reason was the section recording the death of Miriam placed in close proximity to that dealing with the ashes of the Red Heifer? Simply this, to teach that as the ashes of the Heifer effect atonement, so the death of the righteous effects atonement.<sup>12</sup>

A wicked person who has led a completely dissipated lifetime yet repents before death is rewarded by standing with the righteous in death, whereas a wicked man that does not repent loses the opportunity for atonement.

There were certain wicked men who were companions one to the other in this world. One of them repented in good time during his life before he died, but the other did not repent before his death. The one who had done this during his lifetime was in reward stationed by the side of the band of righteous, while the other stood by the side of the band of the wicked, and beholding his companion he exclaimed, Is there perhaps favoritism in this world! Woe to me! He and I were on earth together and were alike. We stole together, robbed together and did all the evil deeds in the world together. Why then, is he with the band of the righteous, while I am with the band of the wicked? You great fool! came the answer, you were a repulsive object after your death for three days, and people did not put you in a coffin but dragged you to the grave with ropes. Your companion saw your vileness and swore to turn from his way of wickedness. He repented like a righteous man, and his repentance caused him to receive here life, honor, and a portion with the righteous.<sup>13</sup>

Just as a wicked man can benefit by repentance as a final act, so a righteous man must be cautioned not to transgress before he dies.

If one performs a precept when near to his end, it is as though his quality of righteousness lacked only that precept and is completed thereby; and if one commits a transgression when near to his end, it is as though his quality of wickedness lacked only that transgression and is completed thereby. Both of them depart (from the world) fully consummated, one in the quality of righteousness and the other in the quality of wickedness.<sup>14</sup>

Some Midrashim see death as an atonement for sin, when it is accompanied by suffering. They thus purport to suffering a worthwhile purpose.

Besides satisfying the claims of a just God or of justice, death and suffering also atone and reconcile man with God.<sup>15</sup>

We find in the Midrash:

All the dead, in death make atonement. But this if there is suffering in correspondence with it. As it is said, 'whose iniquities are upon their bones.' (Ezek. 32:27)<sup>16</sup>

R. Jose went so far as to pray for suffering and death  
from bowel troubles. For he said:

The majority of the righteous die of trouble in their  
bowels (the suffering involved affects stomach). R.  
Jose also said, may my portion be of those who die on  
the way to the performance of a religious duty.<sup>1</sup>

## Death as an Atonement

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8. Yalkut. Ch. Samuel I, sec. 141.
9. Sanhedrin. 44b.
10. Sifre'. Ch. Shoftim, sec. 210.
11. Tanhuma. Ch. Tavo, sec. 4.
12. Midrash Va'yikra Raba. Ch. 20, sec. 12.
13. Midrash Koheleth Raba. Ch. 1, sec. 15.
14. Ibid., ch. 3, sec. 18.
15. Aspects of Rabbinic Theology. Solomon Schechter. P. 307.
16. Sifre'. Ch. Shaloch, sec. 112.
17. Shabat. 118b.

## CHAPTER IX

## Judgment at Death

In Rabbinic attitudes we find the idea that life does not end with death. What deeds man performs in his mortal existence remain with him, and are reviewed and judged by the Divine court after his death. Thus he cannot live his life in a mood of passivity and momentary pleasure, but must realize that in the final evaluation each deed is judged.

The philosopher, Nicolai Berdyaev, presents an interesting sidelight to this belief. It is not the man who feels death is the end that has a fear of death, as would be expected, but the man who believes in the Divine judgment. For the latter, each deed is significant and he believes so strongly in judgment that after death his troubles may only begin!

We come here upon a psychological paradox which to many people is unknown and incomprehensible. An active spirit which has a direct inward experience of being eternal and indestructible, may, so far from fearing death, actually desire it and envy those that do not believe in immortality and are convinced that death is the end. It is a mistake to imagine that the so-called faith in immortality is always comforting and that those that have it are in a privileged and enviable position. Faith in immortality is a comfort and makes life less hard, but it is also a source of terror and overwhelming responsibility....It would be more correct to say that the unbelievers rather than the believers make life easy for themselves...The extreme unendurable terror is not the terror of death but of judgment and of hell. It does not exist for the unbelievers, only the believers know it. A passive spirit seldom experiences it, but an active one experiences it with peculiar intensity, because it is apt to connect its destiny, and consequently judgment and the possibility of hell, with its own creative efforts.<sup>1</sup>



Kaufman Kohler discusses the origin of this Jewish belief in divine judgment.

The Hasidim and their successors the Pharisees were developing after the Persian pattern the thought of a divine judgment day after death, when the just were to awaken to eternal life, and the evil-doers to shame and everlasting contempt.

This advanced moral view transformed the ancient Sheol, from the realm of shades, to a place of punishment for sinners, and thus invested it with an ethical purpose.<sup>2</sup>

Death becomes in the concept of Divine judgment, an absolute necessity. For only when one expires can we begin to judge his accomplishments and failures. As long as he lives he is susceptible to the evil inclination, but after he dies, his reward can be bestowed upon him. In order to experience judgment and the corresponding after life, we must experience the phenomenon of death.

Thus:

Believe not in thyself until the day of thy death.<sup>3</sup> After death, is when our destiny is finalized.

Rabbinic Judaism teaches a resurrection after death for a life of eternal bliss or eternal torment, according as the divine judgment finds one righteous and another wicked.<sup>4</sup>

Only in death does man really face the Lord. This thought is deduced from the Biblical verse, 'No man can see me and live.' (Ex. 33:20), which implies that in death, man does meet his Creator.

In the solemn moment (of death) man, according to Jewish tradition, is given a momentary glimpse of God Himself, as it says, 'No man can see me and live.'--man cannot see me in life, but in death, as the Psalmist declares, 'All they that go down to the dust shall bow before him, even he that cannot keep his soul alive.' (Ps. 22:30).<sup>5</sup>

In the latter verse the Psalmist seems to refer to those living who will eventually die, however, with Midrashic interpretation it becomes a proof text for man seeing God at death.

Rabbi Dosa, in interpreting this verse (Ex. 33:20) says virtually the same thing, and is probably Bender's source text.

This implies that men cannot see God when they are alive, but that they can see Him at their death, in this strain it says, 'All they that go down to the dust shall kneel before Him, even he that cannot keep his soul alive.'  
(Ps. 22:30)<sup>6</sup>

In his last hours, Rabban Johanan expressed verbally this belief, while weeping out loud.

O Master, his disciples exclaimed, why art thou weeping? He answered, Do I go to appear before a king of flesh and blood, whose anger if he should be angry with me, is but of this world, and whose chastising if he should chastize me is but of this world, and whose slaying is but of this world, whom I can moreover appease with words or bribe with money? Verily I go before the King of Kings the Holy One praised be He, whose answer if he should be angry with me, is of this world and the world to come. whom I cannot appease with words, or bribe with money. Also I have before me two roads, one to Paradise, and one to Gehenna, and I know not to which he will sentence me.<sup>7</sup>

The 'sentence' to which Rabban Johanan refers is discussed more explicitly in other Midrashim which describe the ultimate confrontation between man and God.

Let not thine Yezer assure thee that the grave is a place of refuge for thee, for perforce thou wast framed, ...perforce thou livest, perforce thou diest, and perforce thou art about to give account before the King of Kings.<sup>8</sup> (from Avot. 4:22)

In the text we find:

The soul of man and the soul of animals, all go to one place. One thing happens to man and to beast on the day of death. But when an animal dies, her master

sells her to the Goyim, and they eat her. When she dies her spirit has rest, but man when he dies, his spirit does not have rest but stands in judgment, and all his deeds are ordered before him, good and evil, and they say, 'such and such you did, and such and such you said, on such and such a day...'<sup>9</sup>

And:

When man departs from the world, all of his deeds come and are singled out before him. And he (God) says to him, this you did on such and such a day, and he says thus and thus, and God says it is sealed! 'he sealeth up the hand of every man.' (Job 37:7)<sup>10</sup>

Even though the Midrash might postpone the divine judgment until the 'future world,' the deeds of man in life bear the same importance.

When a man is about to depart from the world, the Holy One reveals (himself) to him, and says, 'your deeds are written and you shall die for your deeds, and he writes (them) and seals it. In the future world when the Holy One brings his creatures to judgment, he will bring all the records of man and show them their deeds.'<sup>11</sup>

One Midrash deals specifically with the questions man will be asked in the final judgment, and in which areas he should thus strive to improve himself. However, the final determinant overarching all, is his love of the Lord.

Raba said, when a man is led in for judgment he is asked, Did you deal faithfully, did you fix times for learning, did you engage in procreation, did you hope for salvation, did you engage in the dialectics of wisdom, did you understand one thing from another. Yet even so, if 'the fear of the Lord is his treasure' it is well, if not, (it is) not (well).<sup>12</sup>

Even with these guidelines the final judgment is still hidden from man.

Our rabbis taught, seven things are hidden from man. These are they, the day of death, and the day of comfort, (no one knows when he will be relieved of his anxieties), the depth of judgment...etc.<sup>13</sup>

The Rabbis were so concerned with the idea of Divine judgment, that even when one passed through a graveyard it was incumbent upon him to recall it to mind.

On seeing Israelitish graves, one should say, blessed is He who fashioned you in judgment, who fed and maintained you in judgment, and in judgment gathered you in, and will one day raise you up again in judgment.<sup>14</sup>

Another Midrash also deals directly with Divine judgment and the belief in the future life.

He that passes a grave is obliged to give a blessing. Blessed is he that created you with judgment, and destroys you with judgment, and in the future you will stand in judgment.

Two Rabbis were walking in a graveyard and one of them gave a blessing. His friend said to him, 'the dead know nothing.' He answered, there is nothing between the dead and the living except one thing, as it is written, 'Let the saint exult in glory, let them sing for joy upon their beds.' (Ps. 199:5)<sup>15</sup>

## Judgment at Death

1. Readings in the Philosophy of Religion. 'Death and Immortality.' Nicolai Berdyaev. P. 495.
2. Jewish Theology. Kaufman Kohler. P. 283.
3. Berachot. P. 60b.
4. Op. cit. Kaufman Kohler, p. 300.
5. Jewish Quarterly Review. 'Beliefs, Rites and Customs Connected with Death, Burial and Mourning.' A.P. Bender. Vol. 6 (1894), p. 670.
6. Midrash Bamidbar Raba. Ch. 14, sec. 22.
7. Avot de'Rabi Nathan. Ch. 25, p. 105.
8. Aspects of Rabbinic Theology. Solomon Schechter. P. 304.
9. Otiot d'Rabi Akiba. Ch. Nun., p. 65-6.
10. Sifre. Ch. Ha'ayinu. Sec. 307.
11. Yalkut. Ch. Job. Sec. 922, p. 1019.
12. Shabat. 31a.
13. Pesahim. 54b.
14. Berachot. 58b.
15. Pesikta Rabati. Ch. 12, p. 47.

## CHAPTER X

## Hope in Death

Mortals are not willing to stand passively by, and accept death as a finality. To the human mind, there must be something more, and God would not strand man at the portal of eternity.

Many modern-day writers have felt compelled to formulate a sensible approach to death and the frightening thought of non-being. Where the Midrash itself takes a more casual, simple, and matter of fact attitude toward death, the modern writers give the impression that they are belaboring a point, and sometimes even trying to convince themselves as well as their readers.

Death is man's first completely personal act, and is therefore by reason of its very being, the place above all others for the awakening of consciousness for freedom, for the encounter with God, for the final decision about eternal destiny.<sup>1</sup>

Rollo May tells us that each man is concerned with the future as the most meaningful of the three modes of time. Since this is the case, death poses a sensitive barrier in the way of man's longings and hopes.

The present is not merely the now; it describes a dynamic process of the individual's continuously moving into the future. Thus we regard the future as the most important and determinative of the three modes of time. Every alive conscious human being...is oriented to the future and is engaged at every moment in designing his future...As Heidegger puts it in his famous phrase, 'running forward in thought toward death' (and then beyond).<sup>2</sup>



Since death is a part of life, there is a point of view that it cannot be an evil, and even 'contributes to the welfare of the human race.'

Everything that God has created, must of necessity serve a beneficent purpose. The insertion of the 'very' in the judgment, 'God saw everything that he had made and behold it was very good (Gen. 1:31) was explained as including death, the evil impulse in man, suffering, and Gehinnom, as each of them contributed in the end to the welfare of the human race.<sup>3</sup>

Leo Baeck emphasizes the return of man from the limiting and temporal world into eternity.

With his faith in God, man gained mastery over his loneliness in the world, with the idea of immortality trust gains a new note, and the paradox of the eternity of mortal man, the paradox of human divineness gains precision.

In death he passes through the gate, into (he believes) that eternity to which he belongs, to the great answer in which all the questions of his life, and all its paradoxes are included.

Death is the great return. The liberation from the merely earthly and limiting, earth vanishes and eternity receives.<sup>4</sup>

Kaufman Kohler presents a similar point of view. Man cannot resign himself to decay and deterioration after death, but to the contrary he compensates, sometimes even overcompensates in overcoming the terror of death.

The vision of man is directed upwards and forwards and he will not resign himself to decay in the dust. As he bears in his breast the consciousness of a higher divine world, he is equally confident of his own continuity after death...The longing for a future life, has filled him and buoyed him up.<sup>5</sup>

Modern thought and philosophy have basically the same attitude toward death as primitive man. For each man it is a loss or separation, which he finds difficult to accept

passively and without explanation. Jacques Maritain discusses the Neanderthal man in these terms.

We are dealing already with the dawn of human thought, which reveals itself in a kind of revolt against death. And revolt against death implies love for those who have gone, as well as the hope that their disappearance is not final...The idea of finality is unbearable.<sup>6</sup>

The prospect of non-being is frightening for the living, yet even more for the man about to depart. It is up to religion to make him secure in his final moments, and possibly strengthen him with some form of hope, and courage. This same thought would be valid with regard to a man approaching an operation, or anytime when he seems closer than usual to death.

On the healing team the pastor has a valid place in helping to release the patient from the burden of guilt and the stress of anxiety.

He can help the process of true self-discovery and self-actualization that can aid the person in being able to say with illumination of spirit 'I am.' If there is even a need for the 'courage to be' it is at the moment when the prospect of non-being is encountered.

In the Midrash we also find this hope in God as our support in death.

Said Rabbi Joshua ben Levi, in three places we have heard that man heard His teaching that He is a support in his death. As it is said, 'That I might make thee know the certainty of the words of truth.' (Prov. 22:21) And as Solomon said, 'The end of the matter all having been heard.' (Eccle. 12:3) 'A land of the shadow of death without any order.' (Job 10:22) Since man must have clearness on death, and order his learning.

Rabbi Tanhuma ben Abba said, since He comes to remove (him) the ministering angels say to him, 'Ascribe ye strength unto god.' (Ps. 68:35)<sup>8</sup>

Although it is beyond the confines of this paper, there is a belief that there will be a reunion of the dead in the

world to come. This belief cannot help but affect our attitudes toward death.

When one of the prominent men of Sepphoris, a heretic it is said, lost his son by death, R. Jose went up to comfort him. When he saw the man, R. Jose smiled. The man asked, 'Why art thou smiling?' R. Jose answered, 'We trust in the Lord of heaven, that thou wilt see thy son in the world to come.'<sup>9</sup>

We also find a belief that not only will we meet again in the world to come, but also that in the Messianic future, death will disappear.

The distinction which I made between the celestial creatures and the terrestrial, viz., that the former endure while the latter die, holds good only in this world, but in the Messianic future there will be no death at all; as it is stated, 'He will swallow up death forever.' (Isa. 25:8)<sup>10</sup>

## Hope in Death

1. The Mystery of Death. Ladislaus Boros. P. 84.
2. American Handbook of Psychiatry. 'The Existential Approach.' Rollo May. Vol. II, p. 1356.
3. Everyman's Talmud. Sec. 9, p. 38.
4. Essence of Judaism. Leo Baeck. P. 185.
5. Jewish Theology. Kaufman Kohler. P. 278.
6. Readings in the Philosophy of Religion. 'The Immortality of the Soul.' Jacques Maritain. P. 472.
7. Counselling the Dying. M. Bowers and E. Jackson. P. 145.
8. Tanhuma. Ch. Bo. Sec. 2
9. Midrash Psalms. Ch. 2, verse 11.
10. Midrash Koheleth Raba. Ch. 1, sec. 3.

## CHAPTER XI

## The Body and Soul at Death

## A. The Soul of Man

Modern emphasis in theology stresses the idea that the soul returns to God after death. There is a common belief that the body is material and capable of deterioration but the soul is spiritual and lives on eternally.

Jacques Maritain, a contemporary philosopher, discusses this aspect of man, and tries to prove the spirituality of the soul.

For a spiritual soul has no parts and is not subject to corruption. It is the source of all its energies and cannot die...However, even without philosophy there exists a kind of instinctive and natural belief in immortality.<sup>1</sup>

Thus:

The human soul cannot die. Once it exists, it cannot disappear; it will necessarily exist forever, endure without end.<sup>2</sup>

This belief evaluated and analyzed by Maritain, is basically the same belief expressed "instinctively and naturally" by our Rabbis. They even attempt to elaborate on the description of the soul departing and going to its eternal home.

How does the soul depart? R. Johanan said, like rushing water from a channel. R. Hanina said, like swirling water from a channel. R. Samuel said, like a moist<sup>3</sup> and inverted thorn (tearing its way) out of the throat.

And:

When his time has come to depart from the world, the angel of death comes to take the soul of man. What is

the soul like? Like a species of a reed full of blood, and little reeds scattered throughout the body. The angel takes hold of the top of the reed and pulls it.

From the body of the righteous as if he pulls a thread from milk, from the evil, like the croup or gushing water at the entrance of a canal, when the sluice bars are raised.<sup>4</sup>

The Rabbis weren't certain when the soul finally reaches its assigned place in heaven. Since there is a period of time before the body decomposes, the question is raised as to how long the soul remained linked to the material man.

A certain Sadducee said to R. Abbahu, You maintain that the souls of the righteous are hidden under the Throne of Glory, then how did the bone (practising) necromancer bring up Samuel by means of his necromancy? Then it was within 12 months, he replied. For it was taught, for full (12 months) the body is in existence and the soul ascends and descends, after 12 months the body ceases to exist, and the soul ascends, but descends nevermore.<sup>5</sup>

Another Midrash gives the soul a lesser period of time before it returns to God.

All the seven days of mourning the soul goes forth and returns from the body. After the seven days the body begins to decay, and return to the dust as it originally was, as it is said, 'And the dust returns to the earth.' (Eccle. 12:7) The soul goes forth and returns to the place where it was given, from heaven, as it says, 'And the soul returns to God who gave it.' How do we know the soul has been given from Heaven?

When the Holy One formed man, he did not have a spirit in him, so God breathed with the breath of his mouth, and cast a soul into him, as it is written, 'And he breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.' (Gen. 2:7)<sup>6</sup>

This belief in the lingering soul is probably what inspired the following Midrash:

There is no cdasing to teach Talmud Torah to the dead until their souls go forth.<sup>7</sup>

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There seems to be a clearly accepted belief in the Midrash that after death, 'the soul returns to God who gave it.'

The soul is like its Creator. Just as the Holy One sees and is not visible, so the soul sees and is not visible. Just as the Holy One bears his world, so the soul bears all the body. All souls are his, as it is written, 'Behold, all souls are mine.' (Ezek. 18:4)<sup>8</sup>

And we have a more descriptive division of which parts of man belong to God.

Our Rabbis taught, there are three partners in man, the Holy One, his father and his mother. His father supplies the semen of the white substance out of which are formed the child's bones, sinews, nails, ... his mother, the red substance, skin, flesh ... and the Holy One, blessed be He, gives him the spirit and the breath (soul), beauty of features, eyesight, the power of hearing, and ability to speak and to walk, understanding and discernment. When his time to depart comes, the Holy One takes away his share and leaves the shares of his father and mother with them.<sup>9</sup>

And:

'And keep thee' (Num. 6:24) means, He will keep thy soul in the hour of death. In the same strain it says 'the soul of my Lord shall be bound in the bundle of life.' (I Sam. 25:29)<sup>10</sup>

A special problem arises here which gave the Rabbis great concern. The soul's returning to God is understandable within the tradition, yet if a man is wicked, what differentiation is there between the ultimate fate of his soul and that of the righteous man? There would be a paradox if all the souls return to God, for then the wicked would actually be improving their situation in death, and receiving equal treatment with the righteous (since souls are pure and eternal, and cannot really be categorized into righteous and wicked).



Spake the Holy One, to man, 'Behold I am pure, my habitation is pure, my attendants are pure, and the soul which I gave you is pure. If you return it to me as I give it to you, well and good; otherwise I will burn it in your presence.<sup>11</sup>

And:

To all (with) days there will be death, but the righteous even though they wait for the days of leaving the world, they themselves will live, as it is said, 'in his hands are the souls of all the living; because the souls of the living return to his hand, and the dead do not return to his hand. These are the righteous that even in their death are considered alive...But the wicked, in life are considered dead...the wicked in his life is considered as dead, because he sees the sun shining and does not bless the Creator of light.<sup>12</sup>

The righteous also can give the wicked another chance through their kindness.

When the soul departs from the body, the cry goes forth from one end of the world to the other, and the voice is not heard. The soul does not go out of the body until it beholds the Shekinah, as it is said, 'For man shall not see me and live.' (Ex. 33:20)

All the souls go forth and are gathered to the generations of his father and his people. The righteous with the righteous, and the wicked with the wicked. The righteous come to meet them, and say unto them, Come unto peace.<sup>13</sup>

The righteous can be certain that they will benefit from their righteousness.

The Holy One, blessed be He, takes the souls of the righteous with pleasure. This can be compared to a trustworthy man that was in a city and he himself took a deposit to return (to someone). He knew when the deposit was to be delivered and immediately returned it. But if he had said to his messenger, 'go and take the deposit to such and such a one in order that we may know where he changes the upper to the lower, and the lower to the upper (where he keeps the money, in order to steal from him later)

The departure of the souls of the righteous is a sad occurrence, but especially grievous was the death of Moses.

At that hour, Moses arose and sanctified himself like the Seraphim, and God came down from the highest heaven to take away the soul of Moses, and with him were three ministering angels, Gabriel, Michael, and Zagzagel. Michael laid out his bier, Gabriel spread out a fine linen cloth at his bolster, Zagzagel one at his feet... God kissed Moses and took away his soul, with a kiss of the mouth, and God, if one might say so, wept.<sup>14</sup>

Coming from God, the soul must eventually go back to him. However, according to the Midrash, at a future time, the soul will be restored to man. Thus, we read the prayer expressed by the Israelite every morning after awakening:

O God, the soul which thou hast set within me is pure,... thou hast breathed it into me, and dost keep it within me,...and thou wilt take it from me...and restore it to me in the time to come.<sup>15</sup>

And we find:

'In his hands are the souls of all life.' (Job 12:10)  
It is likened to a man walking in a market, and his keys are in his hand. All the time that his keys are in his hand, his wealth is in his hand.

Thus, the Holy One, the keys of the graveyards are in his hand and the keys to the treasures of the soul. In the future he will open the graves and open the treasures of the soul, and return every spirit to the flesh and body of man.<sup>16</sup>

### B. The Body of Man

We have an abundance of Midrashim expressing the eternity of the soul of man; however, most sources agree that the body disintegrates and returns to the dust. The Rabbis offer a frank and realistic approach to the end of life, with no qualms or reservations about describing the 'worms' or the corpse of man. The greatest loss at death, according to the Rabbis, is the opportunity to praise God and serve him through our actions, and therefore they emphasize these gloomy aspects of life in order to spur us to live our lives more fruitfully and extol God while we have the opportunity.

The fact that the body dissolves is not contradictory with an after life (generally connected with the soul), nor does it induce a fatalistic or pessimistic attitude toward life, but on the contrary, stresses life all the more keenly.

Job, when he suffers almost unendurably, is visited by his three friends who say to him,

'Is there not to you but four cubits in the hour of your death?' (meaning that Job should repent and live well while the opportunity exists).<sup>1</sup>

And:

A daughter of R. Hisda once asked him, 'Does the master desire to sleep a little?' He said to her, soon our days will be both long and short, and we shall sleep long and well.<sup>3</sup>

R. Hisda implies that our days will be long in quantity, and equally short in quality. (Footnote to quote in Talmud)  
Raba went a step further in verbalizing the futility of

the grave, by contrasting it with life. He said,

I am dust in my lifetime, all the more in my death. Behold, I am before thee like a vessel full of shame and confusion.<sup>4</sup>

The future was not always optimistic, and to some Rabbis the prospect of man is but worms.

What is the future of man to be? Worms, and the son of man worms...Man is worms in his life, and worms in his death.<sup>5</sup>

Man cannot expect to take anything with him when he leaves the world. He brought nothing here, and no matter his accomplishments, he leaves as he entered.

'Naked shall he go back, as he came.' (Eccle. 5:14) As a man enters the world so he departs. He enters it with a cry and departs from the world with a cry. He enters the world with weeping, and takes leave of it with weeping...He enters the world with a sigh and takes leave of it with a sigh. He enters the world devoid of knowledge and takes leave of it, devoid of knowledge. It has been taught in the name of R. Meir, When a person enters the world his hands are clenched as though to say, 'The whole world is mine, I shall inherit it,' but when he takes leave of it, his hands are spread open as though to say, 'I have inherited nothing from the world.'<sup>6</sup>

The wise share this same fate with other men.

All the time that the wise are alive their wisdom is, alive, when the wise are dead, their wisdom is lost.<sup>7</sup>

And commenting on Ecclesiastes 3:22 we see:

Who will bring David (back to life) to see what Solomon made? Who will bring Solomon back to see what will happen to him through what Rehoboam did?<sup>8</sup>

Once a man is dead, he no longer bears any significance on the living, but life continues on without him.

Our rabbis taught, three things (God) willed to come to pass and if He had not willed them, it would be but right that he should will them. And these are they, concerning a corpse, that it should become offensive, and concerning a dead person, that he should be forgotten from the heart...<sup>9</sup>

Legally also the dead person is valueless.

(If one said) 'I vow my worth' and died, the heirs need not give him anything, because a dead man has no worth.<sup>10</sup>

The worst misfortune of the dead man is that he is no longer capable of performing good deeds or studying, and thus is not worthy of praise from the Holy One.

'The dead praise not the Lord.' (Ps. 115-17) Let a man always engage in Torah and good deeds before he dies, for as soon as he dies he is restrained from Torah and good deeds, and the Holy One finds nought to praise in him.<sup>11</sup>

When one dies, we must not indulge in excessive grief. They are dead, and we must accept the fact. The rabbis threaten that if one does not limit himself to a reasonable bereavement, he will soon weep for another.

There was a certain woman that lived in the neighborhood of R. Huna, she had seven sons, one of whom died, and she wept for him rather excessively. R. Huna sent word to her, 'Act not thus.' She heeded him not, and he sent to her 'If you heed my word, it is well, but if not, are you anxious to make provision (shrouds) for yet another?' The next son died, and they all died. In the end he said to her, are you fumbling with provision for yourself? And she died.<sup>12</sup>

## The Soul of Man

1. Readings in the Philosophy of Religion. Jaques Maritain.  
P. 468.
2. Ibid., p. 472.
3. Midrash Koheleth Raba. Ch. 6, sec. 5.
4. Shohad Toy (Midrash Thilim) Ch. Thilim, sec. 11., p. 102.
5. Shabat. 152b.
6. Pirke d'Rabi Eliezer. Ch. 34.
7. Semachot. Ch. 8, p. 159.
8. Pirke de Rabi Eliezer. Ch. 34.
9. Nidah. 31a.
10. Midrash Bamidbar Raba. Ch. 11, sec. 5.
11. Midrash Koheleth Raba. Ch. 12, sec. 1.
12. Midrash Tanhuma. Ch. Beracha, sec. 7.
13. Pirke d'Rabi Eliezer. Ch. 34.
14. Midrash Davarim Raba. Ch. 11, sec. 10.
15. Berahot. 60b.
16. Pirke de Rabi Eliezer. Ch. 34, p. 81.

## The Body of Man

1. Pesikta di Rav Kahana. Ch. 11.
2. Erubin. 65a.
3. Berachot. 17b.
4. Midrash Derech Eretz Raba. Ch. 3, sec. 1.
5. Midrash Koheleth Raba. Ch. 5, sec. 14.
6. Mekilta. Ch. Jethro, sec. 20.
7. Midrash Koheleth Raba. Ch. 3, sec. 1.
8. Pesachim. 54b.
9. Arakin. 20a.
10. Shabat. 30a.
11. Moed Katan. 27b.



## CHAPTER XII

## Immortality Through Children

Today much emphasis is placed on the idea that a man lives on through his children. Each man is anxious to have a son, in order that his name may be carried on. Biblical and Talmudic tradition also verbalized the same hope, and children assured a man of immortality in the physical world.

R. Johanan said, Jacob our patriarch is not dead. R. Nahman objected. Was it then for nought that he was bewailed, and embalmed, and buried? The other replied, I derive this from a Scriptural verse, as it is said, 'Therefore fear thou not O Jacob, my servant,' saith the Lord, 'neither be dismayed O Israel, for lo, I will save thee from afar and thy seed from the land of their captivity. (Jer. 30:10) The verse likens Jacob to his seed (Israel), as his seed will then be alive, so too will he be alive.'

Even when a great man dies, life continues on for the living.

When Rabi was about to depart (from life) he said, 'I require (the presence) of my sons.' When his sons entered, he instructed them, 'take care that you show due respect to your mother. The light shall continue to burn in its usual place, the table shall be laid in its usual place, (and my) bed shall be spread in its usual place.'<sup>2</sup>

If one has no children in life, there is nothing left for him but to die.

When a person is born, the Holy One, blessed be He, looks to him to marry before the age of 20. If he reaches that age without marrying, the Holy One, blessed be He, says to him, 'It was for you a time (for children) to be born and you were unwilling, so there is nothing else than a time to die.'<sup>3</sup>

And:

'Weep sore for him that goeth away! Said Rab Judah, that means, Weep for him who goes (to his long home) childless.

R. Joshua b. Levi would not go to (visit) a house of mourning save to that of one who had gone childless, for it is written, 'weep for him that goeth away' (goeth away also means to die childless) 'for he shall return no more nor see his native country.' (Jer. 22:10)<sup>4</sup>

When Samuel the Little died, they suspended his key and purse from his coffin, because he didn't have a son. Rabban Gamliel and Rabbi Eleazar lamented for him, and said, for this it is becoming (suited) to cry and to mourn, for when kings die they leave their crowns to their sons, the rich die and leave their riches to their sons, Samuel Ha Katan took all his worldly precious things and went to Him (God).<sup>5</sup>

Another Midrash emphasizes the idea that leaving a son is not sufficient, but he must be a good son, in order to save his father from 'death.'

Why was the expression 'sleeping' used in the case of David, and 'death' in the case of Joab? 'Sleeping' was used in the case of David because he left a son, 'death' was used in the case of Joab because he left no son. Did not Joab have a son? But with David who left a son like himself, 'sleeping' was used, with Joab, who did not have a son like himself 'death' was used.<sup>6</sup>

And, finally, the Midrash attempted to avoid any form of ancestor worship. Man not only leaves children to carry on his name, but his children become equally important in time to their fathers. One cannot look back and extol past generations, but,

R. Abba b. Kahana said, The generation which comes should be esteemed by you, as the generation which has passed, that you should not say, If R. Akiba were now living, I would study Scripture with him.

But the generation which comes in your days and the Sage who is in your days, should be like the generation which has passed, and the former Sages who preceded you?

Although this chapter is shorter than many others in my thesis, this does not imply that the belief in immortality through one's children was not a widely held rationalization for death, but to the contrary would probably imply that this attitude was generally held by most of the people.

Injunctions against bachelorhood, and acceptance of levirate marriages were, both inducements for man to be fruitful and multiply, as well as carry on a family name. Living through one's children thus would be a natural and accepted deduction from these emphases.

## Immortality Through Children

1. Taanit. 5b.
2. Ketuboth. 103a.
3. Midrash Koheleth Raba. Ch. 3, sec. 2.
4. Moed Katan. 17b.
5. Semachot. Ch. 8, p. 152.
6. Baba Batra.
7. Midrash Koheleth Raba. Ch. 1, sec. 4.

## CHAPTER XIII

## The Loss of Death

When death occurs, a great loss is felt by those close to the deceased, and they cannot help but mourn. Weeping was an acceptable form of expression during this period, and the Midrash portrays the feelings of grief which people experience when a dear one dies. To go a step further, when a great man dies, all the community feels sorrow and mourns, and even God, in Midrashic lore, is capable of tears and grief.

The Cuthean asked, Since (the dead) come back to life, clothed and fed, why do you weep over them (when they die)? He answered, 'A curse upon you! Shall a man lose something that is precious to him and not weep? As the human being comes (into the world) with loud cries, so he departs with loud cries (from the bereaved).'<sup>1</sup>

When Abraham passed away the world felt the loss strongly.

R. Hanan b. Raba said, in the name of Rab: On the day when Abraham our father passed from the world, all the great ones of the nations of the world, stood in a line (to offer comfort to the mourners) and said Woe to the world that has lost its leader, and woe to the ship that has lost its pilot.<sup>2</sup>

Jacob's pottage, according to one Midrash, was the meal of comfort for Abraham's death. (Gen. 25:29)

What is the purpose of this pottage? Esau asked him. I made it because that old man (Abraham) has died, he replied. Judgment has overtaken that righteous man! exclaimed he, then there is neither reward or resurrection! But lo! the holy spirit cries out, 'Weep ye not for the dead.' (Jer. 22:10)<sup>3</sup>

Aaron, also, was mourned by all the people.

You find that when Aaron died, the clouds of glory departed. All Israel assembled to mourn him. They said, Moses mourns, Eleazar mourns, so who should not mourn?<sup>4</sup>

When great men die, the world suffers, and the Talmud descriptively laments the death of the Rabbis.

When R. Eliezer died, the Torah Scroll was hidden away, when R. Joshua died, counsel and thought ceased. When R. Akiba died, the arms of the Torah ceased, and the fountains of wisdom were stopped up. When R. Hanina b. Dosa died, men of deeds ceased. When Rabbi died troubles were multiplied twofold.<sup>5</sup>

Also on Rabbi's death, we find:

On the day when Rabbi died, the Rabbis decreed a public fast and offered prayers for heavenly mercy.

They furthermore announced, that whoever said that Rabbi was dead would be stabbed with a sword.<sup>6</sup>

The Midrash elaborates upon mourning when one feels sadness to the depths of his soul, however it also discusses weeping with an ulterior motive in mind. Every man wants to be missed, or wept for when he dies, therefore if we weep for others we can then anticipate reciprocation.

Do something for others, so that others may do something for thee. Weep for others, that others may weep for thee, accompany others (to the grave) that others may accompany thee; pay respect (to the dead) that others may pay respect to thee.<sup>7</sup>

And:

The common proverb runs, when your friend's son dies bear with him (in sorrow), when your friend dies, throw off sorrow. Therefore he said to him, if you show me kindness at my death and after my death, that indeed is a true kindness.<sup>8</sup>

In the above example one 'throws off sorrow' when a friend dies, since there will be none to repay him at his own death. In spite of this seemingly callous attitude, there is a distinction between token mourning and weeping out of 'true

kindness as the last sentence describes.

Man is not the only mourner; and even God in anthropomorphic terms, feels grief when one of his righteous ones passes away.

He mourns over the world like a father over the death of his son, when the deluge is imminent; he concedes with Isaac after the death of Abraham, he performs the last honors for Moses, who would otherwise have remained unburied, and to this very day he keeps schools in heaven for those who died in their infancy.<sup>10</sup>

In the text we find:

The Holy One, Blessed be He, summoned the ministering angels and said to them, 'If a human king had a son who died and mourns for him, what is it customary for him to do?' They replied, 'he hangs sackcloth over his door.' He said to them, 'I will do likewise. 'I clothe the heavens with blackness, and I make sackcloth their covering.' (Isa. 50:3)<sup>11</sup>

When Moses died even the angels mourned for him.

It is taught that when Moses was taken to the wings of the Shechina, the ministering angels mourned him and said, 'peace will come.'<sup>12</sup>

The Holy One is so concerned with man that on one occasion he postpones a misfortune to allow man to enjoy a period of happiness.

A king gave his daughter in marriage and discovered that her 'shoshbin' had been guilty of lewdness. The king thought, 'If I kill him now I shall mar the happiness of my daughter. Tomorrow I shall be celebrating my own joyous occasion, better let the sad thing be on my joyous occasion than on my daughter's.' Thus also thought the Holy One, Blessed be He. 'If I slay Nadab and Abihu now, I shall mar the joy of the Torah (at the time of the Revelation at Sinai). Presently my own happy occasion is coming (erection of the Tabernacle). Better let the sad duty be performed during My happiness than during that of the Torah.'<sup>13</sup>



Those that feel the death of a man most deeply are those close to him. A wife mourns most strongly for her husband, and a husband for his wife.

The death of a man is felt by none but his wife, as it is said ('And Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died.' Ruth 1:3) The death of a woman is felt by none but her husband...

Our patriarch Jacob, said 'The death of Rachel is more grievous to me than all the calamities which have befallen me.'<sup>13</sup>

The death of a parent is not only felt deeply but visually one mourns more strongly.

For all (other) dead, one makes a rent (in his tunic) of a handbreadth, for one's father or mother (he rends his clothes) till he bares his heart (chest).<sup>14</sup>

## The Loss of Death

1. Midrash Koheleth Raba. Ch. 5, sec. 10
2. Baba Batra. 91a.
3. Midrash Bereshit Raba. Ch. 63, sec. 11.
4. Midrash Eshah Raba. Ch. 1, sec. 56.
5. Sotah. 49b.
6. Ketuboth. 104a.
7. Midrash Bereshit Raba. Ch. 6, p. 927.
8. Ibid.
9. The Rabbinic Mind. Max Kadushin. P. 141.
10. Midrash Eshah Raba. Ch. 1, sec. 1.
11. Sifre. Ch. Beracha, sec. 354.
12. Midrash Bamidbar Raba. Ch. 2, sec. 25.
13. Midrash Bath Raba. Ch. 2, sec. 7.
14. Moed Katan. 22b.

## CHAPTER XIV

## Communication with the Dead

There are references in the Midrash to conversations between the dead and the living. In some of these examples the deceased appear to the living in dreams, whereas in other cases the living communicate with the dead in the cemetery. The Rabbis had discussions as to whether the dead would actually be aware of the happenings in the world, and no clear cut decision was reached.

R. Issac said, If one makes remarks about the dead, it is like making remarks about a stone. Some say (the reason is that) they do not know, others say they do not care. Can that be so? Has not R. Papa said, a certain man made derogatory remarks about Mar Samuel and a log fell from the roof and broke his skull.<sup>1</sup>

Rabbi, it was believed, would return to his home after he died and celebrate the Sabbath with his family.

When Rabbi was about to depart he said, I require the presence of my sons....The light shall continue to burn in its usual place, the table shall be spread in its usual place and my bed shall be spread in its usual place. Joseph of Haifa and Simeon of Efrath who attend on me in my lifetime, shall attend on me when I am dead....He used to come home again at twilight every Sabbath Eve. On a certain Sabbath Eve a neighbor came to the door speaking aloud, when his handmaid whispered, 'Be quiet for Rabbi is sitting there.' As soon as he heard this he came no more, in order that no reflection might be cast on the earlier saints (righteous and pious men who were denied the privilege of revisiting their earthly homes).<sup>2</sup>

We have several examples of the deceased appearing to men in dreams. Raba sat at R. Nahman's bedside as the Angel of Death came to take him. R. Nahman begged to Raba to intercede so that he would not die with torment and suffering.

Later he showed himself to Raba in a dream and when Raba asked if he suffered, he answered,

As little as taking hair from milk, and were the Holy One to say to me, Go back to the world as you were, I wish it not, for the dread thereof (of death) is great.<sup>3</sup>

And another dream in the Midrash,

Rab Judah said, if there are none to be comforted for a dead person, 10 people go and sit in his place. A certain man died in the neighborhood of Rab Judah, as there none to be comforted Rab Judah assembled 10 men every day and they sat in his place. After seven days he (the dead man) appeared to him in a dream and said to him, 'thy mind be at rest for thou hast set my mind at rest.' R. Abbahu said, the dead man knows all that is said in his presence until the top-stone closes (the grave).<sup>4</sup>

There are many examples of men going to the cemetery to entreat assistance from, or ask questions of the departed.

Why do they go to the cemetery? There is a difference of opinion between R. Levi b. Hama and R. Hanina. One says (to signify thereby) 'we are as dead before thee,' and the other says 'in order that the dead should intercede for mercy on our behalf.'

And:

R. Mani was annoyed by the members of the household of the Patriarch, he went and prostrated himself on the grave of his father and exclaimed, Father, father, these people persecute me. Once as they were passing (the grave) the knees of their horses became stiff, until they undertook not to persecute him any longer.

Samuel went to ask his father where he kept his money, after the father had passed away.

The father of Samuel had some money belonging to orphans deposited with him. When he died... (Samuel) went after his father to the cemetery, and said to them (the dead) I am looking for Abba. They said to him, there are many Abbas here....

Meanwhile his father came.<sup>7</sup>

Samuel conversed with his father, who told him where the money was hidden. Samuel upon noticing that his father was weeping, asked him what made him so sad. He immediately informed his son that he too would soon be among the dead. The next moment Samuel's father switched to laughter, and upon inquiry as to the motivation for glee, he tells Samuel he is happy that he is so highly esteemed in the world.

R. Zeiri has a similar experience regarding money. The following quote also points out the vanity of women who always are concerned about appearance.

Zeiri deposited some money with his landlady, and while he was visiting Rab, she died. He went after her to the cemetery and said to her, Where is my money? She replied to him: go and take it from under the ground...and tell my mother to send me my comb and my tube of eye paint by the hand of So and So who is coming here tomorrow.<sup>8</sup>

One must be careful of his appearance, and show respect to the dead.

R. Hiyya on the way to the cemetery with R. Johanan, he noticed the zizit of the latter's garment untied, and admonished him to pick them up, else the dead would remark, 'Tomorrow they will join us and now they scoff at us.'<sup>9</sup>

There is an example in the Midrash of a man eavesdropping on the spirits in the graveyard.

The worm is painful to the dead as a needle in the flesh of the living. It is explained that they know their own pain, they do not know the pain of others. Is that so? Has it not been taught: It is related that a certain pious man gave a dinar to a poor man on the eve of New Year in a year of drought, and his wife scolded him, and he went and passed the night in the cemetery and he heard two spirits conversing one with the other.

One of the spirits wandered through the world, but the

other couldn't because it was buried in a matting of reeds (not linen shrouds). The man learned of coming rains, blights, etc., and two years consecutively saved his crops from harm. Later he relates to his wife the incident, and how only his crops were unharmed. In an argument with the mother of the child (buried in reeds) his wife mentions the reeds derogatorily. The next time the man visits the cemetery the spirits decide to be quiet as their conversations were overheard.<sup>10</sup>

## Communication with the Dead

1. Berachot. 19a.
2. Ketuboth. 103a.
3. Moed Katan. 28a.
4. Shabat. 152b.
5. Taanit. 16a.
6. Ibid. 23b.
7. Berachot. 18b.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., 18a.
10. Ibid., 18b.



## CHAPTER XV

## Additional Thoughts on Death

When a research paper is near completion, the author sometimes finds he has some unclassified material which cannot be organized under the major headings. These ideas, either because they are basically peripheral to the paper, or are isolated examples of various attitudes, must be adjoined in a separate chapter.

One of these minority thoughts seeks to find value in suffering.

The only real death is slow and painful dying, for the dread lies not in being dead, but in dying.<sup>1</sup>

In the Midrash itself, Isaac pleads for suffering as a means of finding favor in the Divine Judgment.

Isaac demands suffering, pleading thus, Sovereign of the Universe, when a man dies without previous suffering the attribute of Judgment is stretched out against him, but if thou causeth him to suffer, the Attribute of Judgment will not be stretched out against him. Said the Holy One, by thy life thou hast asked well, and I will commence with thee.<sup>2</sup>

In the same chapter we have Jacob pleading for illness or suffering before death for a purely practical expedient.

Jacob demanded illness, saying to Him: Sovereign of the Universe! A man dies without previous illness and does not settle his affairs with his children; but if he were ill two or three days, he would settle his affairs with his children. Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to him: By thy life, thou hast asked well, and it will commence with thee.<sup>3</sup>

It is also possible, when the pain becomes unbearable, for a Jew to pray for, and welcome death. When life is laden

with pain, death can be a blessing.

Rabbi's handmaid ascended the roof and prayed, the immortals (angels) desire Rabbi (to join them) and the mortals desire Rabbi, (to remain with them) may it be the will (of God) that the mortals may overpower the immortals. When however she saw how often he resorted to the privy (suffering from acute and painful diarrhoea)\* she prayed, may it be the will (of the Almighty) that the immortals may overcome the mortals. As the Rabbis incessantly continued their prayers, for (heavenly) mercy she took up a jar and threw it down from the roof to the ground. (For a moment) they ceased praying, and the soul of Rabbi departed to its eternal rest.<sup>4</sup>

In the above quote the handmaid's prayer was not the effective instrument which caused the death, but her interruption of the prayers for Rabbi's life. It was discussed in the chapter dealing with the Angel of Death, that a man cannot die while in the process of study or prayer. (Here the prayers of the Rabbis served the same purpose.)

Man is close to death at certain perilous intervals during his lifetime, for example while sneezing, a woman during childbirth, or even travelling by a road alone.

Until the time of Jacob, a man would sneeze and die. Know that when a man sneezes, they say to him, "Hayyim Tovim," because he was dead.<sup>5</sup>

In three circumstances do men die (meaning they are in danger of death, and if not meritorious succumb to it); when dwelling in a dilapidated house, travelling by road alone, and sailing on the ocean, because then Satan brings accusation against them. All invalids are presumed to be in danger of death.<sup>6</sup>

And,

'A time to be born and a time to die.' (Eccle. 3:1) It

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\*See Shabat 118B, the majority of the righteous die of bowel trouble.

is from this verse that the sages of blessed memory inferred that when a woman is giving birth to a child (sitting on the birth stool) there are 99 chances that she may die, and only 1 that she may live, for it says, 'A time to be born which is a time to die,' (the mother being in great danger then).

Sometimes the peril becomes so serious that a decision of life or death must be reached.

If two are travelling on a journey (far from civilization) and one has a pitcher of water, if both drink, they will (both) die, but if one only drinks he can reach civilization.

The son of Patura taught, it is better that both should drink and die, rather than that one should behold his companion's death.

Until R. Akiba came, and taught, 'that thy brother may live with thee' thy life takes precedence over his life. (First your life, and he has the right to live after your life is insured.)

The worst evil that can happen to a man is death.

A man knows no day of real evil other than the day of his death, the day of the soul's going hence.<sup>8</sup>

And:

Rab was once taking leave of R. Hiyyah; the latter said to him, May the all merciful deliver you from that which is worse than death. But, is there anything that is worse than death? When he went out he considered the matter, and found, 'And I find more bitter than death, the woman.' (Eccle. 7:26)<sup>9</sup>

In the preceding Midrash the implication in the question is that nothing can be worse than death. The reference to woman is more of an appeal to the shock value, in saying she is so bad--even worse than death!

A similar technique is used in showing the evils of being envious.

Better it is to die 100 times than to experience envy

even once.<sup>10</sup>

To emphasize the evils of envy they parallel it with death, actually considered the worst evil.

Death is considered a very serious affair, and thus legally we can trust what a dying man says.

No one jests in the hour of (his) death, and the words of a dying man are regarded (legally) as written and delivered.<sup>11</sup>

Life is so precious, that the Midrash forewarns us against hastening the death of the dying man.

Our Rabbis taught, he who closes (the eyes of a dying man) at the point of death, is a murderer. This may be compared to a lamp that is going out, if a man places his finger upon it, it is immediately extinguished. If one desires that a dead man's eyes should close, let him blow wine in his nostrils, and apply oil between his two eyelids and hold his two big toes, then they close of their own accord.<sup>12</sup>

We see the great value and clinging to life expressed in the Midrash, and yet death can be explained as a spur to make us strive toward accomplishments. If we weren't limited in our time on earth, creativity might cease or slow down, and searching for the good might diminish.

He said to me, 'Rabi, why are you happy with the angel of death?' I said to him, my son, if not for the angel of death what would we do for our father in heaven? Go forth, learn from the first 10 generations (before the Flood). God gave them everything good in the world and (yet) they would have destroyed the whole world.<sup>13</sup>

In the Midrash we also find an example of man having a foreknowledge of death. Before he is born, and while yet in the 'belly of his mother' man is given a tour of life and death by an angel.

The angel took a stroll with (him) from morning until evening and he showed him the place where he was to die in the future and the place where he was to be buried in the future. And afterwards they went and he showed him the righteous and the wicked, he showed him everything. And in the evening they returned to the belly of his mother, and the Holy One made for him there, a bolt and doors as it is said, 'who shut up the sea with doors.' (Job 38:8)

One of the greatest achievements of man is the finding of peace. Everyone's mission is to bring peace to the world. The Midrash goes a step further and suggests that even the dying need peace (and rest).

Great is peace, for even the dying need peace; as it says 'But thou shalt go to thy father in peace (Gen. 15:15) and as it says, 'Thou shalt die in peace.' (Jer. 34:5)<sup>15</sup>

Although the dead have peace, they still await the time when in the World to Come they will return.

'All the rivers run into the sea.' (Eccle. 1:7) All the dead enter Sheol but Sheol is never full, as it is said, 'the nether world and Destruction are never satisfied.' (Prov. 27:20) Do you mean to say that once they die in this world, they will never live again in the World to Come? Therefore the text states 'Unto the place whither the rivers go, thither they can go again.'--to the place where the dead assemble in the World to Come they return and will utter a song in the days of the Messiah.<sup>16</sup>

There is a strong belief in our tradition that we should be buried in the soil of the Holy Land. Throughout Jewish history our ancestors have struggled and sacrificed to live and die in the land of our fathers. The question is raised as to what happens to those men buried outside the land, and the Midrash provides an answer.

Rabbi Huna said, All Israel, who die outside the land, their souls are gathered into the land, 'The soul of my Lord shall be bound in the bundle of the living. (I Samuel

25:29) All the heathens who die in the land have their souls cast outside the land. As it is said, 'And the souls of thine enemies, them shall he sling out.'<sup>17</sup>

Afterwards the righteous (buried) outside the land have lost nothing. Why? God makes them a cave in the ground, and they roll and come to Israel, and when they arrive God gives them their souls. As it is written, 'He that giveth breath unto the people upon it.' (Isa. 42:5)<sup>18</sup>

The above Midrash allows for the righteous to enter the Holy Land after death, however in the same text we see men being buried outside the land, as being compelled to bear a "burden."

The land of Israel is the land of the living and there are no dead men in her midst.

Rabbi Helbo said, he who dies outside the Land is buried outside the land, had two troubles (burdens), the burden of death, and the burden of burial. 'There you shall die, and there you shall be buried.' (Jer. 20:6) Rabbi bar Hanina said, he who dies outside the land, but is buried in the land has (the burden) of only one--death.

Rabbi Hama said, 'there you shall die, and there you shall be buried,' for burial in Israel atones for him.<sup>19</sup>

There is merit in being buried in the land of Israel, but if it happens that one dies outside the land, it is also possible to bring Israel to them.

Two rabbis were walking outside the land and they came to two grave stones. One Rabbi said, what worth came to them in their lives that (they warranted) coming here (outside Israel) in their deaths. The other Rabbi said, it is not necessary that they be buried in the land of Israel, and he placed a clod of dirt from the land of Israel to atone for them, as it is written, 'And doth Israel to atone for them, as it is written, 'And doth make expiation for the land of his people.' (Deut. 32:43)

## Additional Thoughts on Death

1. Legends of the Jews. Louis Ginzberg. Vol. III, p. 39.
2. Midrash Bereshit Raba. Ch. 65, sec. 9.
3. Ibid.
4. Ketuboth. 104a.
5. Yalkut. Ch. Thilim, sec. 874.
6. Midrash Koheleth Raba. Ch. 3, sec. 2.
7. Baba Mezia. 62a.
8. Midrash Psalms. 41:4, p. 437.
9. Yebamoth. 63a.
10. Midrash Davarim Raba. Ch. 9, sec. 9.
11. Baba Batra. 175a.
12. Shabat. 151b.
13. Tanna d'be Eliezer Raba. Ch. 16, p. 81.
14. Tanhuma. Ch. Pekude, sec. 3.
15. Midrash Bamidbar Raba. Ch. 11, sec. 7.
16. Midrash Koheleth Raba. Ch. 1, sec. 7.
17. Pirke de' Rabi Eliezer. Ch. 34, p. 255.
18. Pesikta Rabati. Ch. 1, p. 4.
19. Ibid., Ch. 1, p. 3.
20. Ibid.



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