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DEALING WITH DEATH:  
JEWISH PERSPECTIVES ON FACING MORTALITY

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## ABSTRACT

Judaism is a religious tradition focused on life: how we may live well, act righteously, and serve the Divine by our prayers and our deeds. Yet, unavoidable to the human condition is the fact that we all will one day cease to live. The inevitability of death is omnipresent throughout our lives, ebbing and flowing in our conscious attention. People may vary in their responses to human mortality; some may try to avoid thinking of death at all costs, others find mortality motivating, and still others find the thought of death paralyzing.

This thesis seeks to explore Jewish perspectives around facing mortality through Jewish literature, and to provide practical applications for pastoral encounters. To do this, I have categorized emotional responses to death into five main categories: anxiety, avoidance, despair, nihilism, and acceptance. In each chapter, I analyze Jewish sources reflecting one of the five responses, contextualizing its place in Jewish literature and legend, as well as within contemporary, socio-psychological research. This resource is meant to normalize struggling with the concept of death and provide Jewish sources of validation and understanding.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 1: ANXIETY.....	4
CHAPTER 2: DENIAL.....	20
CHAPTER 3: DESPAIR.....	38
CHAPTER 4: NIHILISM.....	48
CHAPTER 5: ACCEPTANCE.....	63
CONCLUSION.....	78
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	79

## INTRODUCTION

One day, each one of us is going to die. This factual, value-neutral statement is at the heart of our existence. All of our fears, hopes, dreams, and distress can be traced back to the central truth of life, that it ends. There is no life without death. And yet, death is also something we can neither experience nor completely understand. It is perhaps the only thing that is at once relatable and unfamiliar to every living thing on earth. With our developed consciousness, we humans are the only living creatures (that we know of) capable of comprehending and reflecting on the implications of mortality. But death defies the comfortable boundaries of conventional logic and understanding; it is chaotic, unpredictable, and indomitable. This defiance of rational bounds makes death, particularly our own, incredibly difficult for us to digest.

It is no surprise, then, that post-biblical Jewish literature has largely focused on how to cope with the death of *others*. Jewish tradition includes detailed instructions on how to move through the process of mourning a loved one, from the moments right before their death, to the funeral and burial, and ultimately through a year-long mourning period.<sup>1</sup> There are far fewer Jewish resources dedicated to the, arguably equally challenging, task of coping with one's own mortality. Yet, every biblical character, every talmudic rabbi, and every medieval Jewish thinker ultimately faced the end of their life. And through their stories and teachings, there is wisdom to be learned about how we move through life as mortal beings.

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross dedicated much of her career to the study of human mortality and the various responses to it. Her work inspired newfound academic interest in the study of human psychology surrounding death. Kübler-Ross is perhaps most well-known for establishing five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.<sup>2</sup> These stages are often misunderstood as a framework for processing grief following the death of a loved one. While her work is still applicable to that kind of grief, Kübler-Ross actually based these stages on extensive interviews with terminally ill hospital patients. The five stages of grief represent the patterns of emotional responses these patients had while coming to terms with their own approaching deaths. On the importance of interrogating the meaning of death in our lives, Kübler-Ross writes:

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on this topic, see Maurice Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*.

<sup>2</sup> Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan, 1969).

Death always has been and always will be with us. It is an integral part of human existence. And because it is, it has always been a subject of deep concern to all of us. Since the dawn of humankind, the human mind has pondered death, searching for the answer to its mysteries. For the key to the question of death unlocks the door of life.<sup>3</sup>

Using Kübler-Ross's work as a guide, I have identified five responses to mortality reflected in Jewish wisdom and tradition. Each chapter provides an overview of the emotional response, its implications, and its representation in Jewish literature. Below is an overview of each chapter:

**Anxiety:** This chapter analyzes the underlying mechanisms which motivate death anxiety. Fear of death motivates all living creatures, but death anxiety is, to our knowledge, unique to humans. Because we are capable of understanding that we will die, we can feel anxiety even when we are not in imminent danger. This sense of anxiety is woven into biblical, rabbinic, and halakhic texts, emphasizing the ultimate unknown which death represents and the importance of taking appropriate precautions to preserve one's life.

**Denial:** This chapter highlights the human impulse to deny the reality of death as a protective mechanism. Talmudic tales depict rabbis literally denying a personified Death, and midrashic texts describe Moses's attempts to deny death. Yet imbued in both rabbinic and halakhic literature is the notion that we are meant to witness death. I argue these injunctions serve, partially, as a counterbalance to our instinct to avoid thinking about or encountering death in our lives.

**Despair:** This chapter explores how primal despair is a productive and expected emotional response to mortality. In particular, Judaism's emphasis on tears as an essential processing mechanism speaks to the intensity of anticipatory self-grief. Biblical and rabbinic characters sob when confronted with their own death, teaching their students that such a response is both healthy and normal.

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<sup>3</sup> Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *Death: The Final Stage of Growth* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1975), 1.

**Nihilism:** This chapter investigates the implications of nihilism, the belief that since we all will die, nothing in our lives matters. Through an analysis of the complicated, but profound biblical Books of Ecclesiastes and Job, we gain an understanding of the Jewish perspective that God is capable of holding the answer to ultimate meaning, even when we are not. God, as the keeper of meaning, both frees us from the dangers of total nihilism, and provides structure for living a meaningful life of righteousness.

**Acceptance:** This chapter provides an overview of Jewish frameworks of death acceptance. In particular, Judaism encourages a realistic perspective on death that facilitates inner peace and allows us to live with an eye towards legacy.

It is important to note that these stages are not chronological, rigid, or exhaustive. They merely represent guideposts based in Jewish tradition that can both normalize and facilitate healthy, human processing. The goal is not to create a kind of formula for how to process death in the Best Way, but rather to validate the very real emotional challenges of living with the knowledge that we will die. Judaism is at its best when it reflects a version of the human experience we can relate to, connecting our struggles to the struggles of our ancestors through the generations. Death represents the ultimate struggle of our lives, and so we can turn to Jewish text and tradition to remind us that we do not struggle alone.

## CHAPTER 1: ANXIETY

The fear of death is one of the great motivating features of life. It lies at the core of our sympathetic nervous system which, when triggered, is commonly referred to as our “fight-or-flight” response. A release of hormones triggers our bodies to prepare for a life-saving decision, to fight or to flee, and most importantly, to avoid death.<sup>4</sup> All creatures have a nervous system with a similar type of function, but humans are distinctive, as far as we know, in that we have the ability to ponder our demise from the comfort and safety of our sofas.<sup>5</sup> In other words, we do not need to be in a life-threatening situation in order to be aware of and to fear the end of our lives. It is this stress, fear, and even terror, that has been colloquially dubbed ‘death anxiety.’

Death anxiety is not a recent phenomenon; human communities have wrestled with the fear of death for as long as we have recorded history. In fact, some evolutionary psychologists argue that death anxiety motivated the development and evolution of religion. The psychologists behind Terror Management Theory, an explanation of the psychological mechanisms underlying death anxiety, argue that religion was an evolutionary adaptation, protecting early humans from extinction.<sup>6</sup> As Alderman articulates, “Paralyzing terror in the face of death would have been an evolutionary dead end, limiting one’s ability to adventurously move about, hunt, compete for mates, or protect offspring. So, using the imaginative abilities that allowed them to plan and prepare for future activities, our ancestors...created an eternal, symbolic universe, with themselves at the center.”<sup>7</sup>

In many religious traditions, this adaptation involved an elaborate view of an afterlife, a promise that death was not the end of human existence.<sup>8</sup> The early Hebrew tradition, however, is

<sup>4</sup> “What Happens during Fight-or-Flight Response?” Cleveland Clinic, June 17, 2025. <https://health.clevelandclinic.org/what-happens-to-your-body-during-the-fight-or-flight-response>.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Callahan, *The Troubled Dream of Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 161.

<sup>6</sup> Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Tom Pyszczynski, *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life* (New York: Random House, 2015), 80-81.

<sup>7</sup> Isaac M. Alderman, *The Animal at Unease with Itself: Death Anxiety and the Animal-Human Boundary in Genesis 2-3* (London: The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc., 2020), 44.

<sup>8</sup> Afterlife beliefs are incredibly varied. Some include moral evaluations in which righteousness or adherence to a particular belief set were required for entry into the “good place,” while others were sentenced to various forms of processing, or some version of the “bad place.” Other afterlife beliefs center around reincarnation. Judaism itself has a variety of literature depicting different kinds of afterlives. For more on this topic, see Bart D. Ehrman, *Heaven and Hell: A History of the Afterlife*.

distinctive in that the afterlife was not a central focus. The Hebrew Bible, while full of expressions of death anxiety, does not provide a detailed view of an afterlife. As such, it gives a window through which to view the reality of death in all of its brutal glory. The Hebrew Bible “looks at death with clear eyes. There are no other-worldly compensations. Life on this earth is all of value that there is.”<sup>9</sup> It is only in later rabbinic texts that any particulars of an afterlife are, no pun intended, fleshed out.

One of the most compelling and realistic depictions of death anxiety comes in the story of creation; as life is created, so too is death, and as human awareness of life is created, so too is human awareness of death. The biblical author constructs the creation narrative in such a way that simultaneously illuminates death anxiety and provides survival mechanisms in the face of that anxiety. Later extrabiblical creation stories further reflect death anxiety in the characterization of the first humans. By writing death anxiety into the core of creation, the biblical authors and ancient rabbis regard death anxiety as a religiously significant feature of life, which is later reflected in halakhic literature concerning proper precautions to preserve one’s own life. These Jewish stories and sources speak meaningfully to the human experience. They do not seek to remove death anxiety from humanity but rather show how to live symbiotically with it.

Before delving into an analysis of these texts, it is important to have a baseline understanding of how death anxiety functions and presents as a psychological feature of human life. We will look at the evolutionary background of death anxiety, as well as theories surrounding its impact on functioning and life satisfaction. We will also examine common coping mechanisms employed to ease fear as well as allow us to live full lives alongside death anxiety. Recognizing death anxiety as a complex, multifaceted experience deepens our understanding of what it means to be both a human and a mortal creature. And with this understanding, we can see the ultimate humanity behind ancient, modern, and contemporary Jewish writings, connecting us to the lived experience of those who came before.

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<sup>9</sup> Hillel Halkin, *After One-Hundred-And-Twenty: Reflecting on Death, Mourning, and the Afterlife in the Jewish Tradition* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2016), 26. Halkin’s assertion here may be a bit overstated. There are within the Hebrew Bible references to an afterlife, specifically in a shadowy under-realm called *Sheol*. There is also, in Samuel I, a reference to the spirit of the deceased Samuel being summoned back to earth to speak with Saul (28:3-25). However, the point remains that the Hebrew Bible contains no *detailed* description of what life after death entails.

Fear of death is a natural, and often helpful, function of all living creatures, but death anxiety derives from human attempts to analyze and rationalize death. Alderman explains how human evolution led to the development of death anxiety:

In the evolution of our species, growing cognitive abilities afforded our ancestors “a heightened self-reflective awareness of themselves within a symbolic universe.” This attainment had advantages, of course, such as allowing for long-term planning and strategizing. However, this forward-looking ability also made humans aware of their own mortality. The risk of this type of awareness is the possibility of crippling anxiety.<sup>10</sup>

The tradeoff Alderman describes – the ability for long-term planning in exchange for the ignorance of our mortality – seems, at face value, very much worthwhile. The ability to plan in the long term brings substantial meaning to our lives. It allows us to dream, to set and achieve goals, and to mark important occasions in our lives. It allows us to build friendships, families, and communities. But the possibility of crippling death anxiety ought not to be minimized.

As with any human emotion, people experience death anxiety to varying degrees. Joseph C. Rheingold, one of the first to do a deep study of death anxiety, argues that even within the same person, “the degree of awareness of the fear of death and its implications may vary from time to time.” Sometimes the anxiety is only brought out by a near-death experience, but it can also arise from something as simple as a “gloomy day,” or “normal bodily events.”<sup>11</sup> Research has found a correlation between those with heightened levels of death anxiety and reduced quality of life and physical health and increased levels of depression. This dynamic is stronger among older adults, for whom thoughts of death may be more accessible.<sup>12</sup> But even young people can suffer from excessive death anxiety that interferes with their daily lives.

The question of what exactly death anxiety is *about* is surprisingly complicated. Because death is one of the few experiences which we can never fully comprehend as living beings, it is not entirely clear what the fear behind death anxiety encompasses. I have grouped the underlying fears behind death anxiety into three main categories: (1) lack of control, (2) pain and suffering,

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<sup>10</sup> Alderman, *The Animal at Unease with Itself*, 26.

<sup>11</sup> Joseph C. Rheingold, *The Mother, Anxiety, and Death* (Boston: Little Brown & Co., 1967), 48.

<sup>12</sup> Yoav S. Bergman, “Death Anxiety and Resilience in Older Adults: The Moderating Role of Attachment Patterns,” *Behavioral Sciences* 14 (2011), 1.

and (3) loss. While there may be dynamics at play that fall beyond the scope of those three categories, I feel they encapsulate the main features of the experience of death anxiety.

### *Lack of Control*

While medical advances have made it such that injuries and illnesses can follow more predictable courses, the reality is that death can be indiscriminate, random, and chaotic. In other words, death cannot be controlled. And our powerlessness in the face of death can manifest as significant fear and anxiety. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross asserts that those who value control feel higher levels of anxiety in the face of death:

[Death] cares not at all for the status or position of the ones it chooses; everyone must die, whether rich or poor, famous or unknown. Even good deeds will not excuse their doers from the sentence of death; the good die as often as the bad. It is perhaps this inevitable and unpredictable quality that makes death so frightening to many people. Especially those who put a high value on being in control of their own existence are offended by the thought that they, too, are subject to the forces of death.<sup>13</sup>

We do make attempts to control death as much as possible, in many ways to our benefit. We are recommended to see doctors at regular intervals. We undergo both invasive and non-invasive testing to gauge our levels of some intangible quality we've termed "health," which is really a measure of distance from death. And we study diseases and ailments in order to project prognoses and life expectancies. Even the rabbis of the Talmud sought to set expectations for when death is more or less likely, arguing that a death before the age of 60 is a divine punishment, but a death after the age of 60 is a natural consequence of old age.<sup>14</sup> Ultimately, however, the human perception of death as substantiated by death anxiety is that it is "always premature and imposed from without."<sup>15</sup> All attempts at control will, in the end, prove futile. Therefore, one may argue, as bioethicist Daniel Callahan does, that in order to relax the grip of death anxiety, we must, in turn, relax our grip on control:

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<sup>13</sup> Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *Death: The Final Stage of Growth* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1975), 5. Kübler-Ross personalizes death in this passage, granting death emotion and motive. This image of death is more easily feared – an enemy that can be conceptualized in understandable terms.

<sup>14</sup> BT Moed Katan, 28a.

<sup>15</sup> Rheingold, *The Mother; Anxiety and Death*, 32.

The problem with a life dedicated to control, a life dominated by a fear of helplessness and a loss of power, is that no degree of vigilance can ever be sufficient to assure its success. However much we try, we cannot always control or dominate what happens to us. For just that reason, and to avoid the obsessiveness that a desire for full control imposes upon the self, we may well be better served by a stance of openness and acceptance...the notion that a fully self-managed life is better prepared for suffering and death could be quite wrong. On the contrary, a person who has learned how to let life go may have not only a richer and more flexible life, but also one that better prepares him for his decline.<sup>16</sup>

Now, this advice is more easily articulated than lived out and should come with a list of caveats. It would be ill-advised for a cancer patient to cancel their appointment with their oncologist or a diabetic to cease taking their insulin injections in the service of relinquishing control and accepting fate. The key is to find the balance between engaging with what is within our control and releasing what is not.

This balance underlies much of the halakhic literature around preservation of one's own life. Maimonides, in Mishneh Torah, creates an extensive list of precautions one must take in order to fulfill the positive mitzvah listed in Deuteronomy 4:9, "Beware for yourself; and guard your soul." Included in his list are drinking from an unknown source, drinking from a river or lake at night, in case you accidentally swallow a leech, and drinking from water that was left uncovered, in case a poisonous creature had previously drunk from it (This wisdom can also apply to uncovered drinks left at bars. As in many cases, Maimonides' wisdom here transcends his time).<sup>17</sup> Maimonides encourages extra precaution, even when evidence may suggest that a situation is safe:

When a jug is left uncovered, a person should not drink from it, although nine people drank from it before him without dying. An incident occurred, and it was reported that the tenth person who drank from a jug died, because the venom of the snake sank to the bottom of the jug. And there is venom from some crawling animals that rises to the surface of liquids, and other venom that becomes suspended in the middle. Therefore, everything is forbidden. This applies even if one filtered the liquid with a filter. Similarly,

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<sup>16</sup> Halkin, *The Troubled Dream of Life*, 150-151.

<sup>17</sup> Mishneh Torah, Sefer Nezikim, Hilchot Rotzeach ush'mirat hanefesh 11.

when a watermelon was left uncovered, even if nine people partook of it without dying, a tenth should not partake of it.<sup>18</sup>

Maimonides' preoccupation with the preservation of life is an example of how death anxiety can be useful. Death anxiety can allow us to foresee and imagine dangerous situations so that we can avoid them. Our challenge is not to imagine far beyond what is reasonable, and thus live a life entirely dictated by fear. In other words, if ten people have safely drunk, you should feel secure in being the eleventh.

### *Pain and Suffering*

The fear of death is, for some, inextricable from the fear of *dying*. In fact, central to Rheingold's thesis is the idea that the process of dying is so terrifying that it supersedes the fear of death itself:

We cannot know what fear of nonbeing itself may exist because of the *threat* of death. It is possible that actually we are a little perturbed by the thought of ultimate cessation, which is unimaginable. What is terrifying is the ever-present menace of malevolent death.<sup>19</sup>

Pain and suffering are the most challenging elements of human existence, and they are often, consciously and unconsciously, associated with the process of dying. For many, pain and suffering are the elements of mortality that cause the most distress and anxiety. As one woman reports, "If I could be sure I would die quickly without suffering or painful lingering, I should not fear."<sup>20</sup>

The rabbis of the Talmud were quite concerned with the pain of death. In Moed Katan 28a, we get an interesting analogy of what the experience of death might be like:

Rava, while seated at the bedside of Rabbi Nachman, saw that he was dying. Said Rabbi Nachman to him, "Please tell the angel of death not to torment me." Said Rava, "Are you not a person of importance [i.e., why not appeal to the angel of death yourself]?" Rabbi

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<sup>18</sup> Mishneh Torah, Sefer Nezikim, Hilchot Rotzeach ush'mirat hanefesh 11.

<sup>19</sup> Rheingold, *The Mother, Anxiety, and Death* 47.

<sup>20</sup> Rheingold, *The Mother, Anxiety, and Death*, 32.

Nachman replied, “Who is esteemed, who is regarded, who is distinguished before the angel of death?” Rava said, “I will appeal for you, but promise me that you will show yourself to me in a dream after you die.” He did so. Rava asked him, “Did you suffer much while you died?” Rabbi Nachman replied, “As little as when you remove a hair from milk. And yet, if God were to say to me, ‘Go back again to the world as you were,’ I would not wish to do so because the fear of death is so great.

The preoccupation with suffering as a part of death is shown in incredible relief in this passage. While he is alive, Rabbi Nachman’s chief concern is that he not suffer when he dies. Then, of all the things Rava could ask the ghost of his friend, he chooses a question that reveals his own fears and anxieties, namely, “Does it hurt?” Rabbi Nachman’s ghostly answer is no less illuminating of the humanity of death anxiety. He has now experienced death as painless and gentle, as evidenced by the analogy of removing a hair from milk. And yet, despite this knowledge, Rabbi Nachman expresses that he would not volunteer to live and face death again! His reasoning is that the fear represented by Rava’s initial question is too immense. This story serves both to comfort death anxiety, by giving reassurance that the process is virtually painless, and to validate the expression of death anxiety, by emphasizing that even one who has experienced a painless death would still fear dying.

The unfortunate reality is that everyone will, at some point, experience pain and suffering. Some will experience more than others. In the same vein, some will experience protracted periods of suffering before death, while others will experience death more suddenly. Research shows that people overwhelmingly prefer to die suddenly, rather than to experience a prolonged period of suffering.<sup>21</sup> The relationship between pain, suffering, and death is nuanced and complex. There are degrees of pain and suffering we deem temporary and/or tolerable and those that we deem intolerable. Pain and suffering can even, in some cases, cause one to *wish for* rather than fear death.

Consider the Talmudic story of Rabbi Yehudah haNasi’s death. Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi had become quite ill. The sages, desperate for him to survive, declared a fast and prayed continuously that he would not die. Rabbi Yehuda haNasi’s maidservant took note of their prayers and made one herself. “The lower [earthly] worlds are requesting that Yehuda HaNasi survive,” she said, “May it be God’s will that the lower worlds bend the judgement of the upper

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<sup>21</sup> Rheingold, *The Mother, Anxiety, and Death*, 31-32.

worlds.” But when the maidservant saw Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi’s suffering – how many times he had to get up to use the bathroom, each time painfully removing and rewinding his phylacteries, she changed her prayer. “May it be God’s will that the upper worlds overcome the lower worlds.” But her one changed prayer could not overcome the prayers of the sages. So, in desperation, the maidservant threw a jug from the roof, shattering it and startling the rabbis. And as they stopped praying, Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi died, a Divine Voice assuring him that he would rest in peace.<sup>22</sup>

The narrative that Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi’s death results in a cessation of suffering and ultimate peace echoes Rabbi Nachman’s experience of death as akin to the feeling of removing a hair from milk. Both stories illustrate the relationship between death and suffering, providing a depiction of death as peaceful in order to calm the human fear of lasting pain.

It is no coincidence that in this particular story, it is the woman, the maidservant, who facilitates Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi’s transition from being alive and suffering to being dead and at peace. Women, carriers of the רחם, the womb, from which the word רחמים, compassion, is derived, are depicted as conduits from birth, to life, and onto death. Women are the midwives through pain and suffering, through life and death. In the apocryphal Greek *Life of Adam and Eve*, composed sometime between 100-300 CE, Eve is described as attending to Adam’s transition into death, and ultimately, the afterlife. Despite the creation narrative depicting Eve as having been created from Adam, and later narratives blaming Eve for the demise of humanity, it is Eve who allows Adam to pass into death at peace. The account “constructs Eve, like the supreme angels, as a performer of corresponding compassionate practices that comfort and assist Adam rather than cause his demise...In a subtle voice it constructs Eve as a compassionate figure, asserting views about her caring role, virtues, elevated status, transcendent spheres of experience, and access to holiness, all manifested in the drama of Adam’s decease.”<sup>23</sup> A more complete study of how women are constructed in biblical and extrabiblical texts as relievers of suffering, and an overview of how women are depicted as bearing their own suffering, is a worthwhile investigation beyond the scope of this study.

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<sup>22</sup> BT Ketubot 104a.

<sup>23</sup> Vita Daphna Arbel, and Bradley N. Rice. “Guarding His Body, Mourning His Death, and Pleading for Him in Heaven: On Adam’s Death and Eve’s Virtues in the Greek *Life of Adam and Eve*.” In *Coming Back to Life: The Permeability of Past and Present, Mortality and Immortality, Death and Life in the Ancient Mediterranean*, edited by Frederick S. Tappenden and Carly Daniel-Hughes, 2nd ed., 103–26. McGill University Library, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvmx3k11.11.>, pp. 119-121.

## Loss

It is common parlance to greet mourners with the empathetic phrase, “I’m sorry for your loss.” While it is natural to conceptualize loss when someone else has died – a person who may have played a prominent role in one’s life is now forever absent – what is more abstract is the consideration of loss that comes from one’s own death. As humans, we have the cognitive capacity to conceptualize the fact that the world will continue after we are gone. In order to do so, we enter into what Plant terms a “quasi-dead” state, in which we, as “ghostly, spectral observer[s]” are able to envision a world from which we have departed. Plant describes the process of imagining the human world after our death:

[W]hen in this quasi-dead state, Nagel’s ‘mundane objective transitions’ are not painless trivialities. For alongside imagining my bodily remains being disposed of, my clothing distributed or destroyed, my office cleared (and so on), I also imagine the lives of my beloved survivors unfold without me.<sup>24</sup>

We are able to imagine the details of our own loss abstractly, in anticipation of our own deaths.<sup>25</sup> But in addition to the details of how the world will continue in our absence, we are also aware of a more abstract sense of loss, a loss which only we truly experience: the loss of self and identity. The idea that one day we will cease to exist – that our memories, personalities, knowledge, and growth, which we spend our whole lives cultivating, will disappear – can be quite a frightening prospect. Callahan expresses the dynamics at play with this kind of all-encompassing loss:

Still another layer is the threat to the self posed by death, the threat of the self’s dissolution and the body’s coming apart. Pain may bring on this dissolution, or it may come with dementia or loss of self-awareness of a mind brought low by a body that is ceasing to be. At its heart is the sense that the self is losing its identity, its “I” and a “me” becoming harder and harder to locate. When the self begins to fade or disintegrate, the loss of a relationship with other people soon follows. Our social world, together with our sense of interior unity and self-awareness, makes us the persons we are. The fear of losing that social world is still another layer in the fear of death. We will lose those whom we love and who love us, never hear their voices again or feel their touch. The dread of

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<sup>24</sup> Bob Plant, “Living Posthumously: From Anticipatory Grief to Self-Mourning.” *Mortality* 27, no. 1 (2022): 38–52. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2020.1810650>, 42.

<sup>25</sup> For more information on anticipatory self-grief, see Chapter 3: Despair.

deprivation here can be as great as that of the loss of self, and perhaps all the more so if the pleasures and delights of the self entailed living and being with others (as, I think, they should have).

It is incredibly difficult to acknowledge the loss of self, identity, and social world.

Comprehending the death of a single important person in one's life can be overwhelming.

Comprehending the loss of everything and everyone is nearly impossible. But not so impossible as to prevent significant fear and anxiety.

The rabbis of the Talmud understood the immensity of self-loss that death imposes. They argued that the recently deceased required comforters [מנהמין], just as the recently bereaved did. Rav Yehuda explains that when a deceased has no comforters, ten people ought to go and sit by his grave. Rav Yehuda took his own words seriously, and when someone in his community passed, he organized ten people to sit by the grave to provide comfort to the deceased. He reports that the deceased visited him in a dream and said, "May your mind rest for you have put my mind at rest."<sup>26</sup> The rabbis understood that loss extends from the mourners to the person who died. In creating a requirement to comfort the deceased, the rabbis are also comforting those alive who ponder their own loss with substantial fear. For in this short parable, the rabbis articulate that the deceased will not be abandoned, that the sense of self-loss is significant and worthy of comfort in life and in death.

Religious beliefs, texts, and rituals provide various coping mechanisms to alleviate the fear of loss that comes along with death. Perhaps the most common coping mechanism is the creation of some afterlife, some assurance that not all will be lost, and that existence will continue. Belief in some form of immortality provides one with the "means through which one could understand oneself as living on beyond the bounded lifespan imposed by our creatureliness."<sup>27</sup> Judaism is not without such afterlife beliefs, as is evident in rabbinic texts describing communications between the deceased and the living, and systems of moral evaluation after death. However, as previously stated, the core biblical texts do not rely on a detailed account of existence after death. Instead, the Hebrew Bible places emphasis on community and family as a form of immortality and continuity of life. The Hebrew Bible

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<sup>26</sup> BT Shabbat 152a-b.

<sup>27</sup> Alderman, *The Animal at Unease with Itself*, 26.

describes death and burial as being gathered to one's people (Gen 25:8) or lying down with one's ancestors (Gen 47:30). Ancient Jewish burial customs involved burying the bones of a family together in burial caves.<sup>28</sup> Halkin explains how the symbolism of bones may have represented a sense of continuity after death:

[B]ehold a bone. Let it be a plain one – an old one – a bone scoured by time, sun, or earth. Weigh it in your hand. Feel its hardness, its smoothness. Regard its whiteness. Consider its constancy. Stripped of its flesh, it will change no more. It is a suitable symbol of immortality.<sup>29</sup>

Absent a detailed vision of an afterlife, the gathering of family bones together represented a kind of immortal bond. In this way, the Hebrew Bible provides reassurance that the loss death entails is not complete, not permanent, that the bonds that bind communities and families together extend on after a life has ended.

#### *Death Anxiety in the Creation Narrative*

Death and mortality are a central concern of the creation narrative of Genesis 2 and 3. In fact, the very first thing the human is told after its creation is the possibility of death. God prohibits the human from eating of the tree of knowledge of good and bad, warning, “on the very day you eat of it, you will surely die.” (Gen. 2:16-17). Thus, essentially from the moment the human is aware of being alive, conscious, and able to receive communication, the human is also aware of death. The weaving of death throughout the narrative of the creation of life, emphasizes the concerns of the biblical author surrounding the tension between the sanctity of humanity and the reality of human mortality. Isaac Alderman convincingly argues that the central focus of the creation narrative is the expression of death anxiety and the establishment of coping mechanisms for such anxiety:

The first humans were given an understanding of their individuality, but also knowledge of their own death. The problematic ambiguity of consciousness and an animal

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<sup>28</sup> Eric M. Meyers, “The Theological Implications of an Ancient Jewish Burial Custom.” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 62, no. 2 (1971): 95–119. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1453302>.

<sup>29</sup> Halkin, *After One-Hundred-And-Twenty*, 20.

body...becomes terror with the judgement of death when the human eats from the tree. The terror that comes from the knowledge of our own death is unique to humans among animals. The meaning of the Garden of Eden myth has been rediscovered by modern psychology: “death is man’s peculiar and greatest anxiety.”<sup>30</sup>

Citing a plethora of research studies, Alderman makes the point that one of the ways in which people manage death anxiety is by creating boundaries between humans and animals. Any reminders that humans are the same as animals heightens death salience, while boundaries that separate humans from animals and promote the idea that humans are superior, such as clothing and other adornments, lessens the fear of death.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, Alderman’s central argument is that “Genesis 2 and 3 are artfully crafted to deal with the stress of human awareness of its own creatureliness and mortality by creating a great gulf between humans and the rest of the animal world.”<sup>32</sup> A deeper investigation into his thesis provides further evidence of the Hebrew Bible’s concern death anxiety.

Alderman separates the creation narrative into three distinct units: (1) Human exceptionalism (2:4b-8, 15-24), (2) Becoming aware of our animal bodies (2:25-3:7), and (3) Lineage and clothing as an anxiety buffer (3:8-24).<sup>33</sup> In each of these units, literary and narrative mechanisms separating humans from animals are juxtaposed to the salience and proximity of death. In the first unit, both the human, animals, and trees are formed from the ground (אדמה), but God only explicitly breathes the breath of life (נשמת חיים) into the human, and only the human receives God’s communication regarding the forbidden tree. Already, we have created a set-up in which the human is situated as superior to the other animals. However, as mentioned previously, the threat of death is immediately present in God’s first warning to the human. As such, Alderman argues, the process through which God creates all the animals and none of them are suitable companions for the human is meant to further emphasize human distinctiveness and separate humanity from the creatureliness from which mortality derives.<sup>34</sup> The human is already

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<sup>30</sup> Alderman, *The Animal at Unease with Itself*, 43.

<sup>31</sup> Alderman, *The Animal at Unease with Itself*, 29-33.

<sup>32</sup> Alderman, *The Animal at Unease with Itself*, xvii.

<sup>33</sup> Alderman, *The Animal at Unease with Itself*, 147-148.

<sup>34</sup> Alderman, *The Animal at Unease with Itself*, 148-149.

placed in a position of power and authority over the non-human animals, by evaluating and naming each of them. The creation of the woman further emphasizes human exceptionalism, based on how the human, who is now defined as male, responds to her presence. The human emphasizes the inferiority of all the other animals when he exclaims, “This one at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman for from Man she was taken.”

Anderson describes the significance of this moment as a death-anxiety buffer:

The man, who began by making a distinction between himself and the non-human animals by recognizing that they are not suitable as helpers, once again highly evaluates himself by accepting and naming the woman. Now not only does he present himself as exceptional among the animals, but he is self-defining in regard to other humans as well, for the woman is affirmed as what the man sees himself to be.<sup>35</sup>

In Alderman’s second unit, the humans become aware of their animal bodies and feel shame. Before the humans eat from the forbidden fruit and gain extra awareness, we are told that they are naked yet feel no shame (2:25). Death plays a prominent role in the process of the woman deciding to eat the fruit. The woman repeats God’s warning about the forbidden fruit, going so far as to fear touching the fruit in case it causes death (3:3). Despite the reassurance the serpent gives that eating the fruit will not lead to the humans’ deaths, the idea of death is very much prominent in the act of eating the fruit. And though the humans do not die, their sudden awareness of their nakedness and subsequent need to cover themselves indicates a discomfort with the reality of mortality. As soon as they eat the fruit, the humans are no longer comfortable with the fact that their bodies mirror the bodies of other, vulnerable, mortal animals. While many have expressed this shame around nudity in sexual terms, Anderson argues that the desire to clothe ultimately comes from the need to mitigate anxiety about human mortality:

Having already asserted superiority over animals in their naïveté, the humans with new knowledge of their animality must once again assert their status as distinct from animals. They do this in the only logical manner, which is to hide or disguise their animal bodies. In doing so, they mark themselves as distinct in a way that goes beyond any self-evaluation. An even greater chasm now exists between the humans and the rest of creation. Life after the acquisition of knowledge is marked by recognition of difference.

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<sup>35</sup> Alderman, *The Animal at Unease with Itself*, 150.

In knowing that they are naked, they now know something that truly distinguishes them from animals. The cost of gaining knowledge was the awareness of their animal bodies. They have moved from being at ease with their nakedness and, now aware of their animality, move to a state of hiding, exerting dominance, and covering their bodies.<sup>36</sup>

Finally, in Alderman's third unit, we are again accosted by the reality of human mortality through the divine curses God speaks to the humans. God emphasizes the insignificance of human life in the face of mortality, declaring, "You are dust, and to dust you shall return." (3:19). In the face of this overwhelming death salience, God provides another pair of clothing for the humans. Alderman argues that this divine act of clothing is meant to mitigate the death anxiety incited by the mortality curse, by further emphasizing the human/animal boundary. Not only are the humans to cover their animal bodies, hiding their creatureliness behind fabric, but the clothing gifted from God is made from the skin of animals. Alderman highlights the significance of using animal skin to cover animal bodies as a form of death anxiety mitigation:

Here with the garments of skin, we see animals demoted not just to the category of unsuitable, but what Hannah Strømme labels "killable." We do not simply mark our distinction and superiority over animals by wearing clothes; we are constantly and continually engaging other species by carrying them with us as we wear their skin and hair to cover our own.<sup>37</sup>

When read through the lens of death anxiety, the creation narrative in Genesis 2 and 3 reveals a deeply relatable, human core. That we need to separate ourselves from other animals in order to avoid being overwhelmed by the fear of death is borne out in modern psychological research and is clearly apparent in the biblical text. Later aggadic elaboration of the creation story reveals a continuation of this central concern:

The Sages taught: On the day that Adam the first human was created, when the sun set upon him he said: Woe is me, as because I sinned, the world is becoming dark around me, and the world will return to chaos and disorder. And this is the death that was sentenced upon me from Heaven. He spent all night fasting and crying, and Eve was crying opposite him. Once dawn broke, he said: this is the order of the world. He arose and

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<sup>36</sup> Alderman, *The Animal at Unease with Itself*, 152.

<sup>37</sup> Alderman, *The Animal at Unease with Itself*, 154.

sacrificed a bull whose horns preceded its hoofs, as it is stated: “And shall please the Lord better than a bull that has horns and hoofs (Ps 69:32).<sup>38</sup>

Adam’s attempt to calm down from the intense terror he felt at the possibility of his own death involves the sacrifice of an animal. In this way, the rabbis emphasize Adam’s distinctiveness from other creatures – the non-human animal is the sacrifice, and the human is the sacrificer.<sup>39</sup> To add on to this distinction, Adam himself imposes death upon the non-human animal, an image which portrays the human as a master of death rather than susceptible to it. Thus, the rabbis’ focus on Adam’s superior position in comparison to the bull actually indicates their own underlying anxieties about the reality of human death.

That emphasizing human superiority over animals mitigates death anxiety and salience is further evidenced by the fact that the reverse – emphasizing human’s inherent animality – increases our acceptance of death for other people. Dehumanizing language has historically been used to desensitize us to violence against groups of other humans. Alderman expands on example of how animal-language has been used to make death seem more acceptable for certain outgroups:

[T]he use of animal descriptors is often used to viciously dehumanize outgroups. The cognitive distancing of humans from animals lends itself easily to propaganda that attributes animal qualities to outgroups. For an example, we can look to British Prime Minister David Cameron, who referred to the Syrian refugees as a “swarm” attempting to enter the United Kingdom. Even more recently, US President Donald Trump repeatedly referred to migrants attempting to cross the southern border as animals. Certainly, egregious examples can be found from Nazi Germany or the Vietnam War.<sup>40</sup>

When we distance ourselves from animals, we distance ourselves from the reality of death. And similarly, when we liken others to animals, we distance ourselves from *their human deaths*. Both attempts to dehumanize outgroups and separate ourselves from non-human animals are ways in which we attempt to control our anxieties about mortality and the reality of death.

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<sup>38</sup> BT Avodah Zarah 8a.

<sup>39</sup> The dynamics of animal sacrifice in biblical literature are diverse and many. One element, which may be present in this example, is vicarious sacrifice. The bull dies in place of Adam, allowing Adam to avoid death and ignore, momentarily, his own mortality.

<sup>40</sup> Alderman, *The Animal at Unease with Itself*, 28.

Death anxiety is a feature of humanity. It is acknowledged and analyzed in psychological literature, and it is apparent throughout biblical and rabbinic texts. Using Jewish perspectives and history alongside contemporary research can normalize our experience with death anxiety. We can look to our traditions to provide examples of the experience of death anxiety and attempts to calm such fears. Ultimately, there is no cure for death anxiety, no magical method or way of thinking which would banish it from our lives. However, we can learn to coexist with our anxiety, to employ coping mechanisms as appropriate, to accept our own limitations and fears, and to live meaningful, fulfilling lives, even if, underneath it all, we're always a little scared.

## CHAPTER 2: DENIAL

Definitionally, we do not experience our own death. The only deaths we can experience are the deaths of others. As such, it makes sense that it is incredibly difficult to grasp the idea that we too will die. As Jack Reimer articulates, “People have been dying ever since the world began, and yet each one of us clings to the illusion that death is something that happens to other people but not to us.”<sup>41</sup> The denial of our own mortality is born out of both experiential evidence (i.e., death only happens to other people) and a desire to avoid painful emotions, like anxiety or depression.

Maintaining some level of death denial is an inevitable reality of the human experience. Life would be rather unpleasant if we lived every moment with full awareness of our impending demise. It is not exactly good etiquette to bring up the harsh reality of mortality at a dinner party.<sup>42</sup> But there are more than good manners at stake when we consider facing the reality of death. Death can be destabilizing, destructive, and chaotic – the antithesis of what most strive for in their lives. Rachel Adler describes the human impulse to resist confronting death:

Human beings live in a particular tension. To be human is to be aware. We know our own fragility and changefulness, and we know that a vast and mutable world is living and dying all around us. At the same time, it is human to resist disruption. In order to reconcile our desire for stability with our destabilizing awareness, human beings cultivate a selective obliviousness. As T.S. Eliot observes, “human kind / cannot bear much reality.” Hence, we sometimes shut out what is screaming to be heard, and when we do, its drumming against the wall of our denial evokes in us an outsized sense of dread.<sup>43</sup>

The imagery Adler uses is quite evocative. In poignant prose, she illustrates what psychological research validates: that all-encompassing denial, the kind that is as solid and confining as a wall,

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<sup>41</sup> Jack Reimer, *Jewish Reflections on Death* (New York: Schocken Books, Inc., 1974), 8.

<sup>42</sup> This brings to mind the iconic scene in the 2023 Barbie movie, when, in the middle of a dance party, Barbie blurts out, “Do you guys ever think about dying?” This is oddly prefigured by stories in the Talmud, Berakhot 30b-31a about rabbis smashing expensive goblets at wedding parties to curtail excessive levity, and singing, “Woe to us that we shall die!”

<sup>43</sup> Rachel Adler, *Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 74.

facilitates an increase in dread.<sup>44</sup> It is the dissonance between the wall of denial and the shriek of mortality that causes such distress. The antidote to such distress is not to tear down the walls. Some levels of denial are useful, allowing us to compartmentalize and be present in the moments of our lives. The key is to install some windows, to allow the reality of death to peacefully coexist in our consciousness alongside our appreciation for life.

In order to process how to moderate appropriate levels of death denial, we must first have an understanding of what death denial means. There are active and passive elements to death denial. Passive death denial is a largely unconscious capacity to compartmentalize so that we can be appropriately present. This compartmentalization allows us to experience the fullness of a joyful celebration, the peace of a leisurely afternoon, or the comfort of a restful night of sleep. Active death denial, on the other hand, involves conscious avoidance and rejection of both tangible reminders of death (e.g., going to doctors' appointments, making funeral arrangements, writing and reading this thesis, etc.) and intangible reminders of death (e.g., thinking about mortality, remembering a deceased loved one, etc.). While active death denial may be an appropriate coping mechanism in some cases, excessive amounts can ultimately lead to increased distress, delayed care and preparation, and a diminishing of the meaningfulness of life.<sup>45</sup> The reality of human psychology is rarely black-and-white, and conscious choices often influence and, in turn, are influenced by unconscious attitudes. However, for the sake of clarity and pragmatism, I will be dealing exclusively with active death denial for the remainder of this chapter.

Jewish tradition understands the reality of death denial as a function of human life. The midrashic elaboration of Moses's death in Deuteronomy Rabbah is perhaps one of the most thorough depictions of how death denial can manifest when a person is confronted with the end of their life. Additionally, rabbinic tales of attempts to trick a personified Angel of Death exemplify the rabbis' understanding of the human impulse to avoid death at all costs. Within the biblical text itself, we also see an underlying desire to deny mortality. The psalmist declares, "A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand; but it [a plague] will not come

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<sup>44</sup> Rachel C. Bock, Lucas D. Baker, Emily A. Kalantar, Christopher R. Berghoff, Joel C. Stroman, Kim L. Gratz, and Matthew T. Tull, "Clarifying Relations of Emotion Regulation, Emotional Avoidance and Anxiety Symptoms in a Community-Based Treatment-Seeking Sample" in *Psychology and Psychotherapy* 97, no. 2(2024): 393–404. doi: 10.1111/papt.12523.

<sup>45</sup> Philip J. Cozzolino, Laura E.R. Blackbie, and Lawrence S. Meyers, "Self-Related Consequences of Death Fear and Death Denial" in *Death Studies* 38, no. 6 (2014): 418–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2013.780110>.

near to you” (Ps 91:7), reflecting our sense of exemption from death compared to others. Throughout biblical literature we read of divine signs and proclamations – promises that God will never again commit certain violences and atrocities (Gen 9:11-17; Ezek. 5:9, 39:29). The absolutism of these promises, that *never* again will God cause a certain level of death and destruction, reveals the human desire to deny death by holding onto false certainties.

In addition to the intense death denial reflected in these texts, there is also an understanding imbued in both biblical and later halakhic literature that death is something to be faced and witnessed. Biblical characters often announce their own deaths in simple, definitive declarations: “Behold, I am about to die” (Gen 48:21). This matter-of-fact tone blocks out the possibility of denial, leaving room for acceptance and a peaceful end.<sup>46</sup> Halakhic injunctions require people to be with those who are nearing their own death. This presence at a time of death can be seen as a counterbalance to prevent complete death denial.

To gain a more complete picture of how Jewish tradition balances and moderates death denial, I have separated death denial into two main manifestations: (1) avoidance and (2) rejection. Examining both elements of death denial from a research- and text-based perspective will provide us with a critical lens through which to read the midrashic tale of Moses’s death. Uniting tradition with research allows us to view death denial with compassion, understanding, and ultimately, a sense of connection and shared struggle.

### *Avoidance*

It is a natural instinct to wish to avoid that which is unpleasant – when we see goose poop on the sidewalk, we avoid stepping in it so we don’t get feces on our shoes. Avoidance can even be a matter of life-preservation. We may avoid close contact with someone who is sneezing and coughing so that we do not become ill. Those with life-threatening allergies must avoid ingesting allergens to guard against serious reactions. It may seem counterintuitive, then, that avoidance, specifically experiential avoidance, can actually amplify distress over the very thing we are trying to avoid. Experiential avoidance is defined as an “unwillingness to remain in contact with aversive experiences such as painful feelings, thoughts and emotions.”<sup>47</sup> Research shows that

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<sup>46</sup> For a more in-depth analysis of the blunt honesty of Joseph’s declaration of death, see Chapter 5: Acceptance.

<sup>47</sup> Rui Shi, Shilei Zhang, Qianwen Zhang, Shaoping Fu, and Zhenhong Wang, “Experiential Avoidance Mediates the Association between Emotion Regulation Abilities and Loneliness” in *PLoS One* 11, no. 12 (2016): e0168536. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0168536>, p. 2

when applied rigidly and inflexibly, experiential avoidance can both increase distress about the very thing one wishes to avoid, “ge[t] in the way of the pursuit of valued goals, and reduc[e] the individual’s contact with the present moment at the cost of effective action and functioning.”<sup>48</sup>

Taken to the extreme, experiential avoidance can lead to the development of disorders like addiction, anxiety, and depression.<sup>49</sup> Thus, one who wishes to deny their mortality by avoiding thoughts, places, and experiences associated with death may find themselves facing increased distress about death and decreased fulfillment in life.

An additional element involved with avoidance of death is the devaluation of time. Time is precious because it is limited. If we never acknowledge that our own experience of time will ultimately end, then we may end up taking life for granted. Kübler-Ross describes how death denial can impede one’s ability to live with purpose:

It is the denial of death that is partially responsible for people living empty purposeless lives; for when you live as if you’ll live forever, it becomes too easy to postpone the things you know that you must do. You live your life in preparation for tomorrow or in remembrance of yesterday, and meanwhile, each today is lost. In contrast, when you fully understand that each day you awaken could be the last you have, you take the time *that day* to grow, to become more of who you really are, to reach out to other human beings.<sup>50</sup>

Kübler-Ross’s observation echoes the popular sentiment of the Tim McGraw song, “Live Like You Were Dying.” McGraw sings of a man who, when faced with a life-changing diagnosis, has a sudden epiphany and chooses to live the remainder of his days with an abundance of adventure, love, and forgiveness.<sup>51</sup> Rabbi Lawrence Kushner lived out a version of that song when he faced a possible brain tumor diagnosis. Kushner describes his experience while waiting for test results:

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<sup>48</sup> Martin Wolgast, Lars-Gunnar Lundh, and Gardar Viborg, “Experiential Avoidance as an Emotion Regulatory Function: An Empirical Analysis of Experiential Avoidance in Relation to Behavioral Avoidance, Cognitive Reappraisal, and Response Suppression” in *Cognitive Behaviour Therapy* 42, no. 3 (2013): 224–32. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16506073.2013.773059>, p. 224

<sup>49</sup> Shi R, Zhang S, Zhang Q, Fu S, Wang Z (2016) Experiential Avoidance Mediates the Association between Emotion Regulation Abilities and Loneliness. *PLoS ONE* 11(12): e0168536. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0168536>, 2.

<sup>50</sup> Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *Death: The Final Stage of Growth*, 164. For a discussion into the rabbinic analogue to this sentiment, see Chapter 5: Acceptance.

<sup>51</sup> Tim McGraw, “Live Like You Were Dying” in *Live Like You Were Dying* (Curb Records, 2004).

Everything I did was supercharged and overdetermined with meaning. I was unable to take anything for granted. The most trivial sensations were gifts. The smell of my children's hair. The sound of the dog barking. My wife's kiss. The morning coffee. Each one of them was too precious to let go.<sup>52</sup>

Kushner's tests came back negative; he was never diagnosed with a brain tumor. But the experience gave him a lasting appreciation for life and a deeper connection to Jewish tradition and practice.

Not all who are confronted with death, whether through medical diagnoses or other near-death experiences, feel their lives are enhanced as a result. Life-threatening experiences can be traumatic and result in increased avoidance and decreased quality of life.<sup>53</sup> Chava Freud describes how awareness of death detracted from the time she spent with her ailing mother:

I remember that first big vacation we took after Mom's illness was discovered. I could not shake the thought that it might be our last trip together. Weepy, sentimental sensations overwhelmed me... which certainly detracted from the pleasures to be experienced in the present. When I think of the half-dozen or so vacation trips we've enjoyed together since then, I must conclude that an obsession with death and dying produces a morbidity that must be transcended if one is to live at all.<sup>54</sup>

For Freud, thinking of her mother's mortality led her to be so emotionally overwhelmed that it took her out of the present moment. Over-awareness of death placed Freud in a state of premature mourning which significantly detracted from the time she spent with her mother who was still very much alive.

The balance of maintaining a level of avoidance that prevents us from becoming overwhelmed by thoughts of death and also recognizing mortality enough so that we value our limited time is quite delicate. Because our societal default is avoidance in the extreme, finding

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<sup>52</sup> Lawrence Kushner, "A Wake-Up Call." In Jack Riemer (ed.) *Wrestling with the Angel: Jewish Insights on Death and Mourning* (New York: Schocken Books, Inc., 1995), 34.

<sup>53</sup> Monique C. Pfaltz, Tanja Michael, Andrea H Meyer, and Frank H Wilhelm. "Reexperiencing Symptoms, Dissociation, and Avoidance Behaviors in Daily Life of Patients with PTSD and Patients with Panic Disorder with Agoraphobia," *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 26, no. 4 (2013): 443–50. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.21822>.

<sup>54</sup> Chava Freud, "In Praise of Denial." In Jack Riemer (ed.) *Wrestling with the Angel: Jewish Insights on Death and Mourning* (New York: Schocken Books, Inc., 1995), 36.

that balance can be incredibly challenging. It can be easier to either remain in total denial or overcorrect into overwhelming awareness than to find a moderate level of acceptance.

In the age of modern medicine, death rarely enters the public sphere. Shrouded by curtains in buildings designated for death and illness, the dying and the deceased are rarely seen. Kübler-Ross explains how the lack of encounters with death amplifies our instinct to avoid and deny mortality:

It is difficult to accept death in this society *because* it is unfamiliar. In spite of the fact that it happens all the time, we never see it. When a person dies in a hospital, he is quickly whisked away; a magical disappearing act does away with the evidence before it could upset anyone. But...being part of the dying process, the death, and the burial, including seeing and perhaps interacting with the body, is an important part of coming to grips with death – that of the person who has died and your own.<sup>55</sup>

Witnessing someone die, specifically in a peaceful manner, can be a powerful way to normalize death as a human experience. Jewish law recognizes the importance of being present at a time of death. Shulchan Arukh requires that people gather around a dying person: when a person feels they are about to die, the community “should not separate themselves from him, lest his soul depart whilst he is alone.”<sup>56</sup> This injunction implies that the gathering of people is meant to serve the needs of the dying person. But the wisdom behind this rule is that it also tends to the spiritual needs of those gathering around the dying person. By requiring witnesses, Shulchan Arukh forces us to watch the process of death, to see with our own eyes what will one day be our own fate. We are not given permission to look away.

Biblical literature also emphasizes the importance of what might be termed ‘public displays of death’ as a way to incorporate death as a normative, human experience. Rabbi Steven Saltzman’s analysis of how God declares the death of Moses, highlights the importance of public visibility. Saltzman zeroes in on the phrase *b’etzem hayom hazeh*, which he translates as “in the middle of the day” or “on that very day.”<sup>57</sup> This phrase is used to express the timing of God’s

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<sup>55</sup> Kübler-Ross, *Death: The Final Stage of Growth*, 5.

<sup>56</sup> Shulchan Arukh, Yoreh Deah 339:4.

<sup>57</sup> Steven Saltzman, “Saying Goodbye.” In Jack Riemer (ed.) *Wrestling with the Angel: Jewish Insights on Death and Mourning* (New York: Schocken Books, Inc., 1995), 69.

declaration of Moses's death: "In the middle of the day/On that very day, God spoke to Moses saying: Ascend Mount Avarim to Mount Nevo...you shall die on the mountain you are about to ascend..." (Gen. 48-50). Saltzman asks, "Why did God insist that Moses die in the middle of the day, when everyone would be standing about watching, waiting, wondering. Why not in the small hours of the night instead, in peace, in quiet, in private?"<sup>58</sup>

The phrase *b'etzem hayom hazeh* is used only two other times in the Hebrew Bible – to describe when Noah enters the ark and when God takes the Jews out of Egypt. Saltzman argues that each of those two instances required witnesses so that people could grasp the inevitability of both the flood and the Jews' salvation. Similarly, Saltzman claims, the death of Moses needed to be declared publicly so that people could accept the reality of his death:

And now, God has decreed that Moses will die – *b'etzem hayom hazeh*, on that very day...[Israel] will try to hold on to him in every way they can, but just as with the flood and just as with the Exodus, so no one could hold back the death of Moses. God has willed it to happen, and no force on earth can stop it.<sup>59</sup>

When death becomes a public declaration, there are no avenues for the people to deny it. In forcing the people to face Moses's death, God helps them come to terms with not just the loss of their leader but also their own mortality.

When we see someone in their final moments it can help us understand death as a normal, human process, enhancing our capacity for compassion and understanding towards both the dying and ourselves. Logically then, when we avoid witnessing death, we risk alienating those in the process of dying as well as the parts of ourselves that indicate our own mortality. Abraham Kaplan describes how turning away from death impedes our sense of humanity:

[W]e the living are dehumanized if we dehumanize the dying. Precisely when they stand in greatest need of human closeness and warmth, our own fears and our own guilts turn us away from them. We imagine that we can continue to deceive them about their own

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<sup>58</sup> Saltzman, "Saying Goodbye", 69.

<sup>59</sup> Saltzman, "Saying Goodbye", 70.

condition and that we are doing so as an act of kindness to them. It is that in part, of course, but it is also an act of kindness to ourselves and an act of cowardice.<sup>60</sup>

Kaplan notes that avoidance is a form of dehumanization, a separation between us and the dying which maintains our delusion of our own immortality.<sup>61</sup> But when we dehumanize death, we dehumanize ourselves, as death is an inevitable part of who and what we are. Humanizing death, turning towards the dying, and embracing our own mortality are acts of courage. The reward for such courage is a meaningful, human life. Research indicates that reduced levels of death avoidance “predict a stronger, healthier actual-self that is personally valued, clearly conceived, efficacious, and that has intrinsic meaning and purpose.”<sup>62</sup>

### *Rejection*

Rejection differs from avoidance as a form of death denial in that it feeds the delusion that we will never die. While avoidance involves ignoring death, rejection involves looking at death and saying, “No thanks, that’s not for me.” While that sentiment may seem humorous, the reality is that many of us think that way. In a study in which participants were asked, “Is your own death probable to you?”, many of the participants “considered it unthinkable and believed they would live forever.”<sup>63</sup> Teens, in particular, are recognized as having a kind of invincibility complex which encourages them to engage in risky behaviors.<sup>64</sup>

The talmudic rabbis understood the desire to reject death outright, providing stories in which a personified Angel of Death is repeatedly rejected. Line by line, the Talmud details different rabbis who encountered Death and said, “No thanks.” Rabbi Elazar was eating *teruma*, a kind of priestly offering, when the Angel of Death appeared to him. “I am eating *teruma*; is it not called sacred?” Rabbi Elazar cried out. In other words, “Not right now, Death, I am *busy*.”

<sup>60</sup> Abraham Kaplan, “Life and Death as Partners.” In Jack Reimer (ed.), *Jewish Reflections on Death* (New York: Schocken Books, Inc., 1974), 130.

<sup>61</sup> For more information on how dehumanization is used to moderate intense emotions around death, see Chapter 1: Anxiety.

<sup>62</sup> Cozzolino et al., “Self-related consequences of death fear and death denial”, 421.

<sup>63</sup> Rheingold, *The Mother, Death, and Anxiety*, 10.

<sup>64</sup> Mary E. Wickman, Nancy Lois Ruth Anderson, and Cindy Smith Greenberg, “The Adolescent Perception of Invincibility and Its Influence on Teen Acceptance of Health Promotion Strategies” in *Journal of Pediatric Nursing* 23, no. 6 (2008).

The Angel of Death left him alone. Later, the Angel of Death came to Rav Sheshet in the marketplace. Rav Sheshet, in exasperation, exclaimed, “Really? In the market, like an animal? Come to my house later.” Again, Death obliged. When the Angel of Death came to Rav Ashi, Rav Ashi stalled for time, asking, “Give me thirty days so that I may review my studies, for as you say: fortunate is he who comes here with learning in his hand.” But at the end of thirty days, when Death again approached him, Rav Ashi cried out, “Why all of this?” (i.e., “Why do I have to die?”). Now the Angel of Death was getting tired of all this rejection, so he decided to take a different approach. When he went to the house of Rabbi Chiya, Death disguised himself as a poor person. He knocked on Rabbi Chiya’s door and requested some bread. Rabbi Chiya, being a righteous soul, immediately brought the bread to him. The Angel of Death then said: “Master, you clearly have mercy for the poor. Why then do you not have mercy for me?” At that moment, in a flair of dramatics involving a fiery rod, the Angel of Death revealed his true identity. Rabbi Chiya surrendered himself, without a word of dissent or rejection.<sup>65</sup>

The rabbis depict Death as a sympathetic character, like a slightly pathetic guy who just can’t seem to get a date. In doing so, the rabbis are gently poking fun at our human impulse to reject death and pointing out its absurdity. At the same time, the rabbis invert the power dynamic between Death and humanity, engaging in a kind of fantasy world in which humans really can say no to dying. In the end, surrendering to Death is a kindness akin to giving sustenance to the poor. These rabbinic tales add levity to the experience of dying, normalize the instinct to reject death, and provide gentle encouragement towards acceptance.

Now, some degree of death rejection is helpful, giving us enough confidence to take the kinds of reasonable risks that allow us to live a life in alignment with what we value. In her study of patients with terminal diagnoses, Kübler-Ross found that death denial, in the form of rejecting the reality of the diagnosis, was at times useful in giving patients the ability to live meaningfully and to build up the capacity to ultimately face their mortality.

Denial, at least partial denial, is used by almost all patients, not only during the first stages of illness or following confrontation, but also later on from time to time. Who was it who said, “We cannot look at the sun all the time, we cannot face death all the time”? These patients can consider the possibility of their own death for a while but then have to

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<sup>65</sup> BT, Moed Katan 28a.

put this consideration away in order to pursue life. I emphasize this strongly since I regard it a healthy way of dealing with the uncomfortable and painful situation with which some of these patients have to live for a long time. Denial functions as a buffer after unexpected shocking news, allows the patient to collect himself and, with time, mobilize other, less radical defenses.<sup>66</sup>

In those whose bodies are deteriorating from age or disease, rejecting death for brief periods of time can be a radical act of self-compassion. To reject death in such cases is to reject concrete evidence, to deny what is apparent before one's eyes and in one's bones. To allow oneself permission to live in such a fantasy *temporarily* can be a beautiful gift.<sup>67</sup>

But for those whose bodies seem secure, youthful and disease-free, it is acknowledgement of death that is radical. To confront the fact that youth and health are temporary states requires one to use their imaginative capacity to envision a future that is, at the very least, uncomfortable. It is more natural to reject future projections of age, disease, or injury. Daniel Callahan explains how health can provide a buffer with which to reject the possibility of death:

Good health gives us a sense of invincibility, a settled conviction that the chaos of illness, the fragility of a body captured by disease, has been held at a distance. Sickness is someone else's problem, not mine. Other bodies go wrong, not mine. Yet illness as such is not necessarily the greatest threat. Its deepest threat lies in its meaning: it is the undeniable token of our precious hold on life. It reminds us that we are human, not gods, that from dust we came and to dust we will return.<sup>68</sup>

When we reject death outright, we reject reality. And living in unreality is, ultimately, unsustainable. We need to be grounded in reality in order to maintain meaningful relationships with others, moderate our risk-tolerance, and feel connected to our true selves. At the same time, a little fantasy can be quite additive, restorative, and even protective. Finding the balance between outright rejection and overwhelming acceptance is incredibly difficult and, at times,

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<sup>66</sup> Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan, 1969), 39.

<sup>67</sup> There is a big difference between momentarily rejecting death in the service of living a meaningful life and completely rejecting reality and choosing to live in the delusion of immortality permanently. The latter can have deleterious effects on both terminally ill patients and their friends and family.

<sup>68</sup> Callahan, *The Troubled Dream of Life*, 127.

unattainable. We can take comfort in knowing that this struggle is shared, that Death has faced rejection from every generation.

*Moses's Denial of Death in Deuteronomy Rabbah*

Moses's death is one of the most significant in the entire biblical canon. The Torah quite literally ends with Moses; his death closes out an entire corpus of biblical literature. Dennis T. Olson argues that the whole of the Book of Deuteronomy can be read through the lens of Moses's death and its meaning.<sup>69</sup> Despite the emotional resonance of Moses's death for the reader – we mourn over the loss of the one who led the Israelites out of Egypt and through the wilderness, and we agonize over the fact that he does not get to see the fruits of his leadership in the promised land – there is very little in the biblical text that describes Moses's own response to his impending death. Sometime between the 6th and 9th centuries CE, the rabbis sought to fill this gap with detailed accounts of Moses's response to his approaching death in Deuteronomy Rabbah.

In several midrashic tales, the rabbis describe Moses's multiple attempts to deny the reality of his death, as he argues with God, makes desperate bargains, and acts in protest. Moses rejects and avoids death at every possible turn. I have separated these stories into six narrative units:

1. Rejecting the Angel of Death 3 Times (11:5)
2. The soul's attachment (11:5)
3. Protest speeches (11:8-9)
4. Protest acts (11:10)
5. Bargaining (11:10)
6. God tends to Moses's death (11:10)

In the first narrative unit, our old friend the Angel of Death comes to retrieve Moses, but Moses says no twice. Only on the third visit, does Moses acquiesce.

Rabbi Meir said: 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 to him, "Go away, for I wish to praise the Holy One, Blessed be He."... The Angel of Death said to Moses: "Moses, why are you so arrogant? There are others in creation who can praise God. Heaven and

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<sup>69</sup> Dennis T. Olson, *Deuteronomy and the Death of Moses* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994).

earth praise [God] all the time.”... Moses replied to him, “I shall silence [heaven and earth] and praise [God].” ...The Angel of Death then came to [Moses] a second time. What did Moses do? He pronounced over him the Ineffable Name [of God] and [the Angel of Death] fled... When he came to him a third time, Moses said, “Since [this decree] is from God, I must accept the righteousness of His judgment.<sup>70</sup>

This midrash echoes the aggadic accounts in the Talmud of rabbis successfully rejecting the Angel of Death. Moses, like the rabbis, has some agency over Death, a fantastical ability to at least delay the end of his life. Additionally, that Death had to visit Moses three times before Moses accepts him mirrors the rabbinic assertion that one seeking conversion to Judaism must make three attempts before being accepted as a student.<sup>71</sup> There is something significant about the number three that, at least in the rabbinic mind, indicates proper motivation, divine sanction, and legal finality. Moses’s autonomy as well as Death’s persistence creates a narrative world in which humans have a relationship with dying that includes elements of predictability and control.

The second narrative unit changes tactics by insinuating a kind of dualism in which Moses must persuade his own personified Soul that she should leave.

Rabbi Yitzhaq said: The soul of Moses struggled to leave. Moses was conversing with his soul, saying: “My soul, perhaps you think that the Angel of Death is seeking to gain dominion over you?” [His soul] replied: “No, the Holy One blessed be He would not do so” ... [Moses then said to his soul]: “Perhaps you have seen Israel weeping and you wept with them?” Whereupon she replied: “[*You have delivered*] my eyes from tears.” [Ps. 116:8]. Said Moses to her: “Do you think then that they have sought to thrust you into Gehinnom?” Whereupon she replied: “[*You have delivered*] my feet from stumbling.” [Ps. 116:8]. Said Moses to her: “And where are you destined to go?” She replied: “[*I shall walk before the Lord in the lands of the living.*” [Ps. 116:9]. When Moses heard this he gave her permission [to leave], saying to her: “[*Return, O my soul, to your rest.*” [Ps. 116:7].<sup>72</sup>

This midrash illustrates the inner turmoil involved in the process of moving from denial to acceptance of death. By separating Moses from his soul, the rabbis are able to represent an inner

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<sup>70</sup> Deuteronomy Rabbah 11:5.

<sup>71</sup> Ruth Rabbah 2:16.

<sup>72</sup> Deuteronomy Rabbah 11:5.

dialogue between anxiety and certainty, despair and comfort, and denial and acceptance. Once again, Moses is the one in control of the situation; he must give his soul permission to depart.

An added element to this midrash is the idea of the soul's immortality compared to Moses. Interestingly, Moses's soul is *not* Moses but a distinct entity with her own thoughts and personality. She seems to have pre-dated Moses as, in leaving Moses, she is "returning" to some prior state of rest. Because the rabbis make Moses's soul separate from Moses, they do not nullify the end of Moses's existence. In other words, that Moses's soul lives on does not indicate that the essence of Moses himself does, too. The soul's denial of death is not of her own but of Moses's. Moses, in this case, has already accepted his death in order to allow for his soul to leave him.

The following two midrashim represent Moses's attempt to protest God's decree and repeal his ultimate fate. In his first attempt, Moses resorts to a kind of begging, asking to live on so that he may continue to act as a prophet to the people:

When the time arrived for Moses to take his leave of the world, the Holy One blessed be He said to him: "Behold, your time [to die] is approaching" (Deuteronomy 31:14). He said before Him: 'Master of the universe, after all this exertion, You say to me: "Behold your time...is approaching"? "Let me not die, but live, and I will relate the deeds of the Lord"' (Psalms 118:17). He said to him: 'You cannot, "for that is all of man" (Ecclesiastes 12:13).<sup>73</sup>

The rabbis capture a real sense of humanity in Moses's plea. The emotional valence of "Let me not die, but live" is deeply relatable and reflects the innate human desire to stay alive. Moses's promise to "relate the deeds of the Lord," is similarly sympathetic. It is common for people facing difficult obstacles to formulate prayers in a similar form: "If I get better, I promise I'll go to synagogue every Shabbat"; "If I don't get fired, I promise I'll never complain about my job again"; "If she gets back together with me, I promise I'll buy her flowers every week."

Ultimately, God is the one who must reject the logic of such trade-offs. Moses has to die, not because of some failure to express the greatness of God, but because every human must die. In a stunning moment of clarity, the rabbis, in the divine voice, reject the notion that death can be prevented by deeds. Whereas Moses's rejection may have held some power over the Angel of Death, he holds no power over the divine judgement of God.

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<sup>73</sup> Deuteronomy Rabbah 11:8.

In Moses's second protest speech, he attempts to appeal to a sense of justice, arguing that God's decree of death would be rewarding good with evil:

*Behold [hen], your time to die is approaching* (Deuteronomy 31:14) – Rabbi Aibo said: Moses said: “Master of the universe, with the very word with which I lauded you in the midst of sixty myriad sanctifiers of Your name, with that You decreed death upon me, as it is stated: *Behold, your time to die is approaching* – all measures dispensed by the Holy One blessed be He, are dispensed measure for measure. But this is an evil measure for a good measure, a lacking measure for a full measure, a restricted measure for an ample measure.’ The Holy One blessed be He said to Moses: ‘This, too, is a good measure, that I said “behold [hen]” to you, as it is stated: *Behold [hineh], I am sending an angel* (Exodus 23:20); *Behold [hen], restitution will be made to the righteous* (Proverbs 11:31); *Behold [hineh], I am sending Elijah the prophet to you* (Malachi 3:23).<sup>74</sup>

The rabbis here seek to explain the word choice of הן, behold, in God's original decree of Moses's death. But in doing so, they reveal Moses's perspective on his death. Moses believes that his death is a kind of punishment, that his death would be a misuse of divine justice. God denies this accusation, pointing to other declarations of good things in which God used the word הן. By categorizing Moses's death declaration with these other declarations of “good measure,” the rabbis imply that Moses's death is also a good thing. The rabbis provide two perspectives on Moses's death: Moses believes his death is evil, and God believes his death is good. While God's perspective may hold divine authority, it is Moses's perspective which is most relatable. The rabbis, like Moses, are confused as to why Moses, and ultimately they themselves, have to die. They need God to say that death is a good thing in order to quell their own misgivings about dying.

In the fourth unit, Moses resorts to acts of protest in an attempt to void God's death decree. He uses his body in a kind of ritual challenge meant to provoke a response from God:

When Moses saw that his sentence had been sealed, he decreed a fast upon himself, drew a small circle, stood within it, and said: “I am not moving from here until You void this decree.” At that moment, what did Moses do? He donned sackcloth, wrapped himself in sackcloth, covered himself with ashes, and stood in prayer and supplication before the Holy One blessed be He, until the heavens, the earth, and the order of Creation shook

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<sup>74</sup> Deuteronomy Rabbah 11:9.

violently, and they said: “Perhaps, the desire of the Holy One blessed be He to renew His world has arrived.” A Divine Voice emerged and said: “The desire of the Holy One blessed be He to renew His world has not arrived. Rather: *In whose hand is the life of every living thing, and the spirit of all flesh of man* (Job 12:10), and Moses is none other than man, as it is stated: *The man Moses was very humble, more than any person on the face of the earth* (Numbers 12:3).<sup>75</sup>

Moses’s refusal to leave his ritual circle unless God changes His mind about Moses’s death reads like the protest of a child who does not want to go home after a playdate. That Moses, the great leader who persevered through decades of wandering, yielding complaints, and providing sustenance, would resort to such juvenile tactics illustrates the extent of his desperation to deny his mortality. Once again, the rabbis use the divine voice to reiterate that death is the fate of every human. That no one, not even Moses, is exempt from mortality.

Moses, however, is not yet ready to accept his ultimate fate. After speeches and actions of protests fail, Moses resorts to bargaining.<sup>76</sup> He expresses a desire to stay alive, even if in a different form:

Moses said before the Holy One blessed be He: “Master of the universe, if you do not take me into the Land of Israel, leave me like the beasts of the field, who eat greenery, drink water, live, and see the world. So, let my soul be like one of them.” He said to him: *Enough [do not continue to speak to Me of this matter]* (Deuteronomy 3:26). He said before him: “Master of the universe, if not, leave me in this world, like this bird that flies in all directions of the world, and gathers its sustenance each day, and in the evening it returns to its nest. So, let my soul be like one of them.” He said to him: “Enough.”  
 ... When Moses saw that no creature could save him from the path of death, at that moment, he said: “The Rock, His actions are perfect, as all His ways are justice; a faithful God and there is no injustice, righteous and upright is He” (Deuteronomy 32:4).<sup>77</sup>

So desperate is Moses to stay alive, he asks God to turn him into another lifeform. And as each request is rejected, Moses’s requests become further and further from the human form. First,

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<sup>75</sup> Deuteronomy Rabbah 11:10.

<sup>76</sup> This unit is not the first time Moses attempts to bargain for his life. A chapter earlier, the rabbis describe an episode in which Moses offers to relinquish his leadership position and serve underneath Joshua if God will let him live. God agrees to this arrangement, but Moses finds this reversal of status so bitter that he comes to prefer death (Deuteronomy Rabbah 9:9).

<sup>77</sup> Deuteronomy Rabbah 11:10.

Moses asks to be turned into a mammal, a “beast of the field.” When God denies that request, Moses asks to be turned into a bird so that he may fly around and continue to be a part of life on earth. After God denies that request, Moses understands that God will not allow him to remain as an animate creature. So he accepts his fate by comparing God to an inanimate object, a rock. In this way, Moses acknowledges himself as a flawed, changeable, and mortal creature compared to God, the unchangeable, perfectly just, and immortal being.<sup>78</sup>

After all these attempts at bargaining, the time has come for Moses to die. The fact that the rabbis spend so much time detailing stories of Moses’s moments of protest and bargaining show their own hesitation to accept and describe his death. But despite their attempts to delay, the rabbis do ultimately write an account of the moment of Moses’s death. It is God Himself who causes Moses to die, not Gabriel, not Samuel, and not the Angel of Death:

A Divine Voice emerged and said to him: “Fear not, I, Myself, will tend to you and to your burial.” At that moment, Moses stood and sanctified himself, like the seraphs. The Holy One blessed be He descended from the uppermost heavens of heavens to take Moses’ soul... The Holy One blessed be He said to Moses: “Cover your eyes with your eyelids,” and he covered his eyes with his eyelids. He said to him: “Place your hands on your chest,” and he placed his hands on his chest. He said to him: “Place your feet one next to the other.” He placed his feet one next to the other.<sup>79</sup>

God’s direct involvement with Moses’s death is meant to be a form of comfort. Just as the rabbis use the divine voice to justify the goodness of death, the rabbis use the divine presence to give death a sense of peacefulness and calm. God instructs Moses to place his body in a particular position, rather than moving Moses’s body Himself. In this way, God grants Moses some of the autonomy and control that he sought in his various attempts at rejecting death.

However, once Moses is positioned properly, God encounters one final obstacle. Moses’s soul reenters the narrative, and makes one final plea:

At that moment, the Holy One blessed be He summoned the soul from within his body. He said to her: “My daughter, one hundred and twenty years I allotted for your being in

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<sup>78</sup> Moses’s declaration forms the basis of the liturgical *tsidduk hadin*—justification and acceptance of divine judgement. For more on *tsidduk hadin*, see Chapter 5: Acceptance.

<sup>79</sup> Deuteronomy Rabbah 11:10.

Moses' body. Now, your end has arrived, it is time to leave. Depart, do not delay." She said before Him: "Master of the universe, I know that You are the God of all the spirits and all the souls. The soul of the living and the dead are given into Your hand. You created me, You formed me, and You placed me in Moses' body for one hundred and twenty years. Now, is there a body in the world purer than Moses's body? As no putrid wind was ever seen in him, and no worms or maggots. That is why I love it and do not wish to depart from it." The Holy One blessed be He said to her: "Soul, depart, do not delay, and I will take you up to the uppermost heavens of heavens, I will seat you beneath My Throne of Glory with the cherubs, the seraphs, and the troops." She said before Him: "Master of the universe, from near your Divine Presence on High, two angels, Uza and Azael, descended and lusted after earthly women and corrupted their way on the earth until you suspended them between the earth and the heavens. But the son of Amram, from the day that You revealed Yourself to him, he did not consort with his wife, as it is stated: *Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses with regard to the Kushite woman whom he had married, for he had married a Kushite woman* (Numbers 12:1). I ask You please: Leave me in Moses' body." At that moment, the Holy One blessed be He kissed him, and took his soul with a kiss on the mouth.<sup>80</sup>

Moses's soul does not want to leave Moses. But rather than using Moses's acts of righteousness to argue that he does not deserve to die, Moses's soul uses Moses's character to explain why she does not want to leave him. God attempts to appease Moses's soul by reassuring her that she will have a place in the highest of the heavens, but even that does not dissuade the soul from wanting to stay with Moses. Ultimately, God has to take decisive action, taking Moses's soul with a kiss.

Again, the rabbis separate Moses from his soul, reaffirming that in death Moses himself is truly gone, even if his soul remains. To further this point, immediately after God administers His kiss of death, God bewails the loss of Moses, crying out, "Who will rise up for Me against the wicked? Who will take a stand for Me against the evildoers?"<sup>81</sup> Even to God, Moses is no more. Death is a final ending. The rabbis depict the moment of death as a moment of romance, a kiss between the divine and the mortal. This imagery affirms their stance that death is ultimately in the category of the good and the beautiful, even though our human impulse may scream the opposite.

In their depiction of Moses's responses to dying, the rabbis validate our instinct to deny death by any means necessary. They inflate these stories both to illustrate the lengths to which

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<sup>80</sup> Deuteronomy Rabbah 11:10.

<sup>81</sup> Deuteronomy Rabbah 11:10.

Moses, and by extension we, will go to deny death and to highlight their own desire to delay Moses's death as long as possible. Through each of these midrashim, there is an appreciation for the human spirit. Death is inevitable, but that does not dissuade us from attempting to deny it. There is a kind of admirable resilience present in our death denying efforts. And with the appropriate balance of denial and self-awareness, death may ultimately come to us as gentle and romantic as a kiss.

## CHAPTER 3: DESPAIR

Death and despair are often represented in pop culture using similar dark imagery. Many cartoons depict a depressed person as walking around with a storm cloud over their head. Death, too, is often represented with storm imagery – thick, dark, and dangerous.<sup>82</sup> It makes sense that death and despair closely resemble one another in cultural symbolism. Sadness is often caused by some kind of loss: loss of routine, loss of an opportunity, or loss of a relationship. Death, representing an ultimate loss, can be seen as the ultimate cause of despair.

Much has been written and studied regarding the despair which manifests as grief and mourning for other people. Judaism contains a detailed and prescriptive framework for those experiencing the death of a loved one: a timeline of grief rituals, practices, and expectations. Kübler-Ross's famous five stages of grief, though initially written as a reflection on her work with terminally ill patients,<sup>83</sup> is most often applied to those grieving the loss of another. Grief counselors specialize in helping people move through the process of mourning a death.<sup>84</sup>

There are fewer resources on the experience of grief and despair regarding the end of our own lives. While it is true that we cannot grieve our own death after the fact, we can very much imagine that loss while we are still alive. It is the projection of complete and total loss of self, relationships, and experiences that can cause profound despair.<sup>85</sup> Frankly, in the face of such massive obliteration, despair is an appropriate emotional response. By recognizing and validating despair and self-grief, we can then use that despair as a tool to find meaning and, ultimately, joy in the limited time we have alive. Kübler-Ross describes how the stage of despair can be productive in guiding terminally ill patients towards acceptance of their diagnoses:

When depression is a tool to prepare for the impending loss of all the love objects, in order to facilitate the state of acceptance, then encouragements and reassurances are not as meaningful. The patient should not be encouraged to look at the sunny side of things, as this would mean he should not contemplate his impending death. It would be

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<sup>82</sup> In the Hebrew Bible, storm imagery is used to refer to deadly divine punishment (Gen. 6:17; Ezek. 13:13; Jonah 1:4).

<sup>83</sup> Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*.

<sup>84</sup> "Role of the Certified Grief Counselor," American Institute of Health Care Professionals. <https://aihcp.net/role-of-the-certified-grief-counselor/>.

<sup>85</sup> Plant, "Living Posthumously," 42.

contraindicated to tell him not to be sad, since all of us are tremendously sad when we lose one beloved person. The patient is in the process of losing everything and everybody he loves. If he is allowed to express his sorrow he will find a final acceptance much easier, and he will be grateful to those who can sit with him during this state of depression without constantly telling him not to be sad.<sup>86</sup>

As Kübler-Ross points out, despair over the loss of one's own life is not something to avoid, escape, or diminish. There is something meaningful about allowing despair to be processed and expressed openly and unabashedly. As a part of a crucial cycle, despair over death can motivate gratitude and awareness of the meaningfulness of life. When we allow ourselves to experience this despair, we increase our capacity for relationship and understanding as we tap into the shared experience of all of those dealing with the terminal condition of life.

Jewish sources understand despair as an important part of grief, both of the loss of a loved one and of the anticipated loss of one's own life. Rabbinic tales describe one's death as a cause for intense weeping and distress.<sup>87</sup> Biblical figures like Hezekiah sob when confronted with their impending death.<sup>88</sup> Tears are described as an appropriate and beneficial human mechanism through which to grapple with the despair of death.<sup>89</sup> By analyzing these sources and comparing them with contemporary psychological research, we will come to the conclusion that despair is a normal, human response to mortality and an important aspect of the meaningfulness of life.

Though still woefully understudied, there have been a few recent publications focused on the impacts and implications of self-mourning, both in terminally ill patients and in healthy individuals. The results suggest that self-mourning is a natural phenomenon which, when fully embraced and appropriately expressed, can facilitate healthy emotional functioning. Self-mourning is a facet of what has been termed "anticipatory grief," in other words, grief over a significant loss that has not yet occurred but that we assume will in the future. Anticipatory grief is used as a tool to prepare for and lessen the impact of such a loss. Most of the literature on anticipatory grief focuses on external losses, as Shana Worrell and Susan Hemer describe:

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<sup>86</sup> Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 87.

<sup>87</sup> Midrash Tanhuma, Pekudei 3. See the discussion of this passage below, p. 46-47.

<sup>88</sup> II Kings 20:3. See the discussion of this passage below, p. 44.

<sup>89</sup> Ps. 126:5. See the discussion of this passage below, p. 43.

The burgeoning literature on anticipatory grief most often views this concept from the perspective of those who will remain, the bereaved-to-be, following the grief experiences of the relatives, friends, and caregivers of the dying within a pre- and post-death framework. Many articles are written for practitioners defining this concept and what to do in response. In contrast to this, [we] approach[e] this framework from the perspective of the dying themselves. This is an aspect recognized as lacking in research in the 1990s in the context of anticipatory grief. Current death, dying, and grief literature reiterates the lack of research into the lived, personal experiences of “living with dying.”<sup>90</sup>

Worrell and Hemer sought to highlight the experiences of those who were actively facing their own imminent death. To do so, they read and analyzed the blogs of two women, Stephanie and Jennifer, who had been diagnosed with a terminal illness. Stephanie was diagnosed with stage four melanoma in her early twenties and lived four years after her diagnosis and three and a half years beyond her projected life expectancy. Jennifer was diagnosed with stage four bowel cancer in her late twenties and lived for two years after her diagnosis, three years less than her predicted life expectancy. Both women were tasked with facing their own deaths at an age at which death is less common and often unexpected. Their blog entries reflect how they each moved through their own grief at both the prospect of dying in general and of dying at a young age. Worrell and Hemer reported that their entries illustrate the realities of anticipatory self-mourning:

The ways in which both Stephanie and Jennifer wrote about their experiences of loss and grief are clear examples of anticipatory grief explored through the perspective of dying or terminally ill individuals themselves. Both women wrote about the ways in which their past, present, and future losses informed each other, and the ways in which their losses were cumulative, growing the closer they were to death itself. Their grief was incomplete and ever changing, as they both existed in a space in which they were both living and dying, unable to find a true sense of closure to their grief, grieving losses that had occurred, while also grieving those still to come. This challenges the traditional narrative of anticipatory grief in a pre- and post-death framework, where pre-death grief is seen to lessen the impact and length of grief post-death.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Shana Worrell and Susan R. Hemer, “Blogging at the End-of-Life: Anticipatory Grief, Losses, and Positive Experiences in Facing Terminal Illness,” *Death Studies* 49, no. 2 (2025): 208–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2024.2312385>, p. 209.

<sup>91</sup> Worrell and Hemer, “Blogging at the End-of-Life,” 215.

Worrell and Hemer emphasize the lack of closure involved in anticipatory self-mourning: because we do not get to experience the aftermath of our own death, self-mourning can only exist in a perpetual state of anticipation. The traditional benefits of anticipatory grief for external losses, namely, softening the impact in the wake of a loss, do not apply to anticipatory self-grief. Yet, they found that there are other benefits to self-mourning including self-growth and the expansion of the lived experience to make room for the nuances involved in actively dying. The key is to differentiate between grief and depression; the former involves “the ability to maintain a sense of hope and self-esteem.”<sup>92</sup> Whereas depression can be an illness itself, representing intense stagnation and hopelessness, grief can be a vehicle of growth and hope.

For Stephanie and Jennifer, this grief-to-growth pipeline came from self-reflection and acknowledgement of their experiences. Stephanie, in one blog post, wrote out a list of the big life goals she was losing due to her terminal illness, particularly motherhood and a career. Because of these losses, she had to reconceptualize “what it meant to be ‘Stephanie’ in a way that was still meaningful, regardless of the length of time she had left in her life.”<sup>93</sup> Through her anticipatory grief, Stephanie was able to find the resilience to redefine her identity and continue to live authentically in the time she had left.<sup>94</sup>

Jennifer often wrote about the progression of loss involved with her terminal illness. The loss of food early on in her diagnosis was a particular point of reflection for her:

Throughout her terminal illness journey [Jennifer] was faced with multiple occasions where she had to endure temporary losses of food, in preparation for testing, for surgeries, or as a result of treatment that left her feeling nauseous. Each time she faced these temporary losses she reflected on what food meant to her, the joy she felt in the communal act of cooking and eating, the emotional connection she had to particular foods, places, and even people, because of specific personal memories around eating... The loss of food brought other losses toward the forefront of her mind, as she understood that she would lose not only the ability to eat, but the ability to make those meaningful connections. She wrote that these were losses she had experienced, was

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<sup>92</sup> Worrell and Hemer, “Blogging at the End-of-Life,” 209.

<sup>93</sup> Worrell and Hemer, “Blogging at the End-of-Life,” 211.

<sup>94</sup> Worrell and Hemer, “Blogging at the End-of-Life,” 213.

experiencing, and would continue to experience as her terminal illness journey progressed. In this way, her past, present, and future feelings of loss and grief were interwoven into one experience.<sup>95</sup>

Coming to terms with her own self-mourning in the face of a changing landscape of loss was one of Jennifer's greatest challenges. In her blog, she sometimes called the grieving of her own life "ugly" and "horrible" and expressed a desire to hide her experience from others so as not to be a burden. Jennifer also wrote of the physical manifestations of her own self-mourning, describing a "crushing pressure" and tightness in her lungs and throat.<sup>96</sup> With raw honesty, Jennifer wrote about the challenges of integrating increasing losses into her own understanding of herself. And through her often despairing posts, she was able to articulate the way "her feelings and experiences of grief and loss prompted her to engage with... what it meant to be both living and dying as authentically and truthfully as 'Jennifer' as possible."<sup>97</sup>

For both Jennifer and Stephanie, anticipatory self-mourning played a central role in their ability to grow and engage with life in a truthful, authentic manner. Their despair motivated them to reflect on the remaining days of their lives, to accept harsh realities, and to reimagine their identities. Worrell and Hemer express how Stephanie and Jennifer's blogs illustrate the nuances of self-mourning which allows for both painful and joyful life experiences:

It is possible for dying individuals to experience loss, grief, growth, connection, and joy concurrently, and even as a result of each other, rather than in spite of each other. Accepting their terminal illness does not mean moving through and beyond strong emotions, rather it occurs simultaneous to other emotional responses and experiences...[W]e found that the ability to continue experiencing positive emotions exists for terminally ill individuals, even in periods of full awareness of losses and acceptance of dying, rather than merely within those of denial. With this understanding of resilience and positivity in the face of adversity we can understand that "even when people are close to death, personal growth may continue."<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Worrell and Hemer, "Blogging at the End-of-Life," 213.

<sup>96</sup> Worrell and Hemer, "Blogging at the End-of-Life," 214.

<sup>97</sup> Worrell and Hemer, "Blogging at the End-of-Life," 214.

<sup>98</sup> Worrell and Hemer, "Blogging at the End-of-Life," 215.

Anticipatory self-grief is not exclusive to those who have been given a terminal illness diagnosis. Life itself is a terminal diagnosis of sorts, and anyone at any stage may struggle coming to terms with their own inevitable death. Grief and despair can be catalysts towards greater meaning, but they can also be part of a normal recognition of the utter desolation of death. We are challenged to hold two, contradictory truths: that our “finite nature contributes meaning and value to many of our ordinary pursuits,” and that mortality may ultimately “cut short valued plans, projects and relationships.”<sup>99</sup> Through this lens death is both meaningful and devastating, worthy of both affirmation and despair. Self-mourning is a process which requires the experience of both. And by engaging in this complex and nuanced process of mourning our own lives, we find connection with the whole of humanity. As Plant writes, “[S]elf-mourning can help us acknowledge our shared fragility as creatures who suffer, degenerate and die. And from this, perhaps, a deeper sense of solidarity with others is possible.”<sup>100</sup>

### *Biblical Sources on Self-Mourning*

Writings throughout the Jewish canon reflect the idea that crying, specifically crying profusely, is the appropriate reaction to reflecting on death. It is through tears of utter despair that death is acknowledged. We now know that the act of crying releases neurochemicals that comfort us and make us feel better.<sup>101</sup> The psalmist understood this truth far before neuroscientists ever validated it, writing, “those who sow in tears will reap in joy” (Ps. 126:5). Public displays of despair in the Hebrew Bible serve to provide relief to the crier, signal to God that the crier is in need of care, and communicate to the reader that immense despair is an acceptable and even desirable response to the human condition.

Hagar cries at the impending death of her son, prompting God to provide a well, a source of sustenance and hope (Gen. 21:16-19). Jeremiah wishes to cry endlessly over the fate of his people, exclaiming, “Oh, that my head were water, my eyes a fountain of tears! Then would I weep day and night for the slain of my poor people.” (Jer. 8:23). Ruth cries at the thought of separating from her mother-in-law Naomi, her tears prompting her to make the famous

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<sup>99</sup> Plant, “Living Posthumously,” 46.

<sup>100</sup> Plant, “Living Posthumously,” 47.

<sup>101</sup> “Is crying good for you?” Harvard Health Publishing, <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/is-crying-good-for-you-2021030122020>.

declaration, “Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus and more may God do to me if anything but death parts me from you.” (Ruth 1:14-17). Crying, through the perspective of the biblical author, is a physical manifestation of despair that has real power. It makes the internal experience external. And it has the capacity to generate real change.

The story of how Hezekiah reacts to hearing a prophecy of his own death provides an example of how the Hebrew Bible showcases tears of despair as a powerful element of self-mourning. Hezekiah is seriously ill when Isaiah the prophet comes to him and says, “Thus said God: Set your affairs in order, for you are going to die; you will not get well” (II Kings 20:1). Hezekiah falls into deep despair. He turns to the wall, offers a desperate prayer to God, and weeps profusely. God hears Hezekiah’s weeping and tells Isaiah to go back and reverse his prophecy and to say to Hezekiah in the voice of God, “I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears” (II Kings 20:5). God promises to add fifteen years to Hezekiah’s lifespan. As evidence of this promise, God causes a shadow to recede the length of ten steps (II Kings 20:9-11).

A simple takeaway of this story might be that Hezekiah’s tears allow him to evade death. A deeper read, however, suggests that Hezekiah’s tears give him back the capacity to live fully and to bring light to the shadows. That Hezekiah is given fifteen additional years to live may reflect some biblical desire to gain agency over death. But perhaps more importantly, Hezekiah is given relief from his despair and inspiration to continue to live. It is symbolically significant that the miracle used to prove God’s promise involves receding shadows. Shadows, a symbol of both death and despair, are repelled by God’s response to Hezekiah’s tears. Hezekiah’s tears allow him to move through “the valley of the shadow of death” (Ps 23:4) to the light of life. Whether he lives for fifteen more years or fifteen more minutes, Hezekiah has, through his tears, been spiritually cleansed and transformed.

### *Rabbinic Sources on Self-Mourning*

Rabbinic literature recognizes the intense despair caused by one’s own mortality and openly expresses that the deceased mourn as much as the living.<sup>102</sup> David Kraemer articulates the rabbinic perspective on death’s impact on deceased individuals themselves:

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<sup>102</sup> For more on the rabbinic call to comfort the deceased, see Chapter 1: Anxiety.

Death is understood as a catastrophic rupture, a source of sorrow for both the deceased and her or his survivors. Since both are presumably grief-stricken by the demise of the body, both must mourn. So both participate in the same ritual, mourning for seven days. And just as the living mourner must be comforted by others, so too must the dead mourner be comforted by others; in both cases, the needs of one individual generate obligations for others. If someone is in need of comfort, others must respond to that need.<sup>103</sup>

In contrast to the contemporary research on anticipatory self-grieving, which assumes that one cannot experience the aftermath of their own death, the rabbis create an imaginative reality in which the deceased is able to mourn their life after they die. This fantasy may have served to quell rabbinic anxieties over death as the end of all experience.<sup>104</sup> However, it also affirms the intensity of mourning that can occur *before* one's death. The rabbis of the Talmud were all very-much alive when they extrapolated about the grief a deceased individual experiences. As such, their writing can be seen as projections of their own anticipatory self-grief.

In addition to speculating on the grief one experiences after death, the rabbis also discuss the open expression of anticipatory sadness. Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai is one such example. When Rabbi Yochanan falls ill and is approaching death, his students come to visit him. Upon seeing his students, Rabbi Yochanan begins to cry. His students, having never experienced their resolute teacher in a state of distress ask him, "Lamp of Israel, the right pillar, the mighty hammer, why are you crying?" Rabbi Yochanan expresses his intense fear at the prospect of facing eternal judgement from God. He says, "Now that they are leading me before the supreme King of Kings, the Holy One, Blessed by He, Who lives and endures forever and for all time; if He is angry with me, His anger is eternal; if He incarcerates me, His incarceration is an eternal incarceration; and if He kills me, His killing is for eternity. I am unable to appease Him with words and bribe Him with money. Thus, I have two paths before me, one of the Garden of Eden and one of Gehenna, and I do not know on which they are leading me, so shall I not cry?"<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> David Kraemer, *The Meanings of Death in Rabbinic Judaism* (London: Routledge, 2000), 113.

<sup>104</sup> For more on how religion can serve as a remedy for death anxiety, see Chapter 1: Anxiety.

<sup>105</sup> BT, Berakhot 28a.

Rabbi Yochanan understands crying to be an entirely natural and expected emotional response to the immense uncertainty that comes with dying. While Rabbi Yochanan names the potential that he might experience eternal punishment in the afterlife as the source of his overwhelming emotion, the root of his despair is actually caused by the unknown factor of death. He says, “*I do not know* on which [path] they are leading me, so shall I not cry?” indicating that it is the lack of knowing that is preventing him from regulating his emotional reaction. He cries as he processes the reality that he is leaving the world of the living, in which he understands his role and place, and entering into a phase that is entirely unfamiliar and potentially negative. There is no further knowledge of what will happen after he dies that he can obtain, nor is there any further action he can take to try to quell his fears of eternal punishment from his death bed. But Rabbi Yochanan can cry. And in doing so, he teaches his students an important lesson that tears are not a sign of weakness, but a normal, human reaction to the tragedy of life ending.

Midrashic literature also validates that self-awareness of one’s own death can be exceedingly painful. In this midrash, the rabbis describe birth and death as processes that occur “against our will,” and provoke intense crying:

When at last the time arrives for his entrance into the world, the angel comes to him and says: “At a certain hour your time will come to enter the light of the world.” He pleads with him, saying: “Why do you wish me to go out into the light of the world?” The angel replies: “You know, my son, that you were formed against your will; against your will you will be born; against your will you will die; and against your will you are destined to give an accounting before the King of Kings, the Holy One, blessed be He.” Nevertheless, he remained unwilling to leave, and so the angel struck him with the candle that was burning at his head. Thereupon he went out into the light of the world, though against his will. Upon going out the infant forgot everything he had witnessed and everything he knew. Why does the child cry out on leaving his mother’s womb? Because the place wherein he had been at rest and at ease was irretrievable and because of the condition of the world into which he must enter... Finally, as his end draws near, the angel comes to him and asks: “Do you not recognize me?” And he answers: “Yes, but why do you come to me on this day of all days?” The angel replies: “To take you from this world; the time of your departure has come.” He begins to cry out immediately, and his voice can be heard from one end of the earth to the other, but no one recognizes or heeds his voice except a crowing cock. He says to the angel: “Have you not already taken me out of two worlds and brought me into this one?” And the angel responds: “Did I not tell you that you were formed against your will, that you were born against your will, that you

would live against your will, and that ultimately you will have to render an accounting before the Holy One, blessed be He, against your will?”<sup>106</sup>

This story reflects human resistance to change: the fetus wishes to remain in the womb; the man wishes to remain alive. But the change is inevitable and unavoidable, and each transition point invokes despair. The newborn baby cries at the permanent loss of his life in the mother’s womb, and the man cries at the permanent loss of his life on earth. Confronted with his own lack of agency, his wailing cries are all that he can control.

With the exception of situations of neglect, a newborn’s cries are heard and provoke a response. Parents comfort their child, swaddling them, feeding them, and rocking them. Thus there is no need in this midrash to express the volume of the newborn’s wailing. But the cries of the dying man, though they are “heard from one end of the earth to the other,” are not recognized. Perhaps the midrash seeks to expose a lack of support for those who despair over their own impending death. Implicit in the text is a challenge both to the dying and to the community. The dying must make their suffering visible and audible, and the community must respond with support and comfort.

This midrash provides a rather pessimistic perspective on the uncontrollable nature of life and death. But there is also hope woven through the narrative. The baby who does not want to live on earth ends up cherishing life so much that he does not want to leave earth. That which is unknown and feared becomes known and loved. And just as in biblical literature, it is tears of despair that precede and facilitate such an evolution.

Embracing despair is neither easy nor comfortable, but it can be profound. Of all the emotional responses to facing mortality, despair is perhaps the most transformative. Tears of despair create fertile ground for growth. The depths of sadness remind us of our humanity and root us in the experience of living. Despair is not simply a counterbalance to joy; it is a valuable, complex, and painful emotion with powerful spiritual elements that connect us to each other and to God.

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<sup>106</sup> Midrash Tanhuma, Pekudei 3:11-13

## CHAPTER 4: NIHILISM

There is something profound about a child who continues to ask, “Why?” Often a child will persist in this singular line of questioning until an adult figure loses patience and remarks something along the lines of, “Because I said so,” or, “Because that’s just the way it is.” What the child boldly inquires is at the core of human intellectual curiosity, an endless concern with explanation. Eventually we reach a point at which we can no longer explain the meaning of something. To cope with our inability to comprehend an ultimate meaning we may gravitate towards the position that there simply is *no* meaning. That conclusion forms the basis of nihilism. Ihab Hassan articulates how our search for rationality can erode meaning to the point of nihilism:

[H]uman consciousness itself, our rational faculty particularly, may be the seat of nihilism, which it projects everywhere, even into God's mind. Nothing can withstand the corrosive power of reason – it can reduce the universe to rust-nothing, except the will to believe and the will to power, both flowing into that inexplicable thing we call Life.<sup>107</sup>

Nihilism is a kind of radical skepticism: the belief that “all values are baseless and that nothing can be known or communicated.”<sup>108</sup> It is, paradoxically, the rational conclusion to an infinite search for rationality. The dissonance between our infinite search and our finite nature inspires nihilism. We will die, and we will never know why. Death, to the nihilist, is the ultimate voider of meaning. When faced with the question, “If I will ultimately cease to exist, what does it matter that I exist now?” the nihilist answers that it does not matter at all. Nihilism as a thought experiment is not necessarily dangerous. In fact, some amount can be healthy and prevent us from taking life so seriously that we forget to enjoy ourselves. But an acceptance of total nihilism can lead to destructive behaviors when put into practice.

The essence of nihilism, that ultimately nothing matters, appears to be diametrically opposed to the main philosophies of Judaism. Judaism is a religion in which life very much matters, so much so that codes of Jewish law governing every facet of human behavior have been written, analyzed, and rewritten across generations. Nihilist tendencies are rejected by the

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<sup>107</sup> Ihab Hassan, “The Expense of Spirit in Postmodern Times: Between Nihilism and Belief,” *The Georgia Review* 51, no. 1 (1997): 9–26. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41400990>, p. 19.

<sup>108</sup> “Nihilism,” Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <https://iep.utm.edu/nihilism/#H2>.

rabbis of the Talmud, and figures who engage in such behavior are written off as heretics. Yet, the Book of Ecclesiastes contains some of the most significant examples of nihilist thought in literary history. And in the Book of Job, Job himself struggles with nihilism in the face of immense suffering. Nihilism is expressed in Jewish text and tradition as a normal, if a bit dangerous, mechanism for processing the reality of death.

An examination of the philosophical underpinnings of nihilism, as it relates to the inevitability of death, alongside biblical and rabbinic treatment of it illustrates the gravitational pull of nihilism, its dangers, and its advantages. The behavioral implications of nihilism indicate two possible responses: a descent into harm, of self and others, or a gained sense of appreciation for life. To find meaning out of meaninglessness is the challenge of nihilism, a challenge which Judaism recognizes as an inevitable part of the human experience.

### *Philosophical Nihilism: Nietzsche and Ecclesiastes*

When browsing through posters for college dorm rooms, you will inevitably find one with the famous quote from Friedrich Nietzsche, “God is dead.” Nietzsche, perhaps the most recognizable philosophical nihilist in history, wrote many books communicating a plethora of ideas. But it is this short, pithy quote that has stuck in our cultural repertoire. The statement, “God is dead,” exudes a kind of intellectual edginess that can be especially appealing to 18-22 year olds experiencing new levels of freedom and independence. It both defies conventional logic and represents a rebellion against normative, monotheistic religion. But it is also taken out of context.

Put back into its original context, Nietzsche’s claim becomes more complex, part of an existential cry at the loss of meaning in the world:

The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. “Whither is God?” he cried; “I will tell you. *We have killed him* – you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? Do we not need to light lanterns in the morning? Do we hear nothing as yet of the

noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods, too, decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.<sup>109</sup>

This aphorism encapsulates the nihilist response to mortality: in the face of a death which comes for all, including God, life is meaningless. There is no logic separating the sun from the earth or the east from the west; everything is “an infinite nothing.” This loss of meaning does not come passively. According to Nietzsche, to get to this conclusion requires action; God does not just die but is *killed*. And in an unexpected inversion, it is us, humans who kill God. Just like the Talmudic rabbis who claimed persuasive power over the Angel of Death,<sup>110</sup> Nietzsche claims mortal power over God. The consequence of this power, however, is not agency over death but rather a loss of direction and purpose.

These ideas, which Nietzsche presents so poignantly, are not novel. In fact, his formulation has direct links to biblical text. The madman’s incessant questions neatly parallel Kohelet’s opening monologue:

Utter vapor—said Koheleth— Utter vapor! All is vapor! What real value is there for a man in all the gains he makes beneath the sun? One generation goes, another comes, but the earth remains the same forever. The sun rises, and the sun sets— and glides back to where it rises. Going southward, turning northward, ever turning blows the wind; on its rounds the wind returns. All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full; to the place [from] which they flow, the streams flow back again. All such things are wearisome: no man can ever state them. The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear enough of hearing. Only that shall happen which has happened. Only that shall occur which has occurred. There is nothing new beneath the sun.<sup>111</sup>

Just like the madman, Kohelet notes the meaninglessness of cardinal directions and the insignificance of the sun’s cycle. The madman’s cry, “Do we not feel the breath of empty space?” echoes Kohelet’s exclamation that “all is vapor.” Kohelet’s claims of the senselessness of life,

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<sup>109</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Walter Kaufmann (trans.), (New York: Random House, Inc., 1974), 181.

<sup>110</sup> For an analysis of these talmudic stories, see Chapter 2: Denial.

<sup>111</sup> Ecclesiastes 1:2-9. I chose to translate הַבֵּל as “vapor,” to encapsulate the sense of breath in the Hebrew. Other common translations include “futility,” and “vanity.”

however, do not come as the result of theocide. For Kohelet, God is still very much present, holding dominion over human life.

The book of Ecclesiastes is incredibly complex and controversial for both ancient rabbis as well as modern and contemporary scholars. As Elias Bickerman notes, “Kohelet’s epigrammatic brilliance, redolent of Alexandrian witticism, made his thought susceptible to almost every possible interpretation. Skeptics and pietists alike have found solace in Ecclesiastes.”<sup>112</sup> Bickerman himself argues that Koheleth is ultimately a character of despair because of his inability to fully endorse the supremacy of pleasure-seeking:

The despair of Koheleth is that he cannot be a hedonist. If like him you consider man as an isolated being, and if you have the courage never to rest until you have found the rock on which to base your answer to the riddle of life, and if, therefore, the good is to make the most of life – then you must conclude that life is not worth living, since life is fleeting.<sup>113</sup>

Meanwhile, Robert Gordis comes to the opposite conclusion, arguing that Kohelet ultimately affirms the value of life:

There is pain and passion, even resignation, before the Unknown and the Unknowable in...*Koheleth*, but no nausea or despair, no disgust or dread, no fear of failure. In a moment of bitterness or frustration Koheleth may say, “Therefore I hated life” (2:18), but it is not his dominant mood, which is an affirmation of life...Koheleth urges the enjoyment of life as the fulfillment of the Divine purpose in the world, to the degree to which that purpose is known to us.<sup>114</sup>

That two scholars, both deeply knowledgeable in the text and its historical and philosophical context, can come to radically different conclusions about the Book of Ecclesiastes, both backed by textual evidence, speaks to the complexity of the text. Replete with contradictory statements and confusing ideology, the author[s] of the Book of Ecclesiastes seems to make the meta-point

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<sup>112</sup> Elias Joseph Bickerman, *Four Strange Books of the Bible : Jonah, Daniel, Koheleth, Esther* (New York: Schocken Books, 1987), 142.

<sup>113</sup> Elias Joseph Bickerman, *Four Strange Books of the Bible*, 156.

<sup>114</sup> Robert Gordis, *Koheleth: the man and his world* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 117-118.

that just as it is impossible for any human to comprehend the one, True meaning of the universe, it is impossible to comprehend the one, True meaning of the text.

The rabbis were so disturbed by Koheleth's appeal to nihilism that they felt the need to reinterpret the text such that it meant the opposite of the original writing. In *Kohelet Rabbah*, the rabbis explain that the use of "vapor" (חבל) is meant to imply that everything is *meaningful*, not *meaningless*, a clear reversal of the plain meaning of the text:

*Vanity of vanities* [חבל חבלים] – Rabbi Huna said in the name of Rabbi Aḥa: David made a statement and did not explain it, but his son Solomon explained it. Solomon made a statement and did not explain it, but his father David explained it. David said: "Man is like *hevel*" (Psalms 144:4); to what *hevel* [is man compared]? If it is to the *hevel* [heat] of an oven, it has significance. If it is to the *hevel* of a stove, it has significance.<sup>115</sup>

The rabbis reject the notion that life could be a futile endeavor, as such a conclusion would run counter to their entire project. They are obsessed with ensuring that every aspect of life is steeped in meaning, from the first words we utter when we wake up to our last moments before going to sleep.<sup>116</sup> Part of this obsession stems from their desire to secure a place in the world-to-come.<sup>117</sup> But it is also based on the theological worldview in which righteous action maintains cosmic order, such as rain in the appropriate season.<sup>118</sup> The rabbis also subscribe to the idea that the biblical text is a perfect representation of the divine will. Thus, in order to maintain both that life is of the utmost significance *and* that the Book of Ecclesiastes represents Truth, the rabbis engage in some bold reinterpretation to make Kohelet's statement a reaffirmation of life's importance.

One element that the rabbis do not have to read into the text of the Book of Ecclesiastes is the recognition of God's existence and supremacy. Despite repeatedly naming the absurdity of life, Kohelet maintains that just action still matters since we are ultimately accountable to God (5:1-6). Pierre Gilbert argues that Kohelet means to prove that there is, in fact, some intrinsic

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<sup>115</sup> *Kohelet Rabbah* 1:2.

<sup>116</sup> Mishnah *Berakhot* 1.

<sup>117</sup> For more on how the talmudic rabbis promote righteousness as a path to the world-to-come, see Chapter 5: Acceptance.

<sup>118</sup> BT *Taanit* 2a.

meaning to life that can be tied to God:

The author of Ecclesiastes proposes a way to facilitate the transition from meaninglessness to significance by inserting throughout his work a number of sayings that address the self-evident value of wisdom in everyday life and the equally self-evident liability of folly... Day to day wisdom becomes the road to considering life under God. Qoheleth's strategy is brilliant. Even if the reader agrees with the premise that life lived within the parameters of a flat horizon is indeed meaningless, providing no ultimate design for human existence, the reality is that there are still attitudes and actions that make sense and are intrinsically good. All things considered, wisdom is indeed superior to folly. Once this is granted, the reader is now faced with the obligation to consider the question that logically must follow. If human existence is indeed utterly absurd, how can there be rays of significance here and there? There must be an ultimate source of wisdom that is beyond and above human experience. This source is God himself.<sup>119</sup>

Gilbert claims that the advice Kohelet gives plays two roles: to provide guidance and to prove that there is some objective standard which gives such guidance value. That objective standard flows directly from God. Interestingly, God acts as both the source of meaning *and* meaninglessness for Kohelet. God may provide some objective moral standard, but the very existence of God also implies a lack of human agency. According to Kohelet, God's control over the fate of the universe removes human agency:

For all this I noted, and I ascertained all this: that the actions of even the righteous and the wise are determined by God. Even love! Even hate! Man knows none of these in advance—none! For the same fate is in store for all: for the righteous, and for the wicked; for the good and pure, and for the impure; for him who sacrifices, and for him who does not; for him who is pleasing, and for him who is displeasing; and for him who swears, and for him who shuns oaths. That is the sad thing about all that goes on under the sun: that the same fate is in store for all.<sup>120</sup>

There is a seemingly bizarre contradiction in Kohelet's argument. On the one hand, Kohelet prescribes moral action on the basis of accountability to God (Eccl. 5:1-6); yet, he also appears to argue that human behavior is predetermined by God. How can we be both accountable to God

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<sup>119</sup> Pierre Gilbert, "Fighting Fire with Fire: Divine Nihilism in Ecclesiastes," *Direction -Fresno-* 40, no. 1 (2011): 65–79, pp. 72-73.

<sup>120</sup> Eccl. 9:1-3.

and also completely controlled by God? A close read suggests that Kohelet's argument is based on the lack of human control over death, rather than the lack of human control over moral actions. Kohelet claims that everything the righteous and the wise do is determined by God, *since* [כִּאֲשֶׁר] the same fate [death] is in store for all. God's determination is about death, not life choices. In other words, while humans may be able to choose to be righteous, that choice has no impact on the fact that they will die like everyone else. It is humanity's lack of agency over death, not life, which concerns Kohelet the most.

Kohelet concludes that since all human life ends in death, human life has no greater significance than the life of any other mortal creature:

I said in my heart with regard to human beings that God is testing them to show that they are but animals. For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is vapor. All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again. Who knows whether the human spirit goes upwards and the spirit of animals goes downward to the earth?<sup>121</sup>

Kohelet emphasizes human animality in order to heighten the reader's awareness of death and mortality and discredit any sense of human superiority.<sup>122</sup> And since humans are no different from animals, in that we both die, it stands to reason that our lives hold no greater meaning than that of an animal. It is, as David Hume suggested, that the life of a human is "of no greater importance...than that of an oyster."<sup>123</sup>

Based on this humbling conclusion, Kohelet's prescription for facing the absurdity of death is to enjoy life. Kohelet declares, "Only this, I have found, is a real good: that one should eat and drink and get pleasure with all the gains he makes under the sun, during the numbered days of life that God has given him; for that is his portion." (5:17). This conclusion aligns with the values of Stoicism, a kind of radical acceptance of life as it is. Though we cannot control life (or death), we can choose how we engage with both. Enjoyment, according to Kohelet, is the

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<sup>121</sup> Eccl 3:18-21.

<sup>122</sup> For more information on how removing the human-animal boundary increases human awareness of death, see Chapter 1: Anxiety.

<sup>123</sup> David Hume, "On Suicide," *Selected Essays*, eds. Stephen Copley and Andrew Edgar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 319.

best choice. But enjoyment to Kohelet necessarily involves a recognition that our portion has been given to us by God. And since God expects righteousness, our enjoyment is tied to our ethical responsibilities on earth.

### *Meaninglessness and Suffering: The Case of Job*

Choosing to enjoy life is fairly easy when one is happy, healthy, and satisfied. It is much harder in the midst of suffering. Death and suffering are closely related in the human psyche. In fact, the fear of suffering is one of the main factors that motivates death anxiety.<sup>124</sup> When we suffer for a greater purpose, like, for instance, training for a marathon, the pain feels meaningful and therefore easier to bear. But for pain that is associated with death – experiencing debilitating symptoms, grieving lost loved ones, or facing crippling anxiety – suffering can feel meaningless, adding to the torment.

Of all the characters in the Hebrew Bible who experience immense suffering, Job is one of the most touching. Job's laments from the depths of his pain and grief give dimension to the human experience of grappling with nihilism in the face of affliction. The Book of Job is a complex mythology within the biblical canon, an outlier in its address of theodicy. It is the ultimate story of Bad Things happening to a Good Person. Job is described as a righteous man, *tam* [תם], morally perfect and upright. And he lives a good life; he has wealth, land, a wife, and lots of children. God decides, after the provocation of *ha-Satan*, to test Job's righteousness by stripping him of his wealth, his children, and his health, all in quick succession. God leaves Job writhing in pain, cursing the day of his birth, all in an attempt to prove that Job's righteousness is not contingent on his good fortune. It is not such a good look for God. Ultimately, God reverses course, ends Job's suffering, and provides him with an abundance of riches and children once more.

The ancient rabbis are particularly troubled by the idea that God would inflict punishment on a righteous man, and so attempt to malign Job's character: "[Job] came into the world only to receive his reward," they write, "The Holy One, Blessed be He, brought afflictions upon him, and he began to blaspheme and curse. The Holy One, Blessed be He, doubled his reward in this world in order to expel him from the World-to-Come."<sup>125</sup> The rabbis can only make sense of

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<sup>124</sup> For more on the dynamic between suffering and death anxiety, see Chapter 1: Anxiety.

<sup>125</sup> BT Bava Batra 15b.

God's initial punishment if Job is a selfish man,<sup>126</sup> and they can only explain God's decision to restore Job's wealth if it is simply a means to greater punishment after death. The difficulty of justifying God's actions in the Book of Job is one reason why the Book of Job is fairly absent from prescribed Jewish practice. As Jason Kalman notes, "The Book of Job is not read as part of the formal public reading of scripture in the synagogue practice of most Jews, only the rarest of verses is cited in the liturgy, and although funeral officiants may recount 'that God gives and God takes away,' that the verse is from Job may not be known to the mourners nor to those who have come to support them."<sup>127</sup>

Despite the Book of Job's absence in public Jewish practice, Jewish intellectuals have struggled with its implications for generations, employing a range of strategies in an attempt to make the seemingly senseless suffering Job experiences cohere with the existence of divine justice. Talmudic rabbis attributed the Book of Job to Moses, arguing that if Moses wrote the Book of Job, then it cannot contradict the deuteronomic view of reward and punishment.<sup>128</sup> Medieval interpreters attempted to justify Job's suffering, claiming that Job is "imperfectly righteous."<sup>129</sup> Joseph B. Soloveitchik argued, in his 1956 essay "Kol Dodi Defek", that "Job's suffering is largely a punishment to help him to learn to empathize with the suffering of others and to bind himself to the community."<sup>130</sup>

That Jewish thought for thousands of years sought to explain why Job suffered to get around the troubling answer of "because God said so," illustrates just how desperately humans seek to make suffering both sensical and meaningful. But Job himself experiences his suffering as meaningless. And because he feels his suffering is meaningless, Job concludes that his life is, ultimately, a waste. "Perish the day on which I was born," Job cries out, "And the night it was announced, 'A male has been conceived!'" (Job 3:3). Job's previous happiness and fulfillment are nullified by his suffering. He prefers to have never existed than to be experiencing his current

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<sup>126</sup> The rabbis make other attempts to disparage Job, claiming that he was one of Pharaoh's counselors who remained silent when asked how to deal with the enslaved Hebrew people (BT Sotah 11a).

<sup>127</sup> Jason Kalman, *The Book of Job in Jewish Life and Thought: Critical Essays* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2021), 8.

<sup>128</sup> BT, Bava Batra 14b.

<sup>129</sup> Jason Kalman, *The Book of Job in Jewish Life and Thought*, 304.

<sup>130</sup> Jason Kalman, *The Book of Job in Jewish Life and Thought*, 38.

state of suffering. Job questions why God even allows those who will suffer to ever live, asking what the point is of giving life to a being who will experience devastating pain:

Why does He give light to the sufferer  
And life to the bitter in spirit;  
To those who wait for death but it does not come,  
Who search for it more than for treasure,  
Who rejoice to exultation,  
And are glad to reach the grave;  
To the man who has lost his way,  
Whom God has hedged about?<sup>131</sup>

At the peak of his suffering, Job views death as a welcome respite, something sought after more than treasure. But his desire to die is less about death and more about life. Job does not simply wish to die, he wishes never to have lived in the first place. “Why did you let me come out of the womb?” Job cries, “Better had I expired before any eye saw me, had I been as though I never was, had I been carried from the womb to the grave.” (Job 10:18-19). Job cannot comprehend any greater meaning to his life if it includes such agony. His conclusion, that it would be better if he never lived, represents the completion of his fall into nihilism.

Job’s experience evokes deep sympathy. In his time of suffering and pain, his cries are understandable. Because of our imaginative capacities, we can comprehend the immensity of Job’s suffering, of what it might be like to lose so much all at once and to experience so much physical pain. We can see how, in a moment of such anguish, anyone might wish to have never been born.

Job’s challenge is to cultivate the capacity to see beyond his current experience, and he can only do that with God’s help. In order to transcend his current state of suffering, Job leans further into the nihilist perspective that his life is insignificant, especially when compared to God. “I spoke without understanding of things beyond me, which I did not know,” Job admits, “I had heard you with my ears, but now I see you with my eyes. Therefore, I recant and repent, as I am but dust and ashes.” (Job 42:3-6). Job’s acceptance that he is no more significant than dust and ashes represents a kind of surrender to the will of God. In this surrender, Job, like Kohelet, is

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<sup>131</sup> Job 3:20-23.

no longer tormented by the “why” of existence. He is content to let God hold that understanding for him. And while Job’s acceptance of his insignificance may not alleviate his suffering, it may very well bring him a sense of peace.

The Talmud understands the ultimate message of the Book of Job to be that one should focus on living the most righteous life possible, not to gain access to a utopian afterlife, but rather to make the most of one’s limited time. The rabbis describe how Rabbi Yochanan would end his study of the Book of Job:

When Rabbi Yochanan would conclude the Book of Job, he said the following: A person will ultimately be slaughtered, and all are destined for death. Happy is he who grew up in Torah, whose labor is in Torah, who gives pleasure to his Creator, who grew up with a good name, and who took leave of the world with a good name. About him, Solomon said: *A good name is better than fine oil, and the day of death is better than the day of one’s birth* (Eccl. 7:1).<sup>132</sup>

The rabbis teach here that the ultimate source of happiness comes not from hedonistic pleasure for pleasure's sake, but rather from living a life in accordance with Torah. Interestingly, Rabbi Yochanan advocates for righteousness from a place of self-interest. The idea that Job suffers, despite the fact that he had lived righteously up until that point, does not imply that his righteous deeds were futile. Similarly, the reality that we will suffer and die regardless of how we choose to live our lives does not mean that we should not choose a life of justice. Rather, it is *because* we may suffer and die at any moment that we should always choose righteousness. A life of righteousness is the happiest possible life, and we ought to strive for the happiest life we can at all times, since we never know when our time will end. The greatest joy comes from knowing, on the day of one’s death, that one has lived a meaningful life.

#### *Destructive Nihilism: Elisha ben Abuya*

For both Job and Kohelet, their nihilism includes a level of agnosticism; they both admit to not knowing the nature of God, the meaning of life, and the aftermath of death. Kohelet reflects that he does not know if human souls ascend after death or simply cease to exist (Eccl. 3:18-21). Job too acknowledges that he does not understand the inner workings of the universe and how he fits into the bigger picture (Job 42:3). In accepting a level of uncertainty, both Job

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<sup>132</sup> BT, Berakhot 17a.

and Kohelet are able to reach conclusions that provide them with a sense of peace, the capacity to appreciate pleasure, and a commitment to moral behavior. But what are the consequences of rejecting uncertainty and maintaining the conviction that there is not even the possibility of a greater meaning?

The rabbis of the Talmud tell of a rabbinic figure named Elisha ben Abuya, a controversial character who stars in various tales, often as an antagonist. Alon Goshen-Gottstein explains how Elisha ben Abuya is unique in rabbinic literature:

Elisha ben Abuya has fascinated the Jewish psyche for generations. He is the only rabbinic figure who has come to be known as a sinner, an apostate, and a heretic. His life and deeds have been of interest both to those who have remained within the confines of traditional Jewish society and to those who see him as a forerunner of their own move away from tradition.<sup>133</sup>

In one narrative, Elisha falls into destructive patterns after learning that he will not get into heaven. In an unfortunate case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, Elisha hears a divine declaration that he is to be banished from heaven. Upon hearing this news, Elisha thinks to himself, “Since I will not make it into heaven, let me go out and enjoy this world.” At this point, Elisha’s response parallels Kohelet’s advice to prioritize pleasure in a senseless world. However, while Kohelet maintains the importance of moral action, Elisha decides that morality is no longer important to him; he will prioritize pleasure over moral principles. Elisha solicits a prostitute, violates the rules of Shabbat, and even, according to some sources, cuts apart a child with a knife. Even when his colleagues attempt to get him to repent and change his ways, Elisha repeats that he has heard of his fate, that there is no point for him to reform. So egregious are Elisha’s actions, that the rabbis give him the nickname *Aher*, meaning “The Other.”<sup>134</sup>

Jeffrey Rubenstein explains how Elisha’s actions stem from the fact that he knows his actions will never result in him getting into heaven:

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<sup>133</sup> Alon Goshen-Gottstein, *The Sinner and the Amnesiac: The Rabbinic Invention of Elisha Ben Abuya and Eleazar Ben Arach* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 21.

<sup>134</sup> BT Chagigah 15a-b.

It is crucial to note that Elisha sins deliberately only...after his merits have been erased and repentance precluded. As he quite logically reasons, "since that man (=I) has been banished from that world, I will go and enjoy myself in this world." Elisha has nothing to lose, no possible share in the world to come (since no merits), so why not enjoy this world? His sin is a result of being excluded from repentance, not the cause of it... Elisha seeks his own pleasure, as anyone not constrained by law, whether divine or human, might do.<sup>135</sup>

This particular story exemplifies the dangers of nihilism. As Rubenstein points out, anyone who wholeheartedly believes their actions will have no meaningful consequences is liable to engage in destructive behaviors that can lead to self-harm or the harm of others in the pursuit of pleasure above all else. In civilized society, we have constructed systems of secular law which provide legal consequences for antisocial behavior.<sup>136</sup> But there are many behaviors that are not necessarily illegal but can be harmful socially, emotionally, and spiritually. Drinking in excess, shirking responsibilities, and neglecting relationships are all examples of harmful behaviors that can occur under the guise of prioritizing pleasure in a meaningless world.

Nihilism is not the cause of such harmful behavior; rather, it is one's chosen *response* to a nihilist worldview that can provoke destructive conduct. Even if we believe, without a doubt, that death is ultimately meaningless and that life is just a random blip, we can still choose to act with purpose. We can eschew a lifestyle that prioritizes short-term pleasurable experiences and instead build a life based on deep relationships, healthful choices, and fulfilling pursuits, all while acknowledging the precepts of nihilism. Elisha's community, even knowing that he is banished from heaven, repeatedly attempt to get him to return to his previous, morally centered self. Perhaps they believe that even if Elisha's actions would not change his fate in death, they matter in life.

### *Meaning in the Ending*

Some argue that life's meaning derives from the fact that it ends. The limits of time are what make time meaningful; an hour ends, allowing for a new hour to begin. Likewise, a life

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<sup>135</sup> Jeffrey Rubenstein, "Elisha Ben Abuya: Torah and the Sinful Sage," *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 7, no. 2 (1998): 139–225. <https://doi.org/10.1163/105369998790232034>, p.185.

<sup>136</sup> Antisocial, in this context, does not refer to someone who does not enjoy being around other people, but rather the kinds of behaviors that are destructive to a civilized society, like robbery, assault, or parking in a restricted zone.

ends, allowing for life to continue on. Now, it would be one thing if death was as predictable as time; if it always came at an appropriate, expected moment. But death can be brutal, chaotic, untimely, and random. Callahan expresses the difficulty of attempting to make sense of death:

I can offer no easy way out of the choice I have tried to portray here: either accept the notion that sense can be made of death as part of a biological life that must come to an end, or see it as the ultimate insult, not admitting of a satisfactory meaning, to be struggled against and not accepted...Death irrevocably assaults the human community. In the cause of biological diversity and renewal, it directly attacks the consciousness of individuality and mutuality that binds human beings who live together as social creatures.<sup>137</sup>

One such example of how death “attacks” human individuality is the case of Moses who dies before accomplishing his greatest goal, stepping foot in the Promised Land. Franz Kafka explains how Moses’s death exemplifies the realities of human, mortal life:

[Moses] is on the track of Canaan all his life; it is incredible that he should see the land only when on the verge of death. This dying vision of it can only be intended to illustrate how incomplete a moment is human life, incomplete because a life like this could last forever and still be nothing but a moment. Moses fails to enter Canaan not because his life was too short but because it is a human life.<sup>138</sup>

Kafka asserts that Moses dies before he accomplishes the main goal of his life because being human means death can come at any time with no consideration for what has been left unaccomplished. But Kafka does not continue on in an attempt to explain why human life is so vulnerable to ill-timed death. This pursuit of “why,” can be endlessly compelling, but nihilism provides an off-ramp. For Callahan, the end of questioning death allows him to continue to live. “For myself,” he writes, “I am able to live with – for I can do no better – the view that death is a part of life, to be accepted, and the grief that goes with it, to be endured.”<sup>139</sup> Hassan articulates

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<sup>137</sup> Daniel Callahan, *The Troubled Dream of Life*, 173.

<sup>138</sup> Franz Kafka, *Diaries 1914-1923*, ed. Max Brod, trans. Martin Greenberg and Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1965), 195-96. For a deeper analysis of how Moses’s death defines the human experience with mortality, see Chapter 5: Acceptance.

<sup>139</sup> Daniel Callahan, *The Troubled Dream of Life*, 173.

how nihilism can be cleansing, a path to the kind of peaceful existence sought after by saints and mystics, writing, “[I]s not nihilism a kind of penultimate sincerity? Is it not kin to self-emptying or kenosis, a white night of the soul that saints and mystics of every kind experience and we all but briefly glimpse?”<sup>140</sup> Whether through cleansing or liberation, nihilism can be a pathway to acceptance, a processing mechanism which allows us to see the absurdity of our mortal existence and keep living our lives anyway. In rejecting the notion of any ultimate meaning, nihilism frees us to create our own purpose. Callahan articulates how creating meaning in our lives helps us accept the reality of death:

We may not...be able to find out what “the” meaning of life is...But it is open to us to construct a coherent and plausible meaning, to make of the interdependency of life and death something of value. It is...part of our nature to be able to find and create meaning and value, to make sense of what otherwise might seem impenetrable. We can open up creative possibilities, adding structure to chaos. This trait becomes all the more valuable when the world as it is refuses to convey any obvious sense of meaning.<sup>141</sup>

Judaism provides meaning-making mechanisms that serve to prevent us from falling into total nihilism and rejecting all meaning in the universe. While acknowledging the very real philosophical challenges posed by nihilism, Jewish tradition continually reaffirms God as a source of objective meaning and justice. Even though humans may not be able to grasp the contours of this ultimate meaning, the fact that it exists with God provides comfort and a path to move through life with intention and purpose.

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<sup>140</sup> Ihab Hassan, “The Expense of Spirit in Postmodern Times,” 20.

<sup>141</sup> Daniel Callahan, *The Troubled Dream of Life*, 170-171.

## CHAPTER 5: ACCEPTANCE

Humans, as living creatures, are constantly changing, always in flux. We strive towards the ideal of acceptance of our mortal situation, but we oscillate, day by day, between conflicting and, at times, challenging emotions. Acceptance is like the north star, always on the horizon, lighting a path forward. As we sail towards the light, we must continue on through choppy waves, powerful storms, and other unforeseen obstacles, an epic journey of both beauty and hardship. And the light is always brightest when we keep moving forward, through all the hurdles, challenges, and disorder. In her work with terminally ill patients, Kübler-Ross found that those who were allowed to express their emotions fervently and authentically were more likely to reach the stage of acceptance than those who kept such emotions bottled up:

[W]e have found that those patients do best who have been encouraged to express their rage, to cry in preparatory grief, and to express their fears and fantasies to someone who can quietly sit and listen. We should be aware of the monumental task which is required to achieve this stage of acceptance...<sup>142</sup>

What Kübler-Ross articulates is at the core of each of my previous chapters; each emotional response to death has a valuable place in processing the truth of human mortality, and its expression is a vital step towards acceptance. But keeping the north star of acceptance visible through these emotional waves requires consistent maintenance and attention.

Jewish tradition recognizes the value of such maintenance, setting rituals and practices which affirm death's place in the cycle of life and prepare us for our ultimate departure. These halakhic and spiritual injunctions require us to regularly acknowledge death and reflect on how we are living our lives. Biblical literature also provides stories of characters facing their impending death with a kind of blunt pragmatism. The realism reflected in these approaches encourages us to face death head-on and, in doing so, increase our capacity for spiritual development. Death may cause significant disorder, but it also inspires significant growth. As Kübler-Ross expresses:

Growing is the human way of living, and death is the final stage in the development of human beings. For life to be valued every day, not simply near to the time of anticipated

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<sup>142</sup> Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 119.

death, one's own inevitable death must be faced and accepted. We must allow death to provide a context for our lives, for in it lies the meaning of life and the key to our growth.<sup>143</sup>

Biblical, rabbinic, and halakhic guides to accepting death provide a grounding framework of both rationalism and surrender. When implemented, this framework has the power to facilitate the kind of inner peace and expansiveness that allows us to commit to a life of depth and vitality. Acceptance helps us navigate the path ahead, but it also illuminates what is left in our wake. Living with an acceptance of death helps us consider what it is we hope to leave behind, what we want our legacy to be. Judaism encourages us to make that legacy one which leaves the world better off than we found it.

### *Realism*

Honesty is a necessary precursor to acceptance. We know that death is one of the few indisputable truths of life, and we have to be honest about that to ourselves and to our community. Truth is neither good nor bad, it simply *is*. Biblical literature provides examples of how to embrace the truth of death in neutral, honest terms:

Judaism is realistic. It knows that death is part of each man's life, and it knows that self-deception does no good. So in the Bible the patriarchs face up to the fact of death with simple honesty. "Behold I am about to go in the way of all the earth," says David to his son, and "Behold I am not about to die," says Joseph to his brothers. It is as simple, as painful, and as undeniable as that.<sup>144</sup>

Each of these characters makes their declaration of death to members of their family; David speaks to his son Solomon, and Joseph speaks to his brothers.<sup>145</sup> There is an element of practicality to these statements, as David and Joseph each seek to ensure certain outcomes after their deaths. David bequeaths his royal authority to Solomon, and Joseph assures his brothers that God will lead them to the land of their ancestors and has them swear to take his bones along

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<sup>143</sup> Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *Death: The Final Stage of Growth*, xi.

<sup>144</sup> Jack Riemer, *Jewish Reflections on Death*, 9.

<sup>145</sup> Joseph's declaration echoes that of his father Jacob, who says to Joseph on his deathbed, "Behold, I am about to die," and assigns Joseph an extra portion of inheritance (Gen. 48:21).

with them. In voicing their impending deaths, David and Joseph also force themselves to acknowledge the truth that they are about to die. They confront their own deaths in no uncertain terms, with no extra flourishes or valuations. With the simple statement, “I am going to die,” David and Joseph claim the power of truth and the freedom of acceptance. They acknowledge what *is*, namely, that their lives have an end, which gives them the capacity to conceptualize and prepare for a future in which they no longer exist.

David and Joseph appear to have some sort of prophetic insight into the timing of their deaths. But, as the rabbis of the Talmud acknowledge, we can never know the exact moment we will die. As such, the rabbis determine that we must be in constant preparation for death. Some of this preparation is practical. David Kraemer describes how talmudic rabbis readied themselves for death:

Rabbi Judah the Patriarch, the editor of the Mishnah is reputed to have given final directions before his death, directions relating to his widow, his funeral and his burial (Kil. 9:3, 32a = Ket. 12:3, 34d). Though we are unable to capture the emotion of his voice, it is clear that Judah was in control, dispensing directives that would determine his own immediate fate and the fate of those close to him. As for all important transitions, preparation is evidently recommended in advance of death. This is not a time for fear on the part of the dying person, not yet a time of lament. Death is to be faced with sobriety, even a degree of confidence.<sup>146</sup>

To maintain the clearheadedness necessary to implement such death preparations, Judah ha-Nasi models the “control,” “sobriety,” and “confidence,” which all emerge from acceptance. Like David and Joseph, Judah ha-Nasi takes a pragmatic approach to death acceptance, allowing his final wishes regarding his inheritance, funeral, and burial to be properly communicated.

It is not just practical preparation for death which acceptance helps to facilitate, but also spiritual preparation. The Talmud emphasizes the importance of such spiritual preparation, which takes the form of engaging in repentance:

Rabbi Eliezer says: Repent one day before your death. Rabbi Eliezer’s students asked him: But does a person know the day he will die? [Rabbi Eliezer] said to them: All the more so, one should repent today lest he die tomorrow; and [so] one should spend his

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<sup>146</sup> David Kraemer, *The Meanings of Death in Rabbinic Judaism*, 73.

entire life in repentance. And it is said in his wisdom: *At all times your clothes should be white, and oil shall not be absent from upon your head* (Eccl. 9:8).<sup>147</sup>

Rabbi Eliezer's injunction, that one ought to be in a constant state of repentance, is based on the assumption that repentance prepares one for death. One who has repented adequately for all the misdeeds of his lifetime is ready to depart from life. Rabbi Eliezer explains that the state of bodily preparation commanded by Kohelet (i.e., wearing white with oil atop one's head) is actually a metaphor for a state of spiritual preparation (i.e., repentance). The Talmud continues, comparing this spiritual preparation to the organization of a feast:

Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai gave a parable: [The unknown timing of death is like] a king who invited his servants to a feast and did not set a time for them [to arrive]. The wise among them adorned themselves and sat at the entrance to the king's house. They said: Is the king's house missing anything? The fools among them went to their work and said: Is there such a thing as a feast without the toil? Suddenly, the king requested his servants. The wise among them entered before him adorned, and the fools entered before him dirty. The king was happy to greet wise ones and angry to greet fools. [The king] said: These [wise ones] who adorned themselves for the feast shall sit and eat and drink, but these [foolish ones] who did not adorn themselves for the feast shall stand and watch.<sup>148</sup>

The fools in the parable do not make any preparations for the feast because the king has not informed them of when they need to start such preparation. This lack of information is behind their confusion when they question how such a feast can be put on if there is no set time for preparation: "Is there such a thing as a feast without the toil?" they ask. The wise ones realize they need to be in a constant state of preparedness, that the king may call the feast at any time and will not give sufficient warning. Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai, through this parable, makes the point that we would be fools to believe that God will tell us when we need to start making preparations for our death. The wise thing to do is to always be prepared. For the wise ones in the parable, preparation means wearing adornments. For us, preparation means constantly being engaged in the work of repentance. Like Rabbi Eliezer's use of the Ecclesiastes text, Rabban

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<sup>147</sup> BT Shabbat 153a.

<sup>148</sup> BT Shabbat 153a.

Yochanan ben Zakkai shifts our focus from physical, bodily adornments to intangible, spiritual ordering.<sup>149</sup>

Notably, in the parable death is compared to a royal feast, a lively image which evokes merriment, celebration, and abundance. By using this metaphor, the Talmud endorses the idea that if one is properly prepared (i.e., has adequately repented), death is something to look forward to. In this way, repentance has the power to change our perspective on death from one of fear and apprehension to one of anticipation and excitement. This approach comes with a healthy dose of coercion. Because the unprepared foolish ones are unable to enjoy the feast, the message of the parable is essentially, “Repent, or else you will be exempt from a positive death experience.” The talmudic rabbis had political reasons to include this kind of fear-mongering in their teachings as they sought to encourage (or, more realistically, to coerce) Jews to adhere to their leadership. But beyond the layers of manipulation in the text, the point still stands that regularly preparing for death can influence one’s perspective on dying. Repentance is a powerful tool of such preparation, as it can lead to a sense of closure, forgiveness, and restoration.

Maimonides uplifts this message in *Mishneh Torah*, arguing that death’s unpredictability requires immediate repentance for sins:

A person should always view himself as leaning towards death, with the possibility that he might die at any time. Thus, he may be found as a sinner. Therefore, one should always repent from his sins immediately and should not say: "When I grow older, I will repent," for perhaps he will die before he grows older. This was implied by the wise counsel given by Solomon [Ecclesiastes 9:8]: *At all times, your clothes should be white.*<sup>150</sup>

Maimonides makes explicit the point that one should not assume that they will have more time. Repentance is not something that can be put off for later because there may not be a later. Of all the things that we hope not to leave unfinished, repentance takes the top priority. We are able to properly prioritize repentance when we “view [ourselves] as leaning towards death, with the possibility that [we] may day at any time.” Maimonides is also preoccupied with repentance as a

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<sup>149</sup> This rhetorical strategy aligns with the Talmud’s aim of codifying a Judaism that does not rely on the physical rituals associated with the Temple in Jerusalem.

<sup>150</sup> Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Sefer Mada, Repentance 7:2.

necessary precondition for meriting the world-to-come. His vision of this afterlife presupposes a separation between the body and the soul. In the world-to-come, there are no bodies, and as such, there are no physical pleasures:

In the world to come, there is no body or physical form, only the souls of the righteous alone, without a body, like the ministering angels. Since there is no physical form, there is neither eating, drinking, nor any of the other bodily functions of this world like sitting, standing, sleeping, death, sadness, laughter, and the like.<sup>151</sup>

Because only the disembodied soul can experience the afterlife, Maimonides argues, “There is no way in this world to grasp and comprehend the ultimate good which the soul will experience in the world to come.”<sup>152</sup> Maimonides gets around the fact that we have no way to verify the existence and experience of a world-to-come by claiming that it is incomprehensible to our mortal, embodied selves. Though he recognizes that the world-to-come is impossible to understand, Maimonides still maintains that it is the “ultimate good.”

Despite Maimonides’s argument that repentance is necessary for one to deserve life in the world-to-come, he still maintains that one should not repent or act justly only *in order to* get into the world-to-come. Truly wise men choose righteousness out of love, not fear:

A person should not say: "I will fulfill the mitzvot of the Torah and occupy myself in its wisdom in order to receive all the blessings which are contained within it or in order to merit the life of the world to come," [or] "I will separate myself from all the sins which the Torah warned against so that I will be saved from all the curses contained in the Torah or so that [my soul] will not be cut off from the life of the world to come." It is not fitting to serve God in this manner. A person whose service is motivated by these factors is considered one who serves out of fear. He is not on the level of the prophets or of the wise. The only ones who serve God in this manner are common people, women, and minors. They are trained to serve God out of fear until their knowledge increases and they serve out of love.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Sefer Madda, Repentance 8:2.

<sup>152</sup> Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Sefer Madda, Repentance 8:6.

<sup>153</sup> Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Sefer Madda, Repentance 10:1.

Maimonides' blatant elitism and sexism aside, his point that righteous deeds ought to be done for the sake of living a life motivated by love, not for the sake of earning a place in the world-to-come, is central to the Jewish prioritization of life in this world. Some theologies are based on the premise that a belief is worth holding "just in case" it is true. Most of these ideas revolve around afterlife beliefs. The argument is essentially that we should believe in a certain deity or follow certain behavioral guidelines "just in case," we could end up in some fiery torture-chamber for all of eternity. Maimonides seems to take the reverse approach. We should not do good deeds "just in case" we might be excluded from the world-to-come; rather, we should do good because it is a part of loving God in this world.

Repentance, in the minds of Maimonides and the talmudic rabbis, is a form of spiritual purification, a method to ensure that one is cleansed of all their wrongdoings before they die. But repentance is also a process through which we live a life motivated by love. Guilt and resentment, the results of delayed or denied repentance, can fester and infect our lives and our relationships. The work of repentance, which Maimonides codified in detail, revitalizes and repairs such that we are able to lead fulfilling lives and sustain meaningful relationships.<sup>154</sup> That the thought of dying can motivate us to do the work of repentance speaks to the life-giving power the idea of death has over our lives.

Repentance requires hindsight, a review of our past and the implications it has on our present. In order to repent, we have to identify areas in which we went astray. However, reflecting on our past does not always have to center the negative; it can also bring up memories of joy, gratitude, and love. Abraham Kaplan explains how expressing an appreciation for the beauty of life against the backdrop of death can bring depth to one's experiences:

No one can summarize his life in a single memorable sentence, yet somehow that retrospective view puts things in a better perspective than a man can have while he is caught up in all his doings. I love that patient who was able to say at the end: "It's been a good life, and the last year of it was the best." I should suppose that such a person probably said that every year, and that he said of every hour *this* is the best hour. To live so deeply, with such a sense of fulfillment in the present moment, is indeed to know the life eternal while alive.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> For more on Maimonides's codification of repentance in *Mishneh Torah*, see Danya Ruttenberg, *On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2022)..

<sup>155</sup> Abraham Kaplan, "Life and Death as Partners," 132.

Kaplan describes how living in a state of constant reflection, not necessarily repentance, can increase one's appreciation for and enjoyment of life. To take every moment and appreciate it as the best moment it could be requires discipline and practice. But such a practice seems worthwhile when keeping in mind that each of those moments could very well be the last. In order to reinforce this framework of gratitude, the Talmud teaches that one should offer at least one hundred blessings a day.<sup>156</sup> Maintaining a constant inclination towards gratitude by offering blessings simultaneously keeps us present in our lives and helps us find peace with our deaths. As Lawrence Kushner articulates, the acceptance of death and its potential imminence pushes us to treasure our lives:

You treasure life most when you keep the certainty and the imminent possibility of your death constantly before you. Not only will you die, but you could die at any moment. This is not a pitch for life insurance; it is a religious truth. All that you have is the fact that you are alive right now. Beyond that, there simply are no guarantees. No promises about anything six years from now, or six months, or six days, or even six hours. Be grateful for the mystery and wonder of simply being able to experience anything for even one more moment. It is not sad. In a holy way, it is very beautiful. Only the certainty of our death and the possibility that it can come at any time make life precious.<sup>157</sup>

Maintaining a realistic perspective on death has several benefits. It encourages us to make preparations, both practical and spiritual, it allows us to view dying as a value-neutral experience, and it motivates us to appreciate every moment we are given. As Kübler-Ross articulates, "Death is the key to the door of life. It is through accepting the finiteness of our individual experiences that we are enabled to find the strength and courage to reject those extrinsic roles and expectations and devote each day of our lives – however long they may be – to growing as fully as we are able."<sup>158</sup>

### *Surrender*

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<sup>156</sup> BT Menachot 43b.

<sup>157</sup> Lawrence Kushner, "A Wake Up Call," 35.

<sup>158</sup> Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *Death: The Final Stage of Growth*, 164.

Part of accepting death requires releasing the illusion of control.<sup>159</sup> Death is indiscriminate and random, and we will never be able to predict or prevent it with certainty. Attempts to take control over death are often counterproductive, preventing us from accepting death in its full reality. Daniel Callahan explains how the desire to control that which is uncontrollable leads to frustration and detracts from our lives:

We all know people whose lives, day in and day out, are dominated by a desire to be in charge of themselves, to have life fully under control. They are restless, even angry, when their lives are interrupted by the unexpected event, by that which unsettles their self-managed existence. They cannot readily abide the notion that they must be forced by circumstances to do something they did not choose, did not contract for. Surprise is their enemy... I can see in those who live differently, whose lives are not an endless drive for control, a better possibility.<sup>160</sup>

Human attempts to control death can dominate our lives, while the surrender of that which is out of our control can be quite liberating. In releasing the need to control it, we can embrace death in its reality and learn to live beside it. There is something loving about this process. Like a parent accepting they cannot control their child and loving the independent person they raise, we change our relationship to death when we release our need to control it and open up the possibility that death might be something we can love. Andrea Gibson paints this possibility in their poem “When Death Came to Visit”:

When death first came to visit, I refused  
to let her enter my home. She sat outside  
in the garden picking buttercups, painting  
her face the color of the sun.

I stood at the window for hours  
watching her, thinking, *Why is she still here?*  
*It's not like she has nowhere to go.* I'd try to sleep,

but as soon as I closed my eyes

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<sup>159</sup> For more on how attempts to control death can lead to negative outcomes, see Chapter 1: Anxiety.

<sup>160</sup> Daniel Callahan, *The Troubled Dream of Life*, 132.

I would hear her outside talking  
 daisies into blooming at night.  
 I suspect she knew, I too am the type  
 to open my petals for the moon.

On my eighth night awake, I did it.  
 I don't know how, but I did it—I walked out  
 to the garden and invited her in. I poured her  
 a cup of lavender tea. I made up her bed

and turned down the lights. I wished her good  
 dreams, though I knew her good dream  
 was to one day take my life.  
 I used to believe I knew my purpose,

thought for sure I understood my calling.  
 But my calling, I now know, has always been  
 this: to parent my own departure.  
 To never punish the child for being who she is.

To keep a roof over the head of the truth.  
 To raise what will end me, with love.<sup>161</sup>

By portraying death as a young girl, Gibson subverts the cultural norm which sees death as fearsome, gruesome, and domineering. They offer an alternative – a vision of death we can imagine inviting in, caring for, and even loving. Though Gibson's death-child is a far cry from the Angel of Death characterized in the Talmud, both seem to desire a relationship with us. Gibson's death-child wants to be let in, to be tended to and parented. The Talmud's Angel of Death wants to guide each human to the end, and human acceptance of his guidance is seen as an act of mercy.<sup>162</sup> Both metaphors help us conceptualize death as an independent entity, one which we cannot control, but we can accept.

Another way in which Judaism encourages us to release our need to control death is by emphasizing the ultimate sovereignty of God. The belief that though we may not be in control,

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<sup>161</sup> Andrea Gibson, "When Death Came to Visit," *Come See Me in the Good Light* (2025), Ryan White (director), Apple TV+.

<sup>162</sup> BT, Moed Katan 28a. For a deeper dive into the talmudic depiction of the Angel of Death, see Chapter 2: Denial.

there is some force in the universe that is calling all of the shots can be both comforting and freeing. Judaism places ultimate understanding and jurisdiction in God's hands so that we can be liberated from the need to make sense of the senseless and to control the uncontrollable. "Who is wise enough to give an account of the heavens?" God asks (Job 38:37). The answer is, only God. It is for this reason that the Jewish custom upon hearing of a death is to proclaim, *baruch dayan ha-emet*, Blessed is the True Judge. God, not humans, has agency over life and death.

One of the most complete liturgical proclamations of God's authority over death comes as part of the burial service. *Tsidduk hadin* (lit: the justification of the judgement) is recited after the casket has been lowered to the ground and covered. It affirms God's place as the final decision maker and ultimate source of justice. The timing of *tsidduk hadin* serves to comfort mourners and help them accept the passing of their loved one. But it also forces people to acknowledge and accept the inevitability of their own mortality at a time when death feels most salient.

*Tsidduk hadin* opens with a familiar passage from Deuteronomy, the very same lines which Moses calls forth while contending with his own death: "The Rock, His actions are perfect, as all His ways are justice; a faithful God and there is no injustice, righteous and upright is He" (Deuteronomy 32:4).<sup>163</sup> This opening sets the frame of the entire liturgical piece. God is perfect and unquestionably just; therefore, everything within God's purview, including death, must fit into this conception of perfect justice. The prayer continues, affirming God's control over death:

He rules below and above, brings death and resuscitates, brings down to the grave and raises up. The Rock – perfect in every deed. Who can say to Him: "What do You do?" ...Righteous are You, God, to bring death and to resuscitate, for in Your hand is the safekeeping of all spirits...A man, whether he be a year old, or whether he lives a thousand years, what does it profit him? As if he has never been shall he be. Blessed is the true Judge, who brings death and resuscitates.<sup>164</sup>

This proclamation treads into nihilism. The years of one's life, whether they number one or one thousand, are ultimately insignificant given that one will die and will be "as if [they] ha[d] never

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<sup>163</sup> For a deeper examination of the midrashic tales of Moses's death, see Chapter 2: Denial.

<sup>164</sup> *The Koren Siddur with introduction, translation and commentary by Sir Jonathan Sacks* (Jerusalem: Koren Publishers, 2009), 1055.

been.”<sup>165</sup> Meaning and blessing cannot come from a human’s lifespan, it can only come from God. There is something comforting about this message; it allows us to outsource our understanding of death to God. And since God is “perfect in every deed,” we can be assured that our deaths fit into God’s perfect vision of the universe.

This theology, that everything that happens in the universe is a part of God’s perfect and just will, faces some serious challenges. When confronted with senseless tragedy, like the death of a child or the devastation of a natural disaster, the assertion that God must have some good reason for causing it feels insensitive at best and cruel at worst. Harold Kushner offers an alternative. He argues, unlike *tsidduk hadin*, that God is actually *not* perfect. And that accepting and loving God despite such imperfections, helps us to be better people:

We do not love God because He is perfect. We do not love Him because He protects us from all harm and keeps evil things from happening to us. We do not love Him because we are afraid of Him, or because He will hurt us if we turn our back on Him. We love Him because He is God, because He is the author of all the beauty and the order around us, the source of our strength and the hope and courage within us, and of other people’s strength and hope and courage with which we are helped in our time of need. We love Him because He is the best part of ourselves and of our world. That is what it means to love. Love is not the admiration of perfection, but the acceptance of an imperfect person with all his imperfections, because loving and accepting him makes us better and stronger.<sup>166</sup>

Kushner’s call to love God despite the evil that occurs in the world echoes Gibson’s teaching that death-child can be cherished and loved despite the fact that she will take our lives. Love is the ultimate surrender of control.

The biblical depiction of Moses’s death provides us with an example of how love and acceptance can prevail, even when we cannot understand why death and suffering have to exist. Dennis Olson describes how the frank account of Moses dying serves to aid in the acceptance of death without rationality or further explanation:

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<sup>165</sup> For more on this philosophy and Jewish responses, see Chapter 4: Nihilism.

<sup>166</sup> Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Schocken Books, 1989), 160.

The last chapter of Deuteronomy makes no attempt to explain or to rationalize Moses' death. Moses' death is not presented as an atoning sacrifice, a precursor of the people's judgement, or punishment for Moses' own sin. The reader no longer hears Moses begging God to let him enter the promised land (Deut 3:23-26). The straightforward narration of Moses' death without explanation simply underscores the inevitable reality of human death and limitation. The text allows the mystery of human suffering and death to remain unanswered.<sup>167</sup>

Moses dies without retracting his commitment to and love for God. In fact, his final words reaffirm and strengthen his commitment to God. Moses, in his last act of leadership, shows us that death is simply "the way of all the earth" (1 Kings 2:2), and acceptance of this reality of nature brings simplicity, peace, and love.

### *Legacy*

Judaism's emphasis on peoplehood is a reminder of the lasting power of human community. We say *am yisrael chai*, the people of Israel live, because even though each one of us will die, the community endures. Humans are drawn to community, to the notion of being a part of something everlasting. We build family units, we engage in religious communities, and we participate in the global project of humanity. When we see ourselves as mortal units of an immortal group, we are able to dream about the impact our lives will have on those who come after us. The death of any individual, even a great leader like Moses, does not equate to the death of a community. We are each a part of something greater and more powerful than ourselves, and we have the opportunity to make an impact that will outlast us. Olson describes how Moses's death illustrates the power of legacy in the context of creating an enduring human community:

[A]s a servant of God, Moses has been a vehicle for redemptive, healing, and saving actions that will open the future for the sake of others. Human gifts and achievements are affirmed even as the inevitability of limits and failures is acknowledged. Life and death, sacrifice and tragedy, heroic accomplishments and deeds, unfulfilled hopes and dreams – these are the ultimate components of the realistic mixture of human struggle and divine purpose that make this last scene in Deuteronomy one of the most moving in all of Scripture.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Dennis T. Olson, *Deuteronomy and the Death of Moses*, 167.

<sup>168</sup> Dennis T. Olson, *Deuteronomy and the Death of Moses*, 170.

Even though Moses dies without ever stepping foot into the Promised Land, his leadership shapes the people who do. There is hope in the fact that Moses's impact outlives him, that what he leaves unfinished in life does not negate the lasting influence his actions have.

In order to consider the legacy we wish to leave, we must first accept the fact that we will, indeed, *leave*. Only after we accept that our lives are limited, can we seriously cultivate a meaningful legacy. The Jewish tradition of writing an ethical will exemplifies this kind of thoughtful legacy curation. While most date the origin of formal Jewish ethical wills to the twelfth century,<sup>169</sup> the practice has biblical origins. Isaac and Jacob offer blessings to their sons, Moses addresses the people of Israel, and David advises his son Solomon. Perhaps most striking is God's statement that Abraham's ultimate purpose is to pass on the way of God to the generations after him: "For I have known him in order that he may command his children and his household *after him* that they may keep the way of God." (Gen. 19:18, emphasis mine). This text forms the basis of halakhic codes requiring fathers to leave moral teachings to his children.<sup>170</sup>

The earliest surviving formal ethical will was composed by Eleazar ben Isaacs of Worms around 1050. It is comprised of pithy aphorisms based on both moral and practical precepts:

Think not of evil; for evil-thinking leads to evil-doing. Take particular heed of cleanliness. Purify thy body, the dwelling-place of thy soul...Do not talk in the college during the lecture, but listen to the words of the wise. Despise no man, for many pearls may be found in a poor man's cloak...Be zealous in visiting the sick, for sympathy will lighten his sickness; but stay not too long, for his malady is heavy enough without thee. Enter cheerfully, and speak cheerfully...Be ever ready to follow the dead to the grave. For him who does a kindness for nothing God shows unrequited favors...Relieve the poor secretly, not openly; feed them at thy table, but do not watch them while they eat...<sup>171</sup>

Jewish ethical wills chronicle the most meaningful advice, experiences, and ideas an individual wishes to impart to their loved ones. The process of writing one requires the author to

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<sup>169</sup> Israel Abrahams, *Hebrew Ethical Wills* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1926).

<sup>170</sup> Israel Abrahams, "Jewish Ethical Wills," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 3, no. 3 (1891): 436–84. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1450009>, p.448.

<sup>171</sup> Israel Abrahams, "Jewish Ethical Wills," 451.

acknowledge that they will not always be there to teach such thoughts. Most historic ethical wills were not written immediately preceding death; rather, they were “written calmly in old age, when death was in the course of nature not far distant...”<sup>172</sup> Ethical wills are thoughtful, meaningful products of the peaceful acceptance of mortality. They are the philosophical equivalent to the carob trees Honi plants, which would not bear fruit until after his death.<sup>173</sup> We can communicate beyond the span of our lives through these writings and continue to influence the world for the better.

Seeing ourselves as parts of a lasting community does not remove the sting that we, ourselves, will not last. But the work of curating a legacy, of creating positive change that will outlive us, can add purpose and meaning to our limited days. Whether by writing an ethical will, driving social change, or simply modeling the value of a life well-lived, we contribute most to the project of humanity when we seek to make the world a better place for those who will come after us.

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<sup>172</sup> Israel Abrahams, “Jewish Ethical Wills,” 439.

<sup>173</sup> BT Taanit 23a.

## CONCLUSION

Death is the precipice of spiritual intimacy. Since it is death that makes us mortal, it distinguishes us from that which is immortal. Our relationship to nature, to community, and to God is informed by our mortality. We feel awe at the magnetism of love, the beauty of a sunset, and the transcendence of an ancient prayer because we know that they will endure beyond us. This revelation is available to us, however, only when we are willing to experience the challenges and obstacles that come from facing our own death.

Processing the fact that we will die is some of the most meaningful and challenging work of our lives. It is a lifelong endeavor, one without a clear beginning or destination. It requires grit and determination, courage and perseverance, hope and faith. The emotions that are provoked as a result of death can range from uncomfortable to excruciating, but there is peace and fulfillment to be found in the process too. Guided by the wisdom of those who have come before, and comforted by the presence of those who walk beside us, we can face death knowing that we are not alone.

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