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SHEOL: A Study of the Afterlife in the Bible and Rabbinic Literature

by

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Ordination

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Referee, Professor Edward Goldman

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Digest

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the concept of Sheol (and its later incarnation, Gehenna) in biblical and rabbinic literature. Although Reform Jews have generally not embraced the concept of a Jewish afterlife, Sheol has served as a significant foundation of traditional Jewish belief. Indeed, the literature's use of Sheol and Gehenna usually reflects a particular ideological or historical development within the Jewish community.

The thesis' methodology is as follows. I reviewed each and every reference to Sheol and Gehenna in four major primary sources: the Tanakh, the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, the Midrash, and the Babylonian Talmud. The references were then systematized by topic, and then organized into broad behavioral and theological categories. The thesis contains four chapters - a chapter for each major source - and a brief summation of my findings. The thesis is heavily weighted towards the primary sources and uses secondary sources only to the extent that they provide historical or theological context.

The Bible describes Sheol in vague, usually fleeting references. Nevertheless, certain themes may be gleaned from the text. In the Pentateuch, Sheol is thought of as a universal waiting area where everyone will go when they die. However, because of the ancients' fear of mortality and God, Sheol is viewed as a place of trepidation and concern. This is particularly evident in the Korah rebellion, when Sheol opened her jaws and swallowed Korah and his men alive. This moment establishes Sheol as a place where one may be judged and condemned.

In the Prophets and the Writings, Sheol emerges as a powerful weapon of God's arsenal. While foreign enemies or unfaithful heathens may prosper in

this life, God will surely condemn them to Sheol in the next life. Thus, with the exception of Job, Sheol provides a theological answer to Jewish suffering and torment. While the prophets utilize Sheol as a place of condemnation, the wisdom literature discusses Sheol as the ultimate consequence of negative or unfaithful behavior.

In the intertestamental period, particularly the Pseudepigrapha, Sheol emerges as a fully realized dwelling of the dead. The Books of Enoch offer detailed descriptions of Sheol, including multi-leveled chambers, fiery rivers, people in chains and sub-zero temperatures. While the graphic imagery is reminiscent of contemporary images of hell, this literature serves as a crucial link between the ambiguity of Tanakh and the poetry of the aggadah.

The midrash focuses on Gehenna's relationship to larger theological questions. The Rabbis view Gehenna as one aspect of humanity's larger cosmic struggle between good and evil, between a life of Torah and a life of sin. For the Rabbis, Gehenna serves as the direct counterpoint to Gan Eden; where the non-righteous dead will dwell while they do *teshuvah* for their sins. The midrashim's primary focus is not on the punishment itself, but rather on how the sinner will be redeemed from punishment.

Finally, the Talmud uses Gehenna primarily as a deterrent against inappropriate behavior. The Rabbis' major interest appears to be maintaining high moral standards for the community. Thus, Gehenna is used as a threat against social infractions including, losing one's temper, slander, and haughtiness. For the Rabbis, the afterlife is that time when each person stands before God, awaiting His judgment. The evidence is the entirety of one's life. Therefore, the Rabbis emphasize how one may avoid Gehenna through proper discipline, Torah study, and the highest ethical standards. For the Rabbis,

Sheol/Gehenna is a very real place - a place that the righteous will avoid, a place where the wicked will be punished, and a place where everyone else will go to do *teshuvah*.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As my time at HUC nears its end, I'd like to express my thanks to the entire college community for their kindness and support during these last few weeks. The writing of this thesis has been a long journey, with a few unexpected turns down to Sheol, and now perhaps some new turns toward Gan Eden. Along the way, I would like to thank the following people specifically:

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Chapter One
The Concept of Sheol in the Bible

In a recent issue of "Reform Judaism," Rabbi Marc Gellman wrote that Reform Jews were not as spiritually satisfied as our Christian neighbors because our tradition has denied the possibility of an afterlife. He contends that the movement's approach to death - rooted in rationalistic, scientific, and existential viewpoints - fails to provide our congregants with any real or lasting comfort. Therefore, he suggests that Reform rabbis should join our Orthodox brethren and begin expressing our belief in the "*olam habah*," the world to come.

Gellman's article is just one example of an emerging theme in religious and popular culture - the belief that death is not the end of life. Rather, it is the first step towards immortality and the ultimate reunion with our loved ones. We see this in popular culture, with the success of films such as "Ghost," and Albert Brooks' clever "Defending Your Life," that imagine the afterlife with a most benign sensibility. Moreover, the continued growth and success of "New Age" religions, that incorporate themes of immortality, soul travel, and reincarnation, seem to be addressing a spiritual yearning that more traditional religions are not meeting.[1] As Gellman writes in his introduction, "Somewhere between what we want and what we inherit, what we invent and what we are bequeathed, is what we need. And what spiritually enlightened Jews need now is to believe in life after death."[2]

[1] A recent newspaper article chronicled the proliferation of recent books on death and the afterlife. Some of the titles discussed were, Then an Angel Came: A Family's Inspiring True Story of Loss and Renewal (a grieving family is saved by a very large angel); My Life After Dying: Becoming Alive to Universal Love (a man is brought back to life after being dead for nine minutes); Kaddish (a serious examination of Jewish mourning by a prominent literary critic). Tom Kuntz,"Death Be Not Unpublishable: The Literature of Good Grief," New York Times, 29 November, 1998, Section 5, p. 7.

[2] Marc Gellman, "The Eternal Eden," Reform Judaism, Summer (1998): 16.

Gellman is not content, however, to imagine just the pastoral Gan Eden of the *olam habah*. He argues that the absence of a belief in the afterlife deprives us "of a belief in an ultimate judgment of the wicked, thereby wilting our faith in God."[3] Gellman wants to believe that the wicked will ultimately be punished, and the place for such punishment, in Judaism, is in Sheol or Gehenna.

Indeed, our rabbinic sources are replete with aggadic materials concerning the afterlife. The Jewish people were going through a particularly oppressive period under Roman rule, and the Rabbis felt compelled to reconcile their belief in Jewish chosenness with the reality of Jewish suffering. An afterlife that accounted for moral or immoral behavior in this world would answer significant questions regarding the suffering of the innocent, the triumph of evil, and the apparent meaninglessness of our existence. Perhaps there was no sufficient explanation for the triumph of our enemies, but surely they would be punished in the afterlife, specifically in Gehenna or, in its earlier incarnation, Sheol.

In addition, the Rabbis used the concept of the afterlife to goad Jews into positive, obedient behavior. Just as the concept of "hell" is used in certain Christian circles to moderate or control errant behavior, likewise the Rabbis used Gehenna as a stick to keep the principles of Torah close at hand.

This thesis will critically explore the biblical and rabbinic texts which comment on Sheol and Gehenna, the locus of the punitive aspects of the afterlife. It will examine the relevant themes that surround its mythology, including its physical characteristics, who went there, what the status of their corpus was, the nature and length of punishment, and the possibility of God's redemption or resurrection from the netherworld.

[3] Id., p. 18.

The Historical Origins of Sheol

The ancient Ugaritic texts of the Canaanite world describe the netherworld as the dominion of "Mot," the god of death. Mot's world bears a certain resemblance to the Bible's Sheol; the world of the dead is clearly located beneath the earth, and Mot himself is described as a powerful monster with dangerous jaws.[4] The story resonates with this imagery, as the dead "go down into the mouth of Mot." Indeed, Mot is so powerful that when the god Baal, lord of the earth, descends to the netherworld, Mot swallows him up.[5] Baal's sister, Anat, then descends into the netherworld to rescue Baal's corpse. She retrieves his body and brings him back up to earth, in order to give him a proper burial. This myth suggests that a proper burial was essential to Baal's eternal peace in Mot's kingdom. Thus, even though Baal was already in Mot's netherworld, he had to be brought back to earth and returned to Mot with appropriate honor, respect and ritual. Just as everyone in the Bible went to Sheol, likewise everyone in the Canaanite world went to Mot's netherworld. The determinative factor in the quality of their eternal life depended on the nature of the funeral. In short, was it a ceremony befitting a king or a commoner? Clearly, the family's concern for the dead played a crucial role in the deceased's relative comfort in the afterlife.[6] Thus, while everyone went to the netherworld, the experience was qualitatively different depending on the family's level of devotion.

For ancient Egypt, the most relevant source for discerning the nature of its afterlife is "The Book of the Dead," which, among other subjects, chronicles a person's post-mortem trial. The trial is conducted for the purpose of reviewing

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[4] Nicholas J. Tromp, Primitive Conceptions of Death and the Netherworld in the Old Testament (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1969) 6 - 8.

[5] Id.,10 - 11.

[6] Id.,13.

the person's moral life, and on the basis of the evidence, determines the nature of his eternal life. The Egyptian god Osiris presides over the Libran scales, weighing a person's heart - believed to be a person's actual conscience,[7] against the feather symbol of Maat, the goddess of truth.[8] Thus, a perfect balance between the heart and objective truth would indicate a person of moral rectitude.[9] In addition to this symbolic balance, the deceased declares his innocence to a variety of transgressions, thirty-six in all ("I have not used poison. I have not caused weeping. I have not killed" etc, etc). The ancient Near East scholar, S.G.F. Brandon, claims that these declarations of innocence were made before Osiris, and then the heart was weighed against the truth to determine the veracity of the declarations themselves.[10] Notwithstanding the primitive nature of the judgment itself, the clear significance of the myth is Ancient Egypt's purposeful connection between a moral life in this world and one's fate/happiness in the next world.

Later on, the post-mortem judgment evolved into weighing the person's sins against the person's merits (the primitive "heart against truth" scale dropped away). Even social distinctions were stripped away, as rich and poor were subjected to the same trial. Moreover, the deceased no longer had to declare her innocence according to a prescribed formula. Rather, the deceased's fate depended on the balance of the evidence, where a person's merits were weighed against her sins. The verdict was the determination of an individual's moral worth.

Once a man was declared morally wanting, however, the deceased's fate

[7] S.G.F. Brandon, The Judgment of the Dead: The Idea of Life after Death in the Major Religions (New York: Scribner's 1967) 37.

[8] S.G.F. Brandon,"Redemption in ancient Egupt and early Christianity," Types of Redemption (Leiden: E.J. Brill 1970) 43.

[9] Brandon, Judgment of the Dead, 38.

[10] Id., 44.

was uncertain. A monster, "Am-mut," "the eater of the dead," is depicted as standing right next to the scale, apparently waiting to devour the unlucky soul. One story suggests that the condemned were devoured body and soul.[11] Still another bizarre myth indicates that the condemned were punished in "Amentit," where a door pivot was implanted in the person's right eye, and rotated on the eye whenever the door was open or closed.[12] In a more traditional vein, another story portrays the dead being tormented in pits of fire.[13]

In Mesopotamian culture, as expressed in the Epic of Gilgamesh, humankind was destined to dwell in a nasty, depressing netherworld, which was known as *kur-nu-gi-a* or the "land of no return." It was imagined as a city, enclosed by seven walls and gates, cloaked in darkness and inhabited by monsters. Everyone, regardless of social standing or personal rectitude, ended up here, living in a state of total wretchedness.[14]

Such equality is illustrated by the myth of Ishtar's descent into the underworld. Ishtar, the goddess of love and fertility, descends to the netherworld, and at each of the seven gates, is stripped of some article of clothing until she is completely naked before the Queen of the underworld, Erishkigal. Upon encountering her, Ishtar is struck with sixty diseases and immediately dies. Rescued by the intervention of other gods, and brought back to the upper world, Ishtar's descent becomes a metaphor for everyone's journey to the netherworld. Just as the great goddess is standing naked in the underworld, stripped of all her powers, likewise all mortals are equally powerless against their own misery.

[11] Id., 45.
[12] Id., 44.
[13] Id., 46.
[14] Id., 51.

The only mitigating factors in the Mesopotamian afterlife are implied in the Gilgamesh epic. The text alludes to those who die outside of their community and who are not given appropriate burial rites. These souls, in the absence of burial offerings from their relatives, are forced to live on the table scraps of others and live (as if it were possible) in even worse conditions than the others. Indeed, the legend developed that these ghosts were so angry at their fate that they wreaked vengeance upon their living relatives, plaguing them with disease and misfortune.[15] The morality of their lives in this world mattered little, since they knew what awful fate awaited them in the afterlife. It was a horrific, egalitarian approach to the fate of the dead.

In marked contrast to the Ugaritic, Egyptian, and Mesopotamian texts, each of which describe elaborate scenarios concerning the afterlife, the Torah offers little insight into the fate of the dead. The language suggests that the dead go to Sheol, but what actually happens there, if anything, is not discussed. The influences of the surrounding cultures will only become apparent later on, when themes of morality, judgment and punishment enter into the textual and mythical conversation.

The origin of the word "Sheol" is quite obscure. It is always feminine and is never joined with a definite article - a sign of a proper noun.[16] The Hebrew root "Shin - Alef - Lamed" means "to ask or inquire". Accordingly, some commentators believe that Sheol was named as a place of an ordeal or an examination. Jastrow notes, however, that the Accadian word "*su'alu*," in all likelihood, refers to the netherworld, and may be the etymological root of Sheol. Still another scholar contends that "Sa'al" was the name of the Canaanite underworld goddess who was connected to the ordeal of death. Thus, he

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[15] Id., 52.
[16] Tromp, 22.

contends that "*Sa'al*," the goddess of death evolved into Sheol, the place of the dead.[17]

The problem with the "Shin-Alef-Lamed" theory, however, is that Sheol - at least as it is referenced in the Torah - was not thought of as a place of ordeal or examination. Therefore, the apparent relationship between the Hebrew root and the netherworld name "Sheol" seems somewhat contrived. Judgment myths appear much later in the canon, and it is speculative, at best, to suggest that these themes had an impact on the Toraitic conception of the afterlife.[18]

Indeed, there are many other names given to the afterlife, although they appear almost exclusively in Prophets and Writings. These include "*Eretz*" (I Samuel 28:13), "*Kever*" (Psalm 88:12), "*Afar*" (Isaiah 26:5,19), "*Abbadon*" (Job 28:22), "*Dumah*" (Psalm 94:17, 115:17), "*shahat*" (Psalm 7:16), and "*nahale Beiya'al*" (the torrents of Belial, II Samuel 22:5). All of these names attest to the variety of beliefs and conceptions about the afterlife in the Bible.

Sheol in the Torah

In the Torah, Sheol is the place where people go after their death. It is (apparently) underneath the earth, and is spacious enough to contain everyone who dies. Sheol's indiscriminate non-judgmental nature is established in its first citation, when Jacob has just been told that his son Joseph has been killed by a wild animal. Upon hearing this news, Jacob fears that he "will go down to my son in mourning, to Sheol!"[19] Jacob not only admits that he will spend the rest of his life mourning for his beloved son, but he also knows that at the end of his life, he too will end up in Sheol.

This short passage reveals a wealth of information about Sheol, and

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[17] Id., 21 - 22.
[18] Id., 23.
[19] Genesis 37:35, The Five Books of Moses, trans. Everett Fox, (New York: Schocken Books 1995).

about attitudes toward death and the afterlife. Since Jacob tells us that he expects to go to Sheol when he dies, we can assume that Sheol is a universal place where everyone - rich or poor, monotheist or idol-worshipper, righteous or wicked - will end up. Moreover, Jacob says that he will go "to his son," which implies that Jacob will be going to the same place as Joseph. It is not clear, however, whether Jacob expects to be reunited with Joseph, or if he is just expressing his belief that he will be going to the same destination.

Indeed, the Torah's references to Sheol are so vague, and offer so little context, that translators have often interpreted the word "Sheol" as synonymous with "grave." Everett Fox, in his new edition of the Torah, translates the Hebrew "Sheol" correctly as a place name, but points out in an explanatory footnote that the highly influential Buber-Rosensweig translation, and others, interpret "Sheol" as "grave."[20] Then, in Genesis 42, Jacob exclaims that he would be overcome with grief if his son Benjamin were to die, and that his "gray hairs would go down with sorrow to Sheol."[21] Such translations are consistent with the belief that Sheol was simply the place beneath the earth where the dead were buried, and that death's primary significance was the marking of the end of life.

However, this interpretation of Sheol is belied by the next reference in Genesis 44, where the author(s) implies that Sheol might be more than just a repository for dead bodies. Here, Judah is attempting to persuade Joseph to spare Benjamin's life by repeating Jacob's own dark words about what will happen if Benjamin dies. In this verse, Judah changes the word from "*yagone*" (grief) to "*beRaah*" (ill-fortune). The implications of the change are profound. In the first passage, Jacob says that he will be in mourning for his sons until his

[20] Id., Fox commentary on verse.
[21] Genesis 42:38.

own death. The second passage suggests that he will die with ill-fortune - that is, his time in Sheol may be impacted by events on earth. Here, the authors may be implying, through this subtle change in word and tone, that life may not only continue on in Sheol (in one fashion or another), but its quality may also be affected by what occurs on earth.

Sheol is not mentioned again in the Torah until the story of Korah. Korah and his men, in an apparent revolt against Moses and the priestly class, challenge Moses' authority to lead the Israelites. Moses and Korah square off, their incense pans at the ready, awaiting God's judgment. Moses, of course, knows what the outcome will be, and pursuant to God's instructions, orders the community to move away from the homes of Korah, Dathan and Abiram, thereby saving the innocent who might be inadvertantly caught up in God's wrath.

The narrative is fascinating, not only because of its dramatic denouement, but also because of Moses' narrative clairvoyance. In past encounters with God's power, Moses (and by extension, the reader) has either been forewarned or simply been astonished by God's capabilities. When God inflicted the ten plagues on the Egyptians, each plague was prefaced by God's instructions, informing Moses of the next horror that would be inflicted. Accordingly, Moses acted as God's conduit in communicating with the Pharoah. Similarly, at the Red Sea, God tells Moses to hold up his staff in order to part the sea. Moses is still astounded by this awesome display, but it is not a surprise. God has told him what He will do, and then He does it.

In the story of Korah, however, Moses only knows that God is angry. God does not tell Moses how He will punish the rebels - only that they will be punished. In theory, based on past encounters, Moses should be surprised by God's actions. Nevertheless, without any prior instructions, Moses describes in

precise detail what is about to happen. "But if YHWH creates a new-creation, and the ground opens its mouth and swallows up them and all that is theirs, and they go down alive into Sheol, then you will know that these men have scorned YHWH."[22] . The narrative removes any lingering doubt regarding Moses' leadership. At this critical juncture, Moses is not just the conduit for God's words; rather, it appears that God is speaking directly through Moses! With an extraordinary exclamation point, Moses' status is elevated from knowing the mind of God to actually <u>becoming</u> the mind of God.

Moses' elevation also might explain the sudden introduction of the concept of Sheol. Despite all of the death and pestilence that surrounds Moses up to this point, this is his first reference to the netherworld. However, if God is actually speaking <u>through</u> Moses at this time, the mention of Sheol would not have been surprising.

The Korah story is also the only moment in the Bible when Sheol plays a significant role in the narrative. Despite the Bible's numerous references to Sheol - which will be discussed below - it is usually mentioned as part of a larger commentary on the fate of the Israelites or their enemies. In this instance, though, Korah and his followers are swallowed alive, as if by a voracious monster that only God could control. Although the text is not clear as to whether God has dominion over Sheol - that is, whether God actually controls the inner workings of the netherworld - the death of Korah tells us that Sheol is an actual place, located beneath the earth, and that God is capable of sending people down to Sheol at any time.

The narrative is also unequivocal in its moral judgment. If Sheol had previously been just a neutral location where everyone, including Jacob, had resided after their death, now it was a place with a highly charged, negative

[22] Numbers 16:30.

context. For the sin of direct rebellion against Moses and God, ordinary death would simply not suffice. After all, God was not averse to the penalty of capital punishment. He had just done so for the sins of Nadab and Abihu, and immediately after Korah's punishment, God consumed by fire the 250 men who had stood with Korah in support.[23]

But for the leaders, the people who not only rebelled against God, but also incited others to do so, God felt compelled to punish with a flourish. The people witnessed the opening and closing of the earth, watching as their neighbors suddenly disappeared beneath the ground, as if they had never been. Surely, they had not descended to Sheol to spend the rest of their natural lives in paradise. Rather, they had been buried alive, fully aware of what had happened, awaiting their fate beneath the earth. The reader - and more importantly, the Israelites - can only assume that going down to Sheol under such circumstances would be a fate worse than death; a place where the rebels would presumably die in a state of torture, or at the very least, extreme discomfort. After Korah is swallowed, Sheol could no longer be thought of in morally neutral terms.

The last citation of Sheol in the Torah occurs in Deuteronomy, and confirms its status as a place for punishment. In the Song of Moses, God is excoriating the Israelites for worshipping other gods and provoking His anger. God declares that a fire burns within His anger, a fire so intense that it will burn all the way down to Sheol.[24] Thus, we see in this passage the first association

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[23] Dr. Ellis Rivkin notes that this is God's angriest moment in the Torah. Not even the building of the Golden Calf warrants this kind of response. Rivkin explains that Korah's rebellion is the depiction of the Levite's attempt to wrest authority from Moses and Aaron. Accordingly, they are defeated and the Levite's are stripped of their priestly authority in favor of the Aaronhide priestly cult. Ellis Rivkin, The Shaping of Jewish History, (New York Scribner's 1971) 31.

[24] Deuteronomy 33:22.

of Sheol with a burning fire, a familiar sensory image that will endure through many centuries of Jewish and Christian texts. Moreover, the verse is unequivocal in establishing God's dominion over Sheol. If the fire of His anger burns all the way down to Sheol's lowest level, God can apparently extend His wrath beyond the earthly realm. Indeed, it appears that Sheol developed punitive associations that Jacob's generation did not seem to know.

The Prophets

As I indicated above, the references to Sheol in the Torah provide just fleeting glimpses of its character. We know that Sheol is a place where the dead dwell, and that one must "go down" - beneath the earth's surface - to get there. We have little insight, however, into what existence is actually like in Sheol for its inhabitants. Does the corpus remain intact? Or is it just the person's soul that descends? If, as Jacob imagines, a person is reunited with his familial ancestors, do they duplicate their lives on earth? Or, did people live a similar life, albeit in a diminished or weakened form? Moreover, if the inhabitants maintained a sense of their own consciousness, were they able to maintain a relationship with God? Were their prayers heard? Did it make any difference if they sinned in Sheol?

As we survey the texts beyond Torah, a number of these questions about the netherworld and its relationship to God begin to be clarified. Indeed, as the perception of God's personality changes, God's relationship to Sheol becomes stronger, particularly God's power to revive the dead. Thus, in the Prophets and Writings, we begin to see the origins of the struggle - one that continues to confound us today - between the belief that our lives will simply end at death, and the faith that God will resurrect us for eternal life in the "*olam haba*." While our prophets clearly imagine a life beyond our own realm, the substance of such a life remains obscured in doubt and metaphor.

The first encounter between the living and the dead occurs in 1 Samuel 22, when Saul employs the witch of En-Dor to raise the prophet Samuel from the dead. Samuel is described by the witch as an "old man coming up" who is wrapped in a robe. Samuel seems genuinely annoyed by Saul's intrusion, and he asks, "Why have you disturbed me and brought me up?" Here, the text emphasizes twice that Samuel has been "raised up," which logically requires that he had been residing somewhere "down." The reader is left to wonder, however, just where Samuel has been, since the word "Sheol" and its other euphemisms are never mentioned. Prior citations of Sheol had been clearly associated with anger and punishment. Perhaps the author was ambivalent about Samuel's presence in a place like Sheol. A righteous prophet such as Samuel would never have spent his eternity in a land of darkness or punishment. Perhaps he went "down" to the afterlife, but to a non-punitive location.

The Samuel story also establishes an afterlife where both body and soul were united. Samuel comes up to the realm of the living and is identified by both the witch of Endor and Saul. It appears that Samuel lives on "down there" in a similar fashion to the life he lived on earth.

Moreover, this story suggests that the folk customs of ancestral cult worship were very much alive. Samuel is not only capable of rising up and communicating with the living, he is also capable of predicting the future. Samuel's unusual powers are a reminder of the days of ancestral cult worship, when people believed that dead family members were far more interested and concerned about their living relatives than a powerful, impersonal God would be. Indeed, the Torah banned necromancy and divination for precisely this reason: to discourage people from worshipping ancestors rather than God.[25]

In fact, Samuel's powers of prediction directly contradict biblical views concerning Sheol's inhabitants. The dead may continue on in Sheol, but their

[25] Simcha Paull Raphael, Jewish Views of the Afterlife (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson 1994)50-51.

existence is greatly diminished and weakened. They are living "shadow" existences - shrouded in darkness and unable to praise or know God. In Psalm 88, the author cries out to God for help and understanding. He is in a very dark pit, at the very brink of Sheol (which, in this Psalm, is apparently a metaphor for death), and he declares that the dead, lying in the pit, are cut off from God. How will God's wonders be known "in the dark" and God's righteousness in the "land of forgetfulness."[26] Here, the author imagines Sheol's inhabitants - the "shades, or "*refaim*," [27] - to be weakened not only from living in a dark, dank pit, but also because they are cut off from God's wisdom and righteousness. The author asks rhetorically if he may rise and praise God, even though the psalmist clearly knows the answer.

Similarly, in Proverbs 9, the man who turns his back on wisdom/Torah follows instead the path of a frivolous woman, who can only lead him to an early grave. The woman's temptations may be sweet, but the man does not know that the "refaim" live in her house, and that he too is residing there, in the depths of Sheol. The inhabitants of Sheol, the "*refaim* " have separated themselves from Torah. Thus, they are dead and virtually powerless, cut off from God's wisdom and divinity.

The above examples offer a striking contrast to Samuel's neo-divine status. Samuel, the righteous prophet, goes "down" and is not only still connected to earthly events, but is also capable of predicting the future. Samuel's connection to God and wisdom is clear. Accordingly, the word "Sheol" does not appear in this context. However, when the text discusses those who turn away from God, and turn away from righteousness, they will be the powerless shadows, the "*refaim*" who will reside in the darkest depths of Sheol. Again, we see that residence and status in Sheol may be dependent upon one's earthly conduct, rather than on the "everyone goes to Sheol"

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[26] Psalm 88: 11, 13.

[27] This Hebrew term for Sheol's inhabitants is frequently cited in Tanakh, including Psalm 88:10, Isaiah 26:14, Job 26:5-6, Proverbs 9:18 and 21:16.

model that is allegedly represented in Torah.

King David's views on Sheol are also closely associated with sin and immorality in this world. In I Kings, Chapter 2, David lies on his deathbed, giving Solomon his final instructions. David explains that first, Solomon must kill Joab, an enemy who killed two captains during peacetime, and second, he must kill Shimei, an enemy who put a curse on David. In a literary refrain used for both, David tells Solomon that he is a wise man, and knows what to do: kill them and send their heads down to Sheol in blood. These are his final words. In the next verse, David dies and is buried in his city.[28]

In this brief but telling passage, the author's linkage of Sheol with sin and betrayal is clear. David's enemies - one who engages in war during peacetime and one who curses him - have committed transgressions for which they must be punished. Accordingly, Solomon will kill them and send their heads (their bodies) down to Sheol. Death will clearly not suffice for those who have betrayed their words. Rather, they will go down to Sheol, to a place where sinners will be punished in the depths of darkness and isolation. Indeed, the author's association of Sheol and sin is so clear that when David dies in the very next verse, he peacefully goes to sleep with his fathers and is buried in the city of David. King David, the righteous warrior, will not end up in Sheol, a place now reserved for sinners and enemies of Israel.

As the Israelites began to coalesce from a collection of tribes into a national entity, the monotheistic God, YHWH, also begins to emerge as the supreme universal authority. Accordingly, the Israelites' ancestral worship motifs of the past began to fade, along with the recognition that the familial dead might possess extra-human, nearly god-like powers.[29] Similarly, the scholar Neil Gillman notes that God's development as a universal ruler required that all conversations with the dead be

[28] 1 Kings 2:5-9.
[29] Raphael, 57-58.

prohibited. The blurring of lines between the living and the dead was no longer acceptable. Only God lived eternally. The dead had to be dead.[30] But, even if the dead were not as influential as they had been in the past, it was impossible for ancient beliefs to simply disappear; rather, the will to believe in an afterlife remained strong, albeit with God firmly in charge of Sheol.

Indeed, while Sheol continued to exist as a dwelling place for the dead, God now played an active, moral role in a person's eternal judgment. Those who abandoned God would be punished in Sheol, those who worshipped idols would be punished, and of course, Israel's enemies would be in for a long stay. Moreover, during the period of the major prophets - Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel - Sheol became an explicitly punitive place. In addition to Israel's wayward sinners, the prophetic theodicy required Israel's enemies to be punished in the next world. The prophet's sense of morality and justice demanded that an all-powerful God, our God, would not simply let our enemies prosper while we suffered. God's retributive power, as manifested in Sheol, would at least explain, if not justify, the Jews' historical circumstances. An omnipotent God would not only redeem a righteous nation from the gates of Sheol, but would also assure that an enemy nation would find its way down.

In the Book of Isaiah, Sheol acquires, for the first time, a descriptive third dimension. In contrast to the Torah, which merely provides a name and a vaguely defined moral context, the prophetic imagination brings Sheol vividly to life. In Isaiah 14, the author writes a "song of scorn" for the king of Babylon, who is now suffering in Sheol. Upon the king's arrival, Sheol's royal inhabitants (the other earthly kings who are little more than "*refaim*") are excited to see the king receive his due. They strut and gloat like hardened prisoners welcoming the newest murderer to the fold. "So you have been stricken as we were, You have become like us! Your pomp has been

[30] Neil Gillman, The Death of Death: Resurrection and Immortality in Jewish Thought (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights 1997) 60-61.

brought down to Sheol and the strains of your lutes!"[31]

In Sheol, there is no special treatment for royalty. Rather, as an arrogant king in life, his existence in Sheol will be particularly unpleasant. Isaiah spares no detail, as the king's sleeping arrangements are graphically described for maximum impact. "Worms are to be your bed, maggots your blanket."[32] The author seems to take perverse delight in the king's misfortune, noting that while on earth he sat at the highest throne, while in Sheol he is at the very bottom of the pit.

Indeed, once the individual sinner reaches Sheol he can no longer even be heard by God. In Isaiah 38, King Hezekiah wrote a poem to God thanking Him for his miraculous recovery. Hezekiah reminds us that God has special powers of redemption, but such powers are only for the living. Hezekiah contends that only the living praise God; that once a person reaches Sheol, their cries can no longer be heard.[33] Here we have a powerful reminder that the worlds of the living and the dead are totally separate, and that God's world is the world of the living. Hezekiah is not denying God's power over Sheol. Rather; he is claiming that the dead no longer enjoy the reciprocal relationship with God that the living have. While the living can both praise God and receive God's grace, Hezekiah denies that the dead can participate in such a covenant.

Isaiah's retributive stance is so biased against the sinners in Sheol, that he claims that they will continue to sin even when they arrive in Sheol. Thus, even in their darkest days in hell, these sinners go on with their transgressions. They just continue their sinful lives in a new place.[34] Still, just a few verses later, God admits that He only desires repentance, and that for those whose hearts are contrite, "Neither will I always be wroth...I have seen his ways, and will heal him: I will lead him also, and restore

[31] Isaiah 14:10-11.
[32] Isaiah 14:11.
[33] Isaiah 38:18-19.
[34] Isaiah 57:9

comforts unto him and to his mourners."[35] God concludes the chapter, however, not with a voice of compassion, but with a voice of awe and fear. "But the wicked are like the troubled sea when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt. There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked."[36] God's door may be open for repentance, but His sinners in Sheol may be too wicked to walk through it.

The theme of collective retribution continues in the book of Ezekiel, as Israel's enemies - Assyria and Babylonia - are fated to receive God's harshest punishment in the afterlife. In contrast to Isaiah's allusions, which were fleeting and usually mentioned in light of a general moral decline, Ezekiel's description of Sheol is a more detailed account of a multi-leveled chamber of horrors. Indeed, as Israel's socio-political status continues to deteriorate, the fate of its enemies appears ever more certain: God will cast them down to Sheol, where they will be punished in perpetuity.

Ezekiel, speaking on behalf of God, compares the might of Egypt to the past glory of Assyria. Ezekiel likens Assyria to a flourishing cedar of Lebanon, "his height was exalted above all the trees of the field...and under his shadow dwelt all great nations."[37] But soon his arrogance is offensive to God, and he is driven out of Eden and cast down into Sheol, where he will be joined by any tree that exalts itself above the others. The metaphor is quite clear: the nations that conquer Israel and contravene God's intentions will be judged and punished accordingly.

In this chapter, however, Ezekiel describes a Sheol that exists as both a universal place for the dead, and a particular locus of punishment and torture. In one significant verse, Ezekiel reveals that the dead may descend to a netherworld with a variety of chambers and levels. In the "a" part of the verse, the nations shake at the sound of the tree's descent to Sheol because the tree is cast down into the pit (*bor*). In

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[35] Isaiah 57:16,18.
[36] Isaiah 57:20-21
[37] Ezekiel 31:5-6.

contrast, the verse's "b" part describes all the other trees of Eden, the best that Lebanon can offer, who are comforted (*vayinachamu*) in the "nether parts of the earth (*eretz tachteem*)."[38] Ezekiel conjures up a netherworld with the best trees - the other nations - comforted in their afterlife, while the conquering nations descend into the darkest pit. Thus, even though these nations are Assyria's allies, and are still cast down into the netherworld, God has apparently given them some comfort and consolation. In this light, Sheol may be seen as the universal repository for the dead, where certain levels provide some comfort, while others offer only despair and degradation.

The chapter concludes with language that compares Egypt to the trees of Eden, and threatens to bring Egypt down to the netherworld, to "lie in the midst of the uncircumcized with them that be slain by the sword."[39] This threat is more than just a warning to the Pharoah about his personal fate. Rather, it is a warning for an entire nation, which will, like the Assyrians, be cast down to the netherworld. God is asserting His power over life and death, not only on a personal level, but also on a national, socio-political level. When Egypt is cast down into Sheol with the "other trees of Eden," they stand on the shoulders of past wicked civilizations that have been brought down by their national arrogance.

Ezekiel 32 addresses the Pharoah in a similar vein, with numerous references to the netherworld, Sheol and "the pit." Beginning with 32:17, the chapter refers to various nations that have been enemies of Israel, and their experience in Sheol. A poetic rhythm repeats itself: the nation is named, its inhabitants are sent down to Sheol to be with the uncircumcized and those slain by sword, and then bear their shame with those who are down in "the pit." Assyria, Elam, Meshech, Tubal, Edom, the Sidonians - the nations and their citizens pile on, one on top of the other, as the enemies of God

[38] Ezekiel 31:15-16.
[39] Ezekiel 31:18.

and Israel suffer a common ignoble fate.[40]

Although their fate in Sheol is not specifically described, the subtle distinctions between the nations provide some insight into the biblical conception of the afterlife. First, there is a clear distinction made between the circumcized and the uncircumcized. While this may be a shorthand method for identifying Israel's enemies, it also suggests that the Israelites might be spending their afterlife in a different place altogether.[41] Another possibility, however, is that the Israelites might have gone to a less threatening, more benign chamber of Sheol. While such a place is never specified, common sense suggests that the Israelites are not sharing eternity in a pit with their uncircumcized brethren.

Second, Ezekiel distinguishes the citizens of Meshech and Tubal from every other nation. Ezekiel 32:27 specifically states that their people will not lie with the uncircumcized. While they are clearly sinners in the eyes of God and Israel ("but their iniquities shall be upon their bones, though they were the terror of the mighty in the land of the living"), they appear to have been given a proper or ritual burial ("and they have laid their swords under their heads")[42] which might have had an impact on their destination. The inclusion of these two facts suggests that there were some distinctions within Sheol, and that proper funereal rituals - the "*derech eretz*" of the living for the dead - might have made a difference between the pit, and a more benign, upper level.

Finally, a number of verses include the language "*vayisu chalimatam*" "and they bear their shame" with those who go down to the pit.[43] While this may be poetic license, the use of the imperfect tense suggests that these sinners continue to bear their shame in the depths of Sheol. Such language suggests that Sheol's inhabitants

[40] Ezekiel 32:17- 32.

[41] There is, however, no textual support for this position.

[42] Ezekiel 32:27.

[43] Ezekiel 32:24,25, and 30.

have maintained some degree of consciousness, at least enough to have a sense of guilt for their past sins.[44] The ability to bear shame is essential to a meaningful punitive afterlife. These verses suggest that not only did the inhabitants of Sheol feel guilty for their sins, but also understood that their punishment was directly connected to God's power to punish them for their transgressions on earth.

The Writings

The references to Sheol are located primarily in the wisdom literature, where issues concerning morality, sin and God's redemption are discussed. While the prophets primary concern was God's punishment and redemption of Israel as a national, corporate entity, the wisdom literature shifts the focus to individual judgment and redemption. These books confront timeless philosophical conundrums, namely, the struggle to reconcile one's faith in a just and powerful God with the inescapable realities of death and evil. As the authors contend with these issues, Sheol becomes a symbolic arena for examining questions about immortality, God's redemptive and punitive powers, the meaning of judgment and death, and the role of morality and propriety in the material world.

The authors of the Psalms express profound and haunting fears of death and abandonment. While there is surely the fear that death is the end of one's temporal existence, there is also the fear that death will mark the end of one's relationship to God. Thus, the Psalmist pleads, "For you will not abandon me to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit. You will teach me the path of life."[45] This fear of separation is poignantly expressed in 6:6, "For there is no praise of You among the dead; in Sheol, who can acclaim you?" In contrast to the prophets, who focused on Sheol as a locus of collective punishment, this Sheol reverts back to the indiscriminate morgue first

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[44] This is not limited to a corporeal consciousness. In all likelihood, it is the soul that maintains a sense of conscience that enables it to feel guilty.

[45] Psalm 16:10-11.

mentioned in Genesis. Death and Sheol become interchangable, a place/condition where God no longer listens to exaltations, where God's compassionate hand does not reach. Sheol's punishment is not expressed through torture or eternal fire; rather, the punishment is the loneliness of death itself. Just as a child is isolated from friends or parents during "time out," the one who dies is cut off from his beloved God. Thus, the Psalmist implores God to teach him the path of life; that is, to teach him the right way to live so that his days with God will be prolonged.[46]

This theme is revisited in Psalm 88, as the author, on the verge of death, begs for God's mercy and compassion. In Sheol, he fears that God will no longer care for him. "I am a helpless man, abandoned among the dead, like bodies lying in the grave of whom You are mindful no more, and who are cut off from Your care."[47] The Psalmist pleads for his life, certain that his presence in Sheol will be God's sign of personal rejection. He is sure that God's power does not extend to the afterlife. He asks rhetorically, "Do You work wonders for the dead? Do the *refaim* rise to praise You? Are your wonders made known in the darkness, and your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?"[48] kioThe punishment in Sheol is not caused by what is there, but by what is not there: God's light and God's memory.

In contrast to the God who abandons the dead, Psalm 139 offers praise to an omnipotent, omniscient God whose hand reaches to both the highest heavens and the lowest depths. There is no escaping God's knowledge or judgment, as the awe-struck author cries out, "If I ascend to heaven, You are there; if I descend to Sheol, You are there too."[49] God's wrath or reward is not limited to the earthly realm. Indeed, a person's reward or punishment may only be just beginning, as the Psalmist assures us that the wicked and the righteous will assume their rightful places in death.

[46] Psalm 6:5-11.
[47] Psalm 88:5-6.
[48] Psalm 88:11,13.
[49] Psalm 139:8.

Even as the Psalms highlight God's comfort and compassion, the desire for God's retributive justice lingers ominously in the shadows. Psalm 55, a personal lament against disloyalty and betrayal, implores God to bring death to the evil ones, to send them down alive into Sheol.[50] The verse, recalling God's punishment of Korah and his followers, appeals to God's most vengeful instincts, sending the wicked to Sheol in the absence of the honor and respect of proper burial rites. God not only brings on death, but also assures that the deceased will go to Sheol in abject humiliation. The Psalmist's feelings are clear: "For where they [the betrayers] dwell, there evil is."[51] The Psalmist concludes by calling upon God to send the betrayers down to the lowest pit. Eternal life in Sheol is not bad enough for these people. They must spend their eternity in Sheol's lowest, darkest pit, where the wicked receive God's most horrific punishment.[52]

God's power over life and death also appears to extend, albeit indirectly, to Sheol. Just as God opened up the earth to swallow Korah, Sheol becomes an animated force - a personification of death itself, pursuing the living in order to drag them down into its clutches. In Psalm 18, as David is saved from the hands of Saul, he recalls how close he was to death. "Ropes of Death encompassed me; torrents of Belial (another name for Sheol) terrified me; ropes of Sheol encircled me; snares of Death confronted me."[53] This imagery is repeated in Psalm 116, as the author praises God for saving him from the power of Sheol. "The bonds of death encompassed me; the torments of Sheol overtook me."[54] While the Psalmist is clearly employing poetic license, Sheol's character - *the rodef hamavet* - is clearly engaged in a life and death

50 Psalm 55:16.
51 Id.
52 Psalm 55:24.
53 Psalm 18:5-6.
54 Psalm 116:3.

struggle to overtake humanity's (and by implication, God's) life force. And while God may reign victorious on this day, Sheol's ability to vanquish the unfaithful or weak makes it a worthy, powerful opponent.

The Psalms also comment on the corporeal status of Sheol's inhabitants. Up until the Psalms, the canon's description of bodies in the afterlife had been limited to the *refaim*. These inhabitants looked and acted like their living selves, but in a diminished, weakened state.[55] Psalm 88 mentions them, rhetorically asking if the *refaim* "rise to praise You" in the land of silence and forgetting.[56] Psalm 49, however, offers a much more nuanced response to the question of what awaits a person in the afterlife.

The Psalm's primary theme is the Ecclesiastian democracy of death: rich or poor, foolish or wise, death awaits all people, regardless of their material prosperity or status. "Do not be afraid when a man becomes rich, when his household goods increase; for when he dies he can take none of it along; his goods cannot follow him down."[57] It is the arrogant, the "self-confident," who are destined for Sheol, where their "form shall waste away...till its nobility is gone."[58] Death is the great equalizer, where the powerful will be humbled as they slowly deteriorate. The Psalmist imagines Sheol not as punishment for the wicked, but as the place where even the haughtiest person is reduced to the dust that everyone shares in common.

Psalm 141 lends further credence to this view. The author prays to God to deliver him from sin and evil, reminding God that when death occurs, "our bones are scattered at the mouth of Sheol."[59] This statement suggests that death starts a process of natural decomposition, leaving only our scattered bones at Sheol's entrance. The

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55 Raphael, 55.
56 Psalm 88:7.
57 Psalm 49:17-18.
58 Psalm 49:15.
59 Psalm 141:7

presence of mere bones implies the death of consciousness, the death of guilt, and the end of punishment. Death itself is the punishment. Sheol is merely a resting place for our physical remains.

Sheol as Metaphor: The Proverbs

If the Psalmist's interest in Sheol spoke to the Israelite's concern about individual mortality and God's judgment, the Proverbs use Sheol as a check on individual morality. Sheol is both a genuine place of punishment, and a shibboleth for whatever the authors deemed inappropriate. In this book, Sheol represents man's "*yetzer hara*" which leads inevitably to death. As we learn to avoid sin and temptation, we learn to prolong our days through personal rectitude.

In Proverbs 1, Sheol's ability to swallow men alive is compared with a thief's ability to plunder the innocent - wholly and completely, leaving them with nothing. The proverb teaches that the sinner's world is so tempting that it is capable of obliterating everything it touches, and all that is good. Thus one must be particularly vigilant in avoiding temptation and sin.[60] Proverbs 15 continues with this line of thinking, noting that the intelligent man's path leads upward, avoiding the dangers of Sheol below. In the battle between good and evil, the choice for good will prolong one's days, while the choice for sin will lead to Sheol/death.[61]

In effect, the link between sin and death is made explicit in Proverbs 23, where the author advises parents to beat their children with a rod in order to save them from Sheol.[62] The imposition of strict discipline will lead to moral rectitude, saving the child from sin and the clutches of death. In this verse, Sheol not only serves as a metaphor for sin, but also for the consequences of a sinful life - an untimely death. While the advice may seem hopelessly anachronistic, the dramatic use of the term "Sheol"

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60 Proverbs 1:12.

61 Proverbs 15:24.

62 Proverbs 23:13-14.

emphasizes the import of the parents' conduct.

Sheol is also used as a metaphor for inappropriate desire, particularly in the material and sexual realms. The Proverbs teach that just as man's desire for silver and gold cannot be satisfied, likewise, Sheol cannot be satisfied.[63] As the midrashim will explicate later on, Sheol's ability to absorb more sinners is directly proportional to the number of sinners who are eligible. In short, the demand on Sheol can never outstrip its capacity. As long as there are sinners who covet, who place money and possessions above God and morality, Sheol will always be able to accomodate them.

The adulterous or forbidden woman is also compared with Sheol. The Proverbs portray men, strolling down the path of the righteous, suddenly veering off course to follow a forbidden woman down into Sheol. In Chapter 5, a father warns his son about the dangers of the seductress. "For the lips of a strange [forbidden] woman drip honey; her mouth is smoother than oil; But in the end she is as bitter as wormwood, Sharp as a two-edged sword. Her feet go down to Death. Her steps take hold of Sheol."[64] This forbidden woman appears again in Chapter 7, this time in harlot's clothing. She kisses the son without warning and seduces him with her perfumed, feminine wiles and her invitations to her house to make love. The father warns his son to keep on the narrow path and not to be led astray. "Her house is the way to Sheol, going down to the chambers of death."[65] And in Proverbs 9, this woman will offer up temptations, so that the stupid and the sinful will follow her to her door. "He does not know that the *refaim* are there, That her guests are in the depths of Sheol."[66]

The imagery is clear: when we put ourselves in the position of socializing or talking with a woman outside of the Israelite community, we are hurdling ourselves

63 Proverbs 27:20.
64 Proverbs 5:3-5.
65 Proverbs 7:27.
66 Proverbs 9:18.

towards death. In these particularly misogynic verses, men are perceived as the eternal simpletons, easily seduced by the sexual wiles of the foreign seductress, who in classic "Mata Hari" fashion, need only point them in the wrong direction. Once they stray from the proper path, their one and only destination is the depths of Sheol. Indeed, the forbidden woman and Sheol are one and the same. The path to the woman's house - to fraternization, to immorality, to a sexual relationship outside the boundaries of the community - is the path to Sheol. In the world of the Proverbs, there is little or no distinction between sin and death, between immorality and eternal damnation.

The Book of Job

The Book of Job takes the concept of Sheol back full circle, to its origins as a waiting area for the dead - a place large and open enough to accept personalities as diverse as Jacob and Korah. As Job describes it, Sheol offers no more or less hope than life itself; but perhaps death will relieve some of the pain and suffering. The movement from earth to Sheol simply marks the end of one's life and the end of one's body. There is no comfort that the rich will be punished; there is no comfort that the faithful will be rewarded; there is no belief that God is either merciful or compassionate to His people. Instead, Job mourns for the tragedy of consciousness; for our awareness of death, for our nobility in the face of death, and for our recognition that God's power - though spectacular in *Maaseh Bereshit* - may actually be too limited to answer our most basic theological questions.

Job's suffering - the loss of his wife, his children, his home, and all of his possessions - gives him little hope or courage for the future. Not only has he lost everything that is dear to him, he is also suffering from lesions and boils on his skin. Surely, he will never experience any happiness again. Under these circumstances, Job expresses his belief in the permanence of death. "As a cloud fades away, So

whoever goes down to Sheol does not come up; He returns no more to his home; His place does not know him."[67] God cannot save Job, or anyone else, from Sheol. It is the place where everyone - regardless of their status - must eventually land.

Moreover, the dead will not even be awake or conscious in Sheol. The dead will not perceive anyone - living or dead - in Sheol. Sheol is that realm where silence and darkness overwhelm even the righteous. Job mourns his loss as he tries to reconcile his faith in God with what he knows awaits him at his death. "If I must look forward to Sheol as my home, And make my bed in the dark place, Say to the Pit, 'You are my father,' To the maggots, 'Mother' 'Sister' - Where, then, is my hope? Who can see hope for me? Will it descend to Sheol? Shall we go down together to the dust?"[68]

If Sheol is to be Job's home in the afterlife, there is little to which he can look forward. He will not see his family members there. Rather, the pit that will serve as his grave, the maggots that will attack and eat his body, these will be companions in death. In this land of darkness and forgetting, his body and his hope have disappeared. If the righteous suffer during their life, and death offers no hope, or even any cosmic significance, then God has disappeared as well. Just as Job descends into this black hole, likewise his hope, his search for meaning, follows after him.

While Job may be confounded by the suffering of the righteous, he is also angered by the wicked who enjoy relative peace and prosperity during their lives. In Chapter 21, he asks in frustration, "Why do the wicked live on, prosper and grow wealthy? Their children are with them always, and they see their children's children. Their homes are secure, without fear; They do not feel the rod of God....They spend their days in happiness, And go down to Sheol in peace."[69]

In short, Job's philosophical question is this: if God is neither judging the wicked

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[67] Job 7:9-10.

[68] Job 17:13,16.

[69] Job 21:7-9,13. Job's concerns are in direct contradiction to Jacob who feared that he would not go down to Sheol in peace after Joseph's alleged death.

in life, nor in the afterlife, what is the purpose of God's connection with the world? If God has ceased to judge one's behavior, what difference does one's behavior make? Job clearly states that one's behavior makes no difference whatsoever, since the happy, healthy man dies the same death as the miserable, bitter man. "They both lie in the dust and are covered with worms."[70]

And yet, even as Job renounces hope, he ponders if the wicked might still be punished in Sheol. In Chapter 24, a lengthy meditation on the fate of the wicked, Job tries to convince himself that God's judgment - even if not apparent on earth - actually extends beyond the grave. "And Sheol, those who have sinned. May the womb forget him; May he be sweet to the worms; May he no longer be remembered; May wrongdoers be broken like a tree."[71] Given his own suffering on earth, Job can no longer believe in a just God whose moral influence shapes people's lives. But this passage suggests that Job is desperately clinging to a last remnant of faith, to the belief that somehow the wicked will be judged in Sheol, even if it is just the satisfaction that sinners will be a tastier meal for the maggots than the righteous.

Once again, for all of Job's rationality, for all of his certainty that God, the judge of judges, has put down his gavel in the afterlife, he stubbornly hangs on to God's retributive powers. We may all be in darkness in Sheol, but it is just a little darker for the wicked. We may all be eaten up by maggots, but the wicked are devoured with a little more gusto. We may all be down below the earth, but the wicked are down just a little bit further, further away from someone's memory.

While these verses may reflect Job's prayers or wishes, rather than his belief system, they demonstrate that Job's views on Sheol and the afterlife were hardly monolithic, and may have included some thinking about the afterlife. Indeed, Job is engaging in the kind of speculation about the afterlife that was characteristic of the

[70] Job 21:26.
[71] Job 24:19-20.

rabbinic period a few centuries later. Even as Job argued with God and his acquaintances about judgment and mortality, it was a nearly impossible feat to give up on the idea of life after death, particularly when God's powers over life and death were so dramatic.

Resurrection from Sheol

Resurrection has been interpreted as God's power, in the messianic age, to revive the dead. Neil Gillman describes it this way. "[A]t the time of resurrection, the soul would be restored to the resurrected body, and that each individual human, with body and soul united as they were on earth, would come before God for judgment." [72] It is not the soul, wandering back and forth between Gehenna and earth, nor is it God's power to preserve life and postpone death. Rather, it is God's unique ability to reunite a corporeal body with its former soul.[73]

Although there are no references to resurrection in the Torah,[74] both the Prophets and the Writings allude to God's power to raise the dead. In Psalms 30 and 49, the Psalmist pays tribute to God's power. "God will redeem my life from the power of Sheol, for He will receive me." And similarly, ""O Lord, you brought me up from Sheol, preserved me from going down into the pit." [75] These verses, at first glance, suggest that God may have the power to raise the dead. But, what their poetry recalls is not God's power to resurrect the dead; rather, as Neil Gillman notes, it is God's power to frustrate death, to not let death have its way. These verses reflect God's power as the giver of life and death, and therefore, God is capable of prolonging life and postponing death. In these instances, God is saving the Psalmist from going

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72 Gillman, 260.

73 This view of resurrection runs counter to the Zohar's mystical belief in reincarnation and the possibility that one soul may inhabit many different bodies in the course of time. This view of resurrection requires each human being to have his/her own individual soul.

74 The concept of resurrection was apparently not part of the Pentateuchal religious system.

75 Psalm 49:16 and Psalm 30:4.

down to Sheol in the first place, not raising them up from the afterlife.[76]

In a similar vein, Ezekiel's "valley of the dry bones" speech is often cited as proof of God's power to revive the dead.

> "Thus said the Lord God: I am going to open your graves and lift you out of the graves, O my people and bring you to the land of Israel....I will put My breath into you and you shall live again, and I will set you upon your own soil. Then you shall know that I the Lord have spoken and have acted."[77]

While the language surely suggests that God will revive the dead, these verses are traditionally interpreted as political allegory. Ezekiel's prophecy, in the wake of the destruction of the First Temple, was a call for the national and spiritual rebirth of the Israelite nation. Such language was not intended as a literal declaration of resurrection. Rather, Israel "shall live again" as a nation when the people can return to God's promised land.

In contrast to the metaphoric language of the Psalms and Ezekiel, the book of Job simply denies God's power to resurrect. In despair over his suffering, Job compares nature's wonderous infinitude to humanity's tragic mortality. "But mortals languish and die; Man expires, where is he?...So man lies down never to rise; He will awake only when the heavens are no more."[78] Job ponders one of the most vexing theological problems of the ages: why do the righteous suffer? His answer simply denies God's justice and power. Perhaps a just God would revive the dead in order to reward them in the next life. But in Job's mind, God is a sadistic creator, willing to sentence humanity to Sheol for eternity.

The strongest evidence for resurrection in the biblical period can be found in

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[76] Gillman, 70. See also Hannah's prayer from 1 Samuel 2:6. "The Lord deals death and gives life, casts down into Sheol and raises up." This verse reflects God's ability to do whatever God wishes to do. It does not imply God's power to resurrect the dead.

[77] Ezekiel 37:12,14.

[78] Job 14:10,12.

the prophecy of Isaiah and the predictions of Daniel. In Isaiah, resurrection becomes the only reasonable way to account for the suffering of the pious. Thus, if justice can no longer be accomplished within the boundaries of life, then God must revive the pious dead to assure that justice is done. "Oh, let your dead revive. Let corpses arise. Awake and shout for joy, You who dwell in the dust. For your dew is like the dew on fresh growth; You make the land of the shades come to life."[79]

Isaiah's passage assumes that if God resurrects the dead, then God's divine justice will be vindicated. God's resurrection of the dead in the next world is a corrective to the Israelite suffering in this world. Moreover, as Gillman notes, these verses only imagine the resurrection of the pious. Resurrection is not a means for judgment; rather it is a reward to those who remained steadfast and faithful in the face of injustice in this lifetime.[80] The wicked, however, remain in Sheol.

The most vivid discussion of resurrection may be found in the book of Daniel, which adds an explicit statement of punishment to the process. Scholars believe that Daniel was written just prior to the Maccabean revolt, when Antiochus IV was punishing Jews for striving to be pious.[81] Clearly, if Jews were martyred for the mere observance of religious law, God's justice would have to extend beyond life. "Many of those that sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to eternal life, others to reproaches, to everlasting abhorrence."[82]

The passage not only supports God's power to resurrect the dead, but also states that wicked persons may be resurrected for the sole purpose of punishment. It suggests that at the end of days, God will resurrect many (not all) people; some (the pious) will be resurrected for eternal life, but others will only be resurrected so that they may stand before God to receive judgment. While this is a plausible explanation

79 Isaiah 26:19.

80 Gillman, 92.

81 We are familiar with this story from the tales of Chanukah.

82 Daniel 12:2.

and reflects its historical context,[83] the judgment of the wicked remains problematic. Why must God resurrect the wicked in order to punish them? Why must their body and soul be reunited in order to receive God's judgment? By this time, Sheol is viewed as a place where the wicked are punished. Therefore, why not simply leave the person's soul down in Sheol's fire?

The answer may be found in an emerging vision of God's responsibilities as the moral judge. While the Bible's evidence concerning resurrection remains contradictory and obscure, Daniel suggests that resurrection and judgment in the next world must be a part of God's divine plan. Accordingly, God as "judge" can not allow the wicked to escape judgment by simply leaving them in Sheol. Rather, the end of days requires individual judgment so that the righteous can be rewarded and the wicked can be punished. Indeed, by the time Daniel becomes a part of the canon, resurrection is not the ultimate demonstration of God's power; it is the ultimate means for dispensing reward and punishment.

The Jewish community entered its next historical phase - the intertestamental period - far from certain of its future. Life under the Hasmonean dynasty was troubled, as Jews and Hellenizers struggled for the community's soul. Moreover, the religious leadership was beginning to fragment between the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and later on, the Essenes. Under these conditions, and with Greco-Roman influences lurking just above the surface, the concept of Sheol began to emerge as a real, three-dimensional chamber of horrors.

The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha's Sheol is no longer the Bible's vague, dark land of the shades; rather, it is presented in bright living color, complete with shackles, tormented souls, and plenty of fire and ice. God is now firmly in control of the afterlife, and is portrayed as the ultimate Judge, sentencing Jewish enemies and

[83] Gillman alleges that the passage reflects the divisions between Jews during this Hellenist era. The Jews who adhered to Torah, and did not become Hellenized, were the Jews who received eternal life. In contrast, the Hellenists were the Jews who were resurrected in order to receive God's judgment. 89.

other sinners to eternal punishment in Sheol. Although the ideology and descriptions of Sheol appear somewhat harsh, this material serves as an important transition from the Bible's ambiguous, fleeting references to the Rabbis' poetic explanations of injustice, redemption and the *olam haba* .

the era. In these texts, we see the extraordinary theological development of the Jewish afterlife, as the biblical concept of Sheol is expanded from a relatively neutral waiting area to a realm of harsh, unforgiving judgment. These sources also provide contradictory evidence for a host of important questions on the afterlife, including: the separation of body and soul, the separation of the righteous from the wicked, the role of punishment at the time of judgment day (the end of days), the status of the soul immediately after death, and God's judgment of the individual in the afterlife.

In the Second Book of Baruch, the author's view of Sheol resembles the Psalms' land of silence and forgetting.[3] The dead sleep in Sheol in relative peace and serenity, cut off from the fear and suffering of the living. "And lo, the righteous sleep in the earth in tranquility; For they knew not this anguish, nor yet had they heard of that which had befallen us." [4] The author laments that if only the living could communicate with the dead, they would say to those in Sheol, "Blessed are ye more than we who live." [5] This envy of the dead appears to reflect the Bible's view of Sheol as a place to rest, far away from the suffering of those who live under the oppression of foreign powers. There is not even a hint of torture or judgment in this passage, as the righteous sleep peacefully just beneath the earth.[6]

Similarly, the Book of Sirach,[7] authored by Ben Sira, expresses the same benign view of Sheol. This book, which is another example of the biblical genre

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[3] Psalm 88: 4,5 and 7.

[4] Second Book of Baruch 11:4-5.

[5] Id. 11: 7.

[6] This passage's negative existential view is interesting in light of the deads' apparent separation from God. If the dead have been cut off from the events of the earth, does it not logically follow that they have also been cut off from God? Peace appears to be a higher value than connection to the divine.

[7] Also known as the Wisdom of Ben Sira, or Ecclesiasticus.

of "wisdom literature,"[8] describes Sheol in familiar, realistic terms. As in the Book of Ecclesiastes, Ben Sira believes that death is an inevitable aspect of existence. But, he also asserts that a person's attitude towards death is dependent on the quality of his life. Thus, for those who are prosperous and relatively happy, death will be seen as a bitter pill. But, for those who may be sick, or who have lost hope, death will be seen as a welcome end to suffering.[9] Regardless of one's life circumstances, death will always have the last word. "Fear not Death (it is) thy destiny, Remember that the former and the latter[10] (share it) with thee....(Be it) for a thousand years, for a hundred, or for ten (that thou livest), In Sheol there are no reproaches concerning life."[11]

Ben Sira alleges that, in death, everyone will share a common fate. Whether a person has lived one hundred years with wealth and good fortune, or just ten years with illness and suffering, his time in Sheol will be the same. Death is the great equalizer, and offers no more comfort to the righteous than to the wicked. Sheol is not a realm of judgment. Rather, it is a neutral respite where nobody is reminded of life's inequalities or injustices.

In another passage concerning death's inevitability, Ben Sira's words directly echo Psalm 49. The Psalm notes that both the foolish and the wise die, and that regardless of their fame or folly, the grave will be their eternal home.[12] The Psalm advises not to be concerned with those who amass wealth and possessions, "for when he dies he can take none of it along; his goods cannot follow him down [to Sheol]."[13] Ben Sira uses this sentiment to urge those who

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8 This genre includes the Book of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes, and in the Apocrypha, the Wisdom of Solomon.

9 The Book of Sirach, 41:1-2.

10 Those who have come before and those who will come after.

11 Book of Sirach, 41:3-4.

12 Psalm 49: 10-12.

13 Id. 17-18.

have prospered to enjoy their wealth, to give it to loved ones, and even to indulge in personal pleasures when they arise. "Refrain not from the joy of the present, And let not the portion of a good desire pass thee by....Give and take; yea, indulge thy soul, For in Sheol, there is no delight."[14] In short, Ben Sira advises that since "you can't take it with you," you might as well enjoy life while you can. There will surely be no joy or pleasure in Sheol.

Although Sheol may offer little in the way of solace, at least it does not torture its inhabitants. Rather, Sheol exists as a neutral, amoral oblivion, where everyone simply goes to sleep in the darkness and the silence.[15] For the author, Sheol is simply a fact of death.

The Pseudepigrapha, specifically, the Books of Enoch, begin to extend the boundaries of Sheol beyond the Bible's limited view. Although the Bible's primary concern is God's power and authority over Sheol,[16] the observer/traveler Enoch is intent on describing the afterlife; who (or what) goes down to Sheol, and what do they encounter when they arrive. Enoch not only provides a much more detailed portrayal of the afterlife, but also serves as a thematic link between the Bible's generalized simplicity and the midrash's poetic mythology.

The First Book of Enoch (hereinafter referred to as "1 Enoch"), Chapter 22, provides some guidance to three major questions: first, does the soul separate from the body at the time of death; second, are the righteous and the wicked housed in separate locations within Sheol; and third, what happens in the afterlife between the time of death and the end of days? In verses 2 - 4,

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14 Book of Sirach 14: 14, 16.

15 Book of Sirach 22:11. "Mourn for the dead, for his light has failed." In other words, the dead are in darkness, separated from the light.

16 Accordingly, the Bible examines the relationship (is there one?) between man and God in Sheol, not the mechanics of the afterlife.

Enoch arrives in Sheol and describes what he sees.

> And there were four hollow places in it, deep and very smooth: three of them were dark and one bright and there was a fountain of water in its midst. And I [Enoch] said 'How smooth are these hollow places, and deep and dark to view.' Then Raphael answered, one of the holy angels who was with me, and said unto me: 'These hollow places have been created for this very purpose, that the spirits of the souls of the dead should assemble therein, yea that all the souls of the children of men should assemble here. And these places have been made to receive them till the day of their judgment, and till their appointed period [till the period appointed], till the great judgment (comes) upon them.' [17]

In this brief but crucial passage, the angel Raphael explains that Sheol is the universal repository for all souls. Thus, the reader may conclude that the body and the soul separate at some time after death, and that the soul (or the "spirits of the souls") goes down to Sheol to await the end of days, or Judgment Day. Moreover, these verses suggest that the wicked and righteous are located in different compartments of Sheol, and accordingly, their fates are very different.

The chapter then describes the four pits (hollow places) of Sheol, and the distinctions between each of them. One pit is entirely reserved for the righteous, who enjoy a bright spring of water running through the chamber.[18] The three remaining pits are for the wicked and those involved with the conduct of the wicked. Thus, the second chamber is reserved entirely for the wicked, who were neither punished during their lifetimes, nor deprived of funeral rites upon their deaths.[19] These sinners will be punished by great torment and tribulation until the end of days. "There [in the pit] He shall bind them for ever." [20]

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17 1 Enoch 22:2 - 4.

18 1 Enoch 22:9. According to Greek, Christian, and Jewish tradition, souls in the underworld suffered from thirst. See Matthew Black, The Book of Enoch, p. 167.

19 This was still considered the most serious punishment of a sinner in this world. Id.

20 1 Enoch 22:11. Although such language suggests eternal punishment, it is not clear what will happen to these sinners at the end of days.

The third chamber is reserved for those who were victims of the sinner's conduct. For example, Abel was found in this chamber, a victim of Cain's murderous behavior. On Judgment Day, these souls will provide accusations and testimony against the sinners who wronged them. Although they are clearly not sinners, they are still considered the wretched, unfortunate souls whose lives were extinguished by the wicked. Accordingly, they are not considered among the righteous. Finally, the last pit is reserved for those who were not quite sinners, but who associated with them. This would appear to refer to Jews who collaborated with their gentile oppressors. While these souls were punished with eternal imprisonment, they might not have to endure further affliction at the end of days.[21]

The division of the righteous from the wicked, and the subdivisions of responsibility amongst the wicked, reflect an unusually sensitive theological response to the moral status of the afterlife. The authors of Enoch employ the biblical imagery of Sheol as the universal gathering place of souls. However, within that structure, they build in a multi-tiered system of punishment to assure that God's justice will be carried out. Moreover, the authors' subtle gradations - between the criminal, the aider and abetter, and the victim, demonstrate a profound, and rather modern, understanding of the impact of sinful behavior on the community.[22]

The authors also leave open the question of who, if anyone, will be resurrected at the end of days. The passage clearly states that the wicked's fellow travelers will receive a lesser punishment than the wicked. At the end of

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[21] Black, Commentary on 1 Enoch 22:13, p. 168.

[22] The authors make an interesting distinction between the righteous, who are truly deserving of an aftelife reward, and the victims, who may or may not be righteous, but whose victim status does not confer "righteousness" upon them. In our own society, we tend to lionize victims, regardless of their actual circumstances. The authors do not want them to suffer more, but they also do not extend to them a status they may not deserve.

days, they will be left to sleep, thereby assuring that they will spend the rest of eternity in Sheol and not be resurrected.[23] Therefore, logic suggests that if the wicked's associates will remain in Sheol, the truly wicked will remain there as well, perhaps enduring an even harsher existence than before. Moreover, the text suggests that the truly wicked shall endure torment in Sheol, and "there they shall be bound for ever." [24]

Despite the non-resurrection language, another passage echoes Daniel's ideology and implies that at the end of days everyone on earth and in Sheol will be resurrected and subjected to God's ultimate judgment. In a later chapter, one of the Enoch parables,[25] the text states that:

> And in those days [the end of days] shall the earth give back that which has been entrusted to it, And Sheol shall give back that which has been committed to it, And Abbadon [Sheol] shall repay that which it owes. And he shall choose the righteous and holy from among them, For the day has drawn nigh that they should be saved."[26]

This passage suggests that everyone, even the truly wicked, will be resurrected from Sheol, but only the righteous will ascend to be with God. Once the righteous ascend, then Sheol, the gathering place of all souls, effectively transforms into Gehenna, the realm of judgment for the wicked. In light of this passage, the souls in the other three chambers may indeed be resurrected, reunited with their corporeal selves, and then immediately punished and sent back down to Gehenna.

Enoch's eclectic nature also includes, however, a passage that strongly echoes Isaiah's prophecy that only the righteous will move on to the next world.

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[23] 1 Enoch 22:13.

[24] 1 Enoch 22:11.

[25] The First Book of Enoch contains a section with three parables. For purposes of this thesis, the second parable, which refers to Sheol in the context of the end of days, is the most relevant.

[26] 1 Enoch 51:1 - 2.

"And the righteous shall awake from sleep, He shall arise and proceed in the ways of righteousness, And all his paths and conversation shall be in eternal goodness and grace."[27] The wicked (and their sins) "shall perish in darkness for ever, And shall no more then appear from that day for evermore."[28] The resurrection - which takes the righteous and leaves behind the wicked in Sheol - is the actual demonstration of God's justice. The righteous are rewarded for their piety in this life with eternal life in the World to Come. And the wicked are punished for their behavior in this life with eternal damnation in Sheol. In contrast to Daniel's "judgment day," any further judgment of the wicked would be superfluous because they would have already been sentenced to eternity in Sheol.

The Second Book of Maccabees also comments on resurrection in the famous story of the defiant mother and her seven sons who refused to accept Antiochus' decrees against the observance of Torah. Each son made an inspiring speech prior to his execution, but three of the sons and the mother told their captors they were unafraid of death because of their personal faith in God's resurrection. Thus, the fourth son said, "you [the tyrant] shall have no resurrection unto life." [29] The son contrasts his own experience - being a good, observant Jew - with the guard/tyrant who will not know resurrection. His wicked soul will simply remain in Sheol, without a judgment or hope for a brighter future.

The closest the Apocrypha comes to Daniel's "judgment" language is from the Testament of Benjamin, which states that "all will rise, some to glory and some to dishonor."[30] The author expands on the Daniel material,

27 1 Enoch 92:3.
28 1 Enoch 92:5
29 Gilman,102.
30 The Testament of Benjamin, 10: 6 - 8.

introducing the concept of a universalist resurrection; that is, rather than just a resurrection of those who suffered at the hands of Antiochus, this passage envisions a universal resurrection of all those who had come before. As the language in Daniel suggests, however, some of those who are resurrected will be found guilty of wickedness and sent back to Sheol.

Just as the prophets expounded on the wicked's fate in the netherworld, the Book of Enoch stresses God's wrath, as sinners great and small are cast down into Sheol's hungry jaws. Indeed, Sheol's reputation as a place of collective punishment is primarily based on the events that occur after the messianic era begins. In these apocalyptic passages, God is condemning large groups of sinners - kings, idol-worshippers, slanderers, even entire nations - to spend the rest of eternity in Sheol.

In these messianic days, the author dramatizes the ascendance of the Elect One,[31] who shall sit on the throne of glory and pass judgment on all of the non-righteous. While the righteous ones are blessed with peace and dwell nearby, the sinners are soon to be judged, and destroyed "from the face of the earth." [32] Moreover, when the Elect One (a.k.a. the "Son of Man") judges these sinners, they have no hope of redemption.

> "And he shall cast down the kings from their thrones and kingdoms
> Because they do not extol and praise him...
> And the faces of the powerful shall change color and be covered with shame,
> And darkness shall be their dwelling and worms shall be their beds,

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31 Christians assume that the "Elect One" is Jesus Christ. Jews interpret this passage as a reference to the Messiah. It depends, of course, as to whether the book is dated prior to, or after, the Gospels. One commentator notes, however, that if the Elect One was referring to Jesus, why isn't Jesus mentioned, either directly, or indirectly as the foundation of Christianity. This significant absence suggests that Enoch is a Jewish document and that the "Elect One" refers to an *olam haba* messiah. See Black, The Book of Enoch, p. 181.

32 1 Enoch 45:6

And they shall have no hope of rising from their beds
Because they do not extol the Name of the Lord of spirits."[33]

This passage not only employs traditional biblical Sheol imagery, including darkness and the "bed of worms," but also offers no hope for redemption in the next world. A sinner who has no hope of rising from his bed will remain in Sheol for eternity. This denial of resurrection also appears just two chapters later, as the author writes, "And before them [the righteous] they [the wicked] shall fall and not rise again: And there shall be no one to take them by his hands and raise them up."[34]

Just as the prophets reserved their basest feelings for idolators and enemy nations, likewise Enoch's authors express little sympathy for their plight. Echoing the language and the imagery of the Korah story, these sinners "who work iniquity shall be swallowed up, And from before the Lord of spirits sinners shall perish from off the face of the earth; Who shall not abide, but shall be exterminated for ever and ever."[35] And shortly thereafter, "In those days Sheol shall open her mouth and they shall be engulfed therein, Their destruction Sheol shall not remit, But sinners shall be swallowed up from the presence of the elect." Sheol is animated as a hungry, sleeping giant who comes alive to swallow sinners whole, keeping them in its torturous pits forever.

Although the Enoch parable does not stress the act of repentance, one chapter does mention its potential efficacy. On Judgment Day, the righteous shall be victorious in the name of the Lord of the spirits (the Elect One). The gentiles will witness the righteous' victory, so that they may repent and give up their idol-worshipping ways. Once they have recognized the Lord's power and

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[33] 1 Enoch 46:5 - 6.
[34] 1 Enoch 48:10.
[35] 1 Enoch 53:2

authority, even though they will have no honor before Him, "yet through his name shall they be saved."[36] But, whoever does not repent on this day shall perish before the Lord, and He will have no mercy upon them.[37] While repentance may have some impact on Judgment Day, it does not appear to be an option in Sheol. Once a person is classified as a sinner in Sheol, the text does not mention any potential for redemption. In contrast to the rabbinic literature, which frequently refers to repentance and Sheol's limited punishment, Enoch's view of Sheol offers little more than eternal wrath and cruelty.

Enoch's personal tour of Sheol offers the kind of description that has become synonymous with our modern understanding of Hell. Enoch describes Sheol as a "deep valley with burning fire" and a "burning furnace," inhabited by kings wearing leg shackles and iron chains of "incalculable weight." These chains would sink the sinners into the lowest "depths of hell."[38] In another passage, a parable about the judgment of sheep, Enoch describes Sheol as the "place of condemnation" where the guilty are cast into a fiery abyss "full of flaming fire, and full of pillars of fire."[39]

While the descriptions of Sheol occasionally soar into the realm of the author's imagination, they also reflect (to the extent possible) the biblical source material. The author depicts the wicked going down to Sheol, "with all your possessions and all your glory and splendor, And in great shame and desolation and great slaughter, Your spirits shall be cast into the furnace of

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36 1 Enoch 50:2 - 3.

37 1 Enoch 50:4 - 5.

38 1 Enoch 54: 1 - 6.

39 1 Enoch 90: 23 - 26. In this section, Enoch witnesses the Lord of the Sheep's day of judgment for the sheep. He describes the "sheep burning, and their bones burning" in the fiery abyss.

fire."[40] The reference to "all your possessions" recalls not only the story of Korah and his men, who were swallowed up along with all of their possessions, but also reassures the reader that the wicked's descendants will not enjoy the fruits from the wicked's poisonous tree. Furthermore, the verse affirms the separation between body and soul in the afterlife, since it is the "spirits" who will be cast down into the fiery furnace.

Sheol's tortures are also described to reassure the righteous that wickedness will not go unpunished. Enoch swears to the righteous that the "spirits of you righteous who have died will live and rejoice and be glad."[41] In contrast, it is the sinners who have everything to fear.

> Know that their souls will be made to descend into Sheol,
> And they shall be afflicted in great tribulation, and in darkness, and in the toils of death and in a blazing fire.
> And to their great judgment their souls will come,
> And the great judgment shall be for all generations for ever.
> Woe to you for you shall have no peace. [42]

In this passage, the Book of Enoch displays a particularly merciless approach to the aims of Sheol. Those who are cast into Sheol will not only endure the plagues of darkness and fire, but such punishment will be forever. Regardless of their desire for redemption, the Lord offers no mercy. As this material influences subsequent rabbinic texts, God's personality is portrayed with far more sympathy and compassion for the sinner who wishes to repent.

This hellish imagery can also be found in the Second Book of Enoch (hereinafter as 2 Enoch), a work that is thought to have been written in the 1st century C.E. The book's description of the netherworld is unique in that it considers Sheol to

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40 1 Enoch 98:3.

41 1 Enoch 103:4.

42 1 Enoch 103: 7 - 8. See also 1 Enoch 63:10 for similar imagery.

be in the third realm of heaven.[43] Indeed, such a description is in direct contrast to the Sheol/Gehenna literature, which suggests that if there is only one place, it is Sheol, with the righteous housed in a separate chamber from the wicked.[44]

2 Enoch describes Sheol as a "very terrible place" with many different kinds of tortures. Such tortures include darkness and gloom, no light at all, with a murky fire constantly burning. There is a "fiery river," and everywhere there is fire, and "everywhere there is frost and ice, thirst and shivering." The chains and bonds are cruel, and the angels who oversee the place are "fearful and merciless, bearing angry weapons, merciless torture."[45] It is an ugly and horrific scene that has surely had a profound influence on modern, albeit fire and brimstone, views of Hell.

In addition to the descriptions of Sheol,1st and 2nd Enoch briefly describe the types of sinners who are condemned to Sheol. As this chapter noted earlier, murderers were separated from the other wicked groups, and of course, idolators were certain to be cast into the fiery depths. But for the more typical sins of the community, Sheol's wrath is a threat against transgressors who fail to act in the community's best interests.

Thus, in 1 Enoch, those who spread evil to one's neighbors will be slain in Sheol.[46] Such language implies that this sinner will not receive his life sentence, but will actually be executed. Instead of living out quiet days of torment chained in darkness, this person's soul will simply cease to exist. Furthermore, those who are deceitful or who cause bitterness on the earth will be utterly condemned.[47]

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43 While the Midrash and Talmud both flirt with the metaphor of Gehenna and Gan Eden sharing space, or being separated by only a very thin line, this is the first example that I have encountered where Sheol is actually a chamber of heaven.

44 2 Enoch 10:2-3. Charles notes that the idea of evil in heaven is alien to modern religious thought. However, in Job, Satan does appear in Heaven to discuss the nature of Job's faith. See Charles, 2 Enoch 10:1 - 6.

45 2 Enoch 10:1 - 6.

46 1 Enoch 99:11.

47 1 Enoch 99:12.

In contrast to these broad all-inclusive categories, 2 Enoch offers a laundry list of very specific behavior that warrants punishment in Sheol. Not unlike the Rabbis, who were concerned about defining precisely what behaviors to avoid, 2 Enoch is very clear about its own prohibitions. Chapter 10 begins with the general category of those who dishonor God, but quickly moves on to the Bible's prohibitions against magic-making, enchantments and devilish witchcrafts.[48] The passage then moves on to specific criminal, sexual, and social sins against the community, including murder, stealing, child sodomy, fornication, boasting (of wicked deeds), lying, slander, envy, and rancor.[49] Sins that disrupted the social and institutional order of the community, that led to fighting and distrust between neighbors, warranted Sheol's wrath. Just as the Rabbis used Sheol's heavy, fiery hand to prevent immoral conduct, likewise the author of 2 Enoch had the same basic behavioral concerns.

This passage is also admirable for condemning the behavior that is **not** observed. One must be aware of a neighbor's needs, and if at all possible, help meet them. The failure to fulfill basic social obligations - feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and giving tzedakah to the poor - will also bring about Sheol's wrath.[50] Simply avoiding sinful behavior will not suffice. The absence of righteousness also warrants condemnation.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the Pseudepigrapha material is its discussion of what occurs - practically and theologically - at the time of death. Does God judge us? What happens to our souls? Are they immediately assigned to a specific realm in the afterlife? Is the assignment permanent, or do we have the power to move up or down? Because the biblical and rabbinic sources do not really address these questions, this material is a welcome addition to our theological understanding

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48 See 1 Samuel 28 (Saul's encounter with the witch of Endor).

49 2 Enoch 10:1 - 6.

50 Id.

of God's judgment of the individual in the immediate post-mortem period.

1st Enoch envisions God presiding over a speedy trial of our entire life. The text states that every day, all our sins are written down, so that they may serve as evidence at our trial.[51]

> "And do not imagine to yourselves or think that no sins are known or seen in heaven, and are not written down in the presence of the Most High. From now on you must know that all of your iniquities will be written down day by day until the day of your judgment."[52]

The Third Book of Enoch (hereinafter referred to as "3 Enoch"), a Hebrew book attributed to Rabbi Ishmael, a Palestinian rabbi of the 2nd century,[53] provides further support for God's judgment of our lives. The text states that God judges the world by consulting "the books of the living and the books of the dead" where all the deeds of the world are recorded.[54] The book even describes what the trial will look like, with God seated on His throne, justice on His right, Mercy on His left, and truth standing directly facing Him.[55]

Once God has issued His decree, the soul is assigned to either return to God (presumably in heaven - it is referred to in 4th Ezra[56] as the "habitations"), or to wander in torment in Sheol. For the first seven days, the righteous soul is free to take a tour of the afterlife to see all of the potential options before settling down into a

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51 This trial, also known as a "life review" enables the person to witness the events of his life. Such events are then judged by God (or God's surrogates) as to their moral soundness. See Raphael, Jewish Views of the Afterlife, p.104.

52 1 Enoch 98:7 - 8. See also 1 Enoch 104:7.

53 The authorship and time period is open to dispute. Scholars have estimated that it was written anywhere between the 1st and 12th centuries C.E. It is also referred to as "The Book of Heavenly Palaces" and is much closer to Talmudic tradition than other works of the Pseudepigrapha. See Raphael, p. 100.

54 3 Enoch 28:7 and 30:2.

55 3 Enoch 31:2.

56 4th Ezra, also known as 2 Esdras, is another book of the Pseudepigrapha. For this research, the first section of the book is particularly relevant, as Salathiel, a figure associated with Ezra the scribe, is on a visionary journey of the afterlife. As part of his journey, he witnesses what happens to the soul immediately after death.

habitation.[57] The wicked souls - the ones who have scorned God's ways and have despised His law - are immediately sentenced to wander about in torture, "ever grieving and sad, in seven ways."[58] The seven kinds of sadness are: they shall be consumed with remorse, they will recognize the past as irrevocable, they will see the reward of the righteous, they shall see a preview of their torments at the end of days, they shall see the habitations of the righteous guarded by the angels, they shall see the torment reserved for them, and in the light of God, they will be consumed with agonizing remorse, confusion and shame.[59]

In his commentary, Charles notes that these seven degrees appear to represent psychological stages of the soul in its intermediate state (the lengthy time between actual death and Judgment Day).[60] Perhaps they represent the soul's gradual acceptance of its fate, wandering in torment down in Sheol, cut off from any possibility of redemption. Once again, however, this paradigm of the soul's fate offers further proof of this material's glaring absence of mercy.

These seven stages can be further divided into three categories: sadness and remorse, views of torture, and views of paradise. The underlying schema appears to be rather cruel. The sinner is tormented not only because he can do nothing to change his fate, but also by previews of the righteous in heaven (what he might have experienced), and his own tormented fate in Sheol (what he will experience). Such previews appear to have little or no regenerative or redemptive value.[61]

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57 While the text does not specifically refer to "righteous souls" who are free for seven days, the text states that at the conclusion of this period, the souls will settle into their "habitations." 4 Ezra 7:101. Charles notes that wicked souls are condemned to wander "to and fro," while only righteous souls settle into habitations.

58 4 Ezra 7:80. These seven ways are thought to be derived from the Babylonian tradition of seven different realms of heaven and hell. See Charles, fn. 80, p. 588.

59 4 Ezra 7:82 - 88. The righteous also go through seven degrees of gladness and joy in heaven.

60 4 Ezra 7: 73, fn. 73, p. 587.

61 This approach is in marked contrast to the rabbinic view of the same material. The Rabbis limit punishment in Gehenna to 12 months, except for very specific sins - adultery, publicly shaming a neighbor, and giving someone an evil nickname.

The Third Book of Enoch offers a much more compassionate, enlightened alternative to the above. After God judges the individual's life and issues a decree, two angels, Samkiel and Zaapiel, are responsible for transporting the souls down to Sheol. Zaapiel takes care of the wicked souls, who are brought down to Sheol and tortured with rods of burning coal. The sinners' faces looked like human faces, but they were as black as the bottom of a pot because of all their wicked deeds. Their bodies were like those of eagles.[62] Samkiel is in charge of the "intermediate" souls, a group of sinners whose trial showed that they were capable of both good and bad deeds. This is the first indication of the existence of an "intermediate" group of souls.

This insight is not only important because it recognizes that the vast majority of people are neither wholly righteous nor wholly wicked, but also because these "intermediate" souls are given an opportunity to redeem themselves. In this version, Samkiel's role in Sheol is to help these souls purify themselves from sin. Their faces are described as greenish in color, because they are still tainted by sin until they are purified.[63] Once they have been purified, they may (it is not entirely clear) have the opportunity to alter their fate and experience heaven. In this case, punishment is not just imposed for the sake of sadism and torture. Rather, the punishment serves as a catalyst for change and teshuvah, and offers the sinner the chance to experience the afterlife as a redeemed soul, instead of as an unredeemed sinner.

In the Apocrypha material, we can see Sheol's evolution from the universal non-judgmental realm of the Torah to the individualized, punitive realm of the Rabbis. The Books of Enoch also provide detailed, sometimes painful descriptions of Sheol, including different levels (pits) for different degrees of guilt, and a variety of punishments. In Enoch's Sheol, even the major transgressions - idolatry, fornication, slander and envy - remind us that the overwhelming concern of Jewish life was

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[62] 3 Enoch 44:1 - 6.

[63] Id.

assuring the well-being of the community.

In comparing these texts to the rabbinic materials that would soon follow, there are two themes that distinguish themselves. First, the Apocrypha's concern with what happens to the soul at the time of death. The soul's four stages - the first seven days, God's assignment, the end of days, and resurrection - represent the only complete systematic analysis of the afterlife that these early sources offer. Although the model only applies to the righteous souls, it still provides some guidance to the soul's afterlife journey, something the Rabbis apparently did not wish to address.

Second, this material is not only lacking in compassion and mercy towards the sinner, but also dismisses any genuine attempt at repentance. While the material is sophisticated enough to evolve from a non-judgmental to a judgmental view of life after death, it is apparently locked in by its desire for merciless, eternal retribution. As we shall see, the Rabbis viewed punishment as a strictly utilitarian tool. It was clearly designed to have a limited, educative function that helped transform people from wicked to penitent. The Apocrypha's harsh system stands in stark contrast to the Rabbis' emphasis on mercy and compassion.

Chapter Three

Sheol/Gehenna in the Midrash

Judaism's Pharisaic period - the era of the Rabbis - provided a much more detailed view of Sheol. The Rabbis, for the most part, discard the biblical name of Sheol, and rename it Gehenna, limiting the use of "Sheol" to biblical prooftexts. In its new incarnation, Gehenna is no longer an ambiguous place where the dead might be residing. Gehenna is now a place where Israel's enemies, apostates, and idol worshippers are punished; a place to which God can send one down for not obeying His commands. It is the end result of a moral YHVH making final judgments based on lifetimes of sin and righteousness. The midrashim offer the archetypal myth of Gehenna as a lynchpin of rabbinic theology - a place where the wicked will finally be punished, and from where the righteous will be saved.

The midrashim's graphic depiction of the afterlife not only encouraged the ordinary Jew to live a life of Torah and mitzvot, it also provided him with some reassurance regarding the ultimate fate of Israel's enemies. While observant Jews may have been buoyed by their potential place in the *olam haba,* the existence of Gehenna as a place of punishment gave them a sense of God's justice and vindication. In the rabbinic mind, a world that was ordered by a just and omniscient God required that the wicked receive their due. Since there was apparently little hope for such justice in this life, the belief in a punitive afterlife, where the wicked were humbled and the righteous were exempt, became an essential, inseparable aspect of rabbinic theology.

The Rabbis also discuss Gehenna as a repository of evil. While God and the Israelites confronted evil in a plethora of manifestations (Pharoah, Nebuchadnezzar, the Philistines, etc.), the Midrash deals with evil as a

systematic force in the world. Evil is not just a king run amuck, or a skirmish with a neighboring tribe over a tract of land. Rather, evil is a force of nature, a part of our biological and psychological makeup, an aspect of our being that we must attempt to subdue. Such evil - the *yetzer hara* - could be controlled through Torah study, tzedakah, humility, good deeds, etc. Israel was not only at war on a national, macrocosmic level. It was also in a war on a personal level - a war between the *yetzer tov* and the *yetzer hara* - a battle between good and evil intentions. It was a battle that could be won, a conflict that gave the relationship with God a healthy, existential significance. Personal behavior was a matter of choice - one could choose righteousness and life, or choose sin and death. For those who lost the battle - who turned away from God in sin and wickedness, Gehenna awaited them, ready to expand as needed.

Just as the Rabbis assumed that the struggle between good and evil was inextricably linked to God and the human condition, likewise they conceived of Gan Eden and Gehenna as parallel visions during the days of Creation. The Rabbis agreed that Gehenna was created by God on the second day. Why the second day? The Rabbis can only conclude that Gehenna was created on that day because it is the only one that does not include the language "for it was good."[1] God could not have praised the day with the appellation "*tov*" when He had created a place devoted to evil.[2] During the process of creation, when God ordered reality through various partitions, the parsing of morality into good and evil created disorder and ambiguity. Thus, God could not have praised the day as "good."[3]

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[1] Genesis, Chapter 1.

[2] Midrash Rabbah 10 vols. Trans. H. Freedman (New York: Soncino Press 1983) (Genesis Rabbah 4:6).

[3] Id.

The ambiguity of the day is reinforced by another creation midrash, which explains that God created three things on each day. On the second day, God created the firmament, Gehenna and the angels.[4] In addition to the concept of Gehenna, the creation of the *malachim* contributed to a sense of moral confusion. As later midrashim explain, it was the *malachim* who were so unwaveringly opposed to the creation of humanity, precisely because it possessed such inferior, wicked impulses.[5] Thus, on the second day, God created angels who were troubled by human morality, and Gehenna, the place where the immoral would be punished. The creation enterprise was no longer exclusively good; rather, there were shades of gray that would become increasingly difficult to separate and organize.

This struggle - between the good and the evil inclination, between man's baser instincts and the study of Torah, between Gan Eden and Gehenna - is a central aspect of the Rabbis' world view. In a rather literal explication of this principle, Rabbi Zeira asserts, by way of a parable, that those who engage in religious acts and good deeds will end up in Paradise; however, those who do not will wind up in Gehenna.[6] Further on, in a lovely, subtle *drash* on the meaning of "*mi-kedem*," "before," the Rabbis assert that Gehenna was created before the Garden of Eden, which was not created until the third day. Given the brutality of Gehenna's fire, Adam wonders what will save his descendants from such an ignoble fate. The answer lies in the word "*herev*" which the rabbis interpret, through *gezara shava* ,as symbolizing both circumcision[7] and the double-edged sword which symbolizes Torah.[8] Adam then sees far into the

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[4] Genesis Rabbah 11:9.
[5] Genesis Rabbah 11:9.
[6] Genesis Rabbah 9:9.
[7] Joshua 5:2.
[8] Psalm 149:6.

future to discover that his descendants have embraced the mitzvah of circumcision and the study of Torah, which will deliver them from Gehenna's punishment. With this assurance, Adam then engages in procreation.[9] These midrashim serve as a paradigm of rabbinic theology, as humanity's *yetzer hara* struggles to overcome forces of righteousness - the willingness to perform the *mitzvot* and to study Torah.

The Rabbis were very sensitive, however, in their recognition of the complexities of human psychology. They understood that the temptations of evil were just a single thought away, and that vigilance and good intentions were not always going to suffice. This perception is beautifully expressed in the Pesikta de-Rab Kahana, where it is asked why Gehenna and Gan Eden were created so close to each other (in space and time), and why they are accorded equal space. The passage explains that they were physically contiguous so that each could borrow physical space from the other, whenever the multitudes of righteous or wicked became too numerous. The sharing of physical space between good and evil becomes a physical metaphor for the intimacy of good and evil housed in one's own mind and heart. As Rav Johanan explains in this same midrash, Gan Eden and Gehenna share space because the separation between good and evil is no more than the thickness of a wall, no more than the breadth of a hand.[10]

The sharing of space between the two worlds also recognizes that God's gift of choice and freedom will result in the triumph of the *yetzer hara* in so many of the nations. Both Gan Eden and Gehenna cry out for more souls, and both need space for their inhabitants.[11] As Gehenna is given a voice to plead for

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[9] Genesis Rabbah 21:9.

[10] Pesikta de Rab Kahana, Piska 28.

[11] Exodus Rabbah 7:4.

more people, it is clear that God's triumph for good will not be until the days of the messiah. Until those days arrive, unrepentant wickedness will continue to attract, and Gehenna's gates will always be open.

The competition for souls between Gan Eden and Gehenna manifests itself both in the external world of time and space and the internal world of mind and heart. Just as they share space and voice to plead for a soul's attention, the mind and heart go through similar vacillations between temptation and righteousness. The shared space between Gan Eden and Gehenna symbolize the manifestation of one's own human nature, as it struggles against one's baser instincts for higher moral ground.

Acccordingly, the Rabbis tell us that each person has been assigned two conflicting portions; one portion for Gan Eden and one portion for Gehenna. Only the future knows which portion will ultimately triumph, so each is represented. However, when a person is declared righteous and goes to Gan Eden, the person receives his own portion, and the unused portion of a person sent to Gehenna. Similarly, the person sent to Gehenna receives his own portion and the unused portion of a person sent to Gan Eden.[12]

This "double" portion enables the Rabbis to explain the suffering of the righteous. The righteous person not only receives his own (overdue) reward for his dedication in this life, but also receives the wicked's (unused) reward in the afterlife. In contrast, the wicked person receives one portion for his wickedness in this life, and a second helping of punishment for the afterlife. Thus, the Rabbis teach us that whatever choice one makes in this life - for good or for ill - will surely be magnified in the afterlife.

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12 H.N. Bialik and Y.H. Ravnitzsky, eds. Sefer Ha-Aggadah:The Book of Legends (New York: Schocken 1992) 244.

The Midrash also functions in the service of poetry and lyricism, as it expands and comments on the more straightforward, perfunctory language of the Tanakh. For the Rabbis, it hardly suffices to know that beneath the earth there exists a dwelling place for the dead that may (or may not) be a holding area for seekers of the next world. The Rabbis want to taste the salt on their tongues, smell the stench of burning flesh, feel the fire singeing their eyebrows, see the darkness of Gehenna's bottomless pit, and hear the cries of the maimed and tortured. Like juvenile delinquents on a tour of the state prison, the Rabbis take us down into the guts of Gehenna and graphically illustrate what lies ahead for the wicked.

The origin of the term "Gehenna" as a place of punishment can be traced to the book of Jeremiah. During the period of the Monarchy, Jeremiah repeatedly denounced a sacrificial, idol-worshipping cult that was operating in the valley of Ben-Hinnom, south of Jerusalem. In this valley, at a place called *Topheth* ("*tophteh*" is translated as "seduction"),[13] parents were offering their children to the idol of Moloch. Jeremiah prophecied that, as a result of this behavior, the valley would come to be known as the "Valley of the Slaughter."[14] The Rabbis were appalled by such practices, and appropriated the valley's name, Gehinnom (Gehenna) as the appellation for the place of punishment in the afterlife.

In Lamentations Rabbah, the Gehinnom valley is described as consisting of seven chambers, with the innermost chamber containing an image of the heathen deity. Various animal sacrifices would trigger the opening of the outer chamber circles (a dove would open two chambers, a calf would open five, etc.), but the sacrifice of a child was supreme and opened the seventh and final

[13] Jeremiah 7:31.

[14] "Gehinnom," Encyclopedia Judaica, 1971.

chamber. In the seventh chamber, the child was placed upon a copper plate, with a fire pan lit beneath him. The midrash teaches that once the ritual began, the parents chanted prayers before the deity, so that they would not have to hear their child's screams and reverse their decision.[15] Thus, the Rabbis adopted Gehenna as a place of unqualified evil, suitable for punishment in the afterlife.

While Gehenna's initial entrance point may have been located just south of Jerusalem, the Rabbis envisioned the dimensions of Gehenna as broad and deep. The prooftext for the dimensions of Gehenna's entrance derives primarily from the story of Korah. Using the prooftext, "So they and all that appertained to them, went down alive into Sheol,"[16] the Rabbis interpreted this verse to mean that the opening of the earth adjusted itself to the girth of each individual. The hole in the earth became larger or smaller depending on the width of the body part (small for feet, wider for hips, smaller for neck and head). This description re-imagines the scene not as God's terrifying earthquake swallowing the men in one gulp; rather, the torture is consciously prolonged, as the men sink gradually - like death by quicksand - into the earth's pit. Moreover, as they sank down, the men were heard crying desperately, "Moses is the truth, and his Torah is the truth."[17] These last moment confessionals serve not only as the homiletic icing on the cake (in the event that someone might still be wavering about Moses' legitimacy), but also as a last moment of *teshuvah* prior to death.

This "narrow" opening is also supported by a prooftext from Job which states "if one has allured you from a narrow opening into a broad place, where there is no straitness."[18] The Rabbis interpret this text as describing Gehenna, a

[15] Lamentations Rabbah 9:36.
[16] Numbers 16:33.
[17] Bialik, 93, citing Yalkut Reuveni, Numbers 16:31.
[18] Job 36:16.

place that must be narrow on top (so that one cannot escape easily) and broad on the bottom (so that it can accomodate multitudes of sinners).[19]

The Rabbis also envision Gehenna as an abyss that stretches far down below the earth. Like Sheol, Gehenna is described as a deep ditch or a pit, which, as one descends further into the lowest chambers, becomes ever darker, ever more punitive. Such depth is established both gramatically and thematically. The Rabbis note the usage of the directional "*Hay*" as a suffix, e.g. "*Sodomah*" instead of the "*lamed*" as a prefix, e.g. "*lisodom.*" An exception was noted, however, regarding the term "Sheol." When a person is going (or pondering going) to Sheol, **both** the *lamed* prefix and the *hay* suffix is used, "*lisheolah.*" The Rabbis conclude that this double directional usage must have some additional significance, and interpret it to mean the lowest level of Sheol, a place of ultimate darkness.[20]

Gehenna's darkness is also analyzed in the Pesikta de-Rab Kahana. Using the *petichta* verse, "*Tzeedkatcha kihararay-ayl mishpatecha tihom raba*," "Thy righteousness is like the mighty mountains; thy judgments are like the great deep,"[21] the author is concerned with discerning the meaning of the "*Tihom Raba*," the great deep. He then cites a prooftext from Ezekiel, "*Bayom radto Sheolah heevalti kesayte alav et tihom*," "In the day when he [the wicked king] went down to Sheol I caused a mourning; I covered the deep for him."[22] Rav interprets the verse to mean that God caused Sheol to mourn for the king, and that Tihom [the deep] covered itself for the king.[23] Why would Sheol mourn for a wicked king? If Sheol's dark, black pit would now be made blacker by the

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19 Numbers Rabbah 10:2.
20 Genesis Rabbah 50:3.
21 Psalm 36:7.
22 Ezekiel 31:15.
23 Pesikta de-Rab Kahana, Piska 9:1.

king's sins, Sheol could mourn his presence. Or perhaps the king's level in Sheol is simply not black enough, and he must descend further down to reach a darker pit of blackness, a chamber more suitable to someone of his venal character.[24]

Although the shift in the subject of the sentence appears strained (substituting Sheol's grief for God's), the purpose of the prooftext is clear: Sheol/Gehenna is a deep, dark place with many different levels of punishment for many different types of transgressions. Just as our criminal sentencing laws vary in accordance with the severity of the crime, the lower levels of Sheol were darker and harsher than the upper levels and were reserved for society's worst elements. This Sheol doesn't punish with fire; rather, its torture is through isolation and darkness.

Rav Judah Bar Rabbi offers a second theory, contending that the word *heebalti* (caused to mourn), should be read *ketiv*, as *heybalti* (caused to go down), so the verse would now read, "I [God] caused him to go down deeper." This reading suggests agreement with the belief that Gehenna's's deeper, darker levels are the repositories of society's most offensive sinners. The passage concludes with God's imagined words, expressing the essence of Sheol/Gehenna as the depths of darkness and isolation. "*Gehinnom chosech, vihatihom chosech, viharashaim chosech, yavoe chosech, vayichsah chosech,*" "Gehenna is darkness, the abyss is darkness, and the wicked are darkness. Let darkness come and cover darkness."[25]

The Rabbis also described conventional punishments of extreme heat and cold, although there is a decided emphasis on Gehenna's tropical character. In Genesis Rabbah, the heat of Gehenna is described as so intense

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[24] Id.

[25] Id.

that when God made a hole in Gehenna, the earth and all its inhabitants became intolerably hot.[26] Such descriptions were also employed to reassure the people that foreign enemies would be severely punished in the afterlife. Thus, King Ptolemy shakes with fear because he believes that God has been steadily heating Gehenna since the beginning of time.[27]

Perhaps the most sophisticated midrash on the "weather as torture" theme in Gehenna can be found in the Pesikta de-Rab Kahana. The writer contends that punishment in Gehenna will last for twelve months, with the first six months spent in the heat and the next six months spent in the cold. When the wicked first arrive in Gehenna, God gives them an itch that is relieved by the heat, so that the wicked will say that God's punishment is not too severe. As their stay continues, though, and the heat becomes overwhelming, they are moved to an area of extreme cold. At first, the chill provides a relief from the heat, and the wicked again think that God's punishment is merciful. But soon the cold becomes unbearable and the wicked must spend the remainder of their days in extreme discomfort.[28]

In this midrash, the Rabbis are not ashamed to attribute to God a certain degree of diabolical intelligence. Rather than just assuming the basic cliches of heat and fire, the Rabbis imagine God to have a keen awareness of psychology, insofar as recognizing that a punishment will be much more severe if its effect on the person changes and develops over time. Just as a child will at first be thrilled by an endless supply of sweets, he will soon be satiated and then overwhelmed by them. Similarly, God's use of the weather in this fashion is indicative of the Rabbis' complex understanding of the nature of punishment.

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[26] Genesis Rabbah 48:9.

[27] Bialik, 510-511.

[28] Pesikta de-Rab Kahana, Piska 10:4.

By manipulating the environmental conditions, and the sinners' responses to them, the punishment not only takes a physical toll, but also an emotional toll. As a result, when a mechanism for relief is transformed into a mechanism for torture, the gravity of the punishment will be much greater than the exposure to just one harsh condition.

The Rabbis' interest in Gehenna reveals their fundamental concern about the nature of God's justice. If, as Tanakh suggests, everyone died and went to Gehenna, then Gehenna must surely be a multi-leveled place where the wicked and the righteous co-exist. Such a model imagines the righteous near the top of Gehenna's chambers, close to the earth's surface, while the wicked wallow in the lowest, darkest realms, oblivious to God and/or any possibility of holiness.

This view of Gehenna achieves a number of goals: it adheres to the biblical text;[29] it enables the righteous to exist in Gehenna without being tormented;[30] and it presents God as the omnipotent master of the afterlife, in control of the eternal fate of both the righteous and the wicked. Nevertheless, the midrashim appear reluctant to lump the wicked and the righteous together. If Gehenna was the only option in the afterlife, what was God really offering the righteous? A penthouse apartment in the midst of Calcutta! Thus, the Rabbis focus on why the wicked will go to Gehenna, and why the righteous will avoid it.

The midrashim condemn the wicked - both Jew and non-Jew - to Gehenna. God doesn't just send the other nations down to Gehenna. God hurls the heathens down there with vigor, because not only did they reject Adonai, but *davka*, they were also materially and politically prosperous.[31]

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[29] Tanakh designates Sheol as the dead's only possible destination.

[30] E.g., the witch of En-dor's resurrection ofSamuel in 1 Samuel 22.

[31] Genesis Rabbah 55:7.

Therefore, Gehenna's punishment was the only just and appropriate outcome for their afterlife.

Although most of Gehenna's inhabitants were citizens of other nations, room was always available for Jews who could not adhere to the community's standards. For example, Korah's men were not only swallowed up by Sheol, they were also punished on a regular, continuing basis. In an oft-cited midrash, an Arab merchant leads Rabba to the place where Korah and his men met their death, a small crack in the earth with smoke rising up. The merchant places a piece of wool on the end of a spear, and inserts it into the crack. The wool comes up singed. The merchant asks Rabba to listen closely. He hears from beneath the earth, "Moses and his Torah are true and we [Korah's men] are liars." The merchant explained that once a month, Gehenna stirred them around as if they were vegetables in a pot, until they arrived at this spot to make *teshuvah*. Rabba explained that God kept Korah's men alive in Gehenna, punishing them for their sins, while allowing them to confront their transgressions and repent for them. In time, God would raise them up from Gehenna.[32]

What about the Jews who go to Gehenna for less noteworthy sins? How do they get past the gates? The Rabbis wrote that Abraham was Gehenna's gatekeeper, and that he would not permit a circumcized Jew to enter. And what about the sinful circumcized Jew? The Rabbis contended that Abraham had a limitless supply of foreskins from babies who died prior to circumcision. He then took those foreskins and surgically fastened them to the sinners, rendering them "uncircumcized" and allowing them to enter Gehenna.[33] This midrash not only attests to the Rabbis' fertile literary talents, but also clarifies the Rabbis' views about the physical nature of the afterlife. The inhabitants of Gehenna were clearly corporeal, as they maintained enough

[32] Numbers Rabbah 18:30.
[33] Genesis Rabbah 48:8.

substance for Abraham both to examine their bodies and perform a reverse *milah* ceremony. Just as Jews were identified in life by the absence of foreskin, so too were they identified in death.

Notwithstanding the obligatory suffering of the wicked in Gehenna, the midrashim offer a surprisingly tame description of its mayhem and torture. In contrast to the Talmud - which offers many more examples of Gehenna's lurid nature - the early midrashim are primarily interested in demonstrating God's desire to limit Gehenna's wrath. Unlike St. Augustine's Christian view, which refers to hell as a place of eternal suffering and damnation, the midrashim teach us that punishment in Gehenna, for both Jews and non-Jews, will last no more than twelve months.[34] The emphasis is not on the fiery furnace, but on the sinner's *teshuvah*. In the Rabbis' view, Gehenna does not exist in order to inflict cruel and unnecessary suffering. Rather, Gehenna is conceived of as a place where the soul is purified through fire and *teshuvah*, as it prepares for the next phase of its journey. As it is described in Pesikta Rabbati, "after going down to Gehenna and receiving the punishment due him, the sinner is forgiven from all his iniquities, and like an arrow from the bow he is flung forth from Gehenna."[35]

The severity of Gehenna's punishment may also depend on the sinner's desire and ability to do *teshuvah*. In a gorgeous, poetic passage, the Rabbis' imagine the tears of a sinner's *teshuvah* flowing like fountains until the fires of Gehenna become cool.[36] Thus, repentance, like good behavior in prison, is actually efficacious in reducing a person's torment. Moreover, it confirms that God hears the praise of the repentant sinner, even from the depths of Gehenna.[37]

The "twelve month" rule is not always written in stone. For particularly grievous sinners - Nebuchadnezzar, Vespasian - those responsible for inflicting extraordinary

[34] The Mishnah, Trans. Herbert Danby, (London: Oxford University 1933) Eduyot 4b.
[35] Pesikta Rabbati, Trans. William G. Braude, (New Haven: Yale University 1968) 53:2.
[36] Exodus Rabbah 7:4.
[37] Id.

sufferings on the Jewish people - the punishment in Gehenna will be not less than three and one-half years.[38] The possibility of parole does not appear to be an option.

The duration of punishment in Gehenna was even debated by Bet Shammai and Bet Hillel. Shammai claimed that the truly wicked would remain in Gehenna for eternity, while everyone else (those who fall in between the wicked and the good) went to Gehenna for twelve months to do *teshuvah* and then ascended to Gan Eden in a purified state. Hillel adopted a more compassionate stance, alleging that the truly wicked (Jews and gentiles) should be sentenced to twelve months, while everyone else should not be sent to Gehenna at all. Only the heinous - informers, those who deny the resurrection of the dead, and those who lead others to sin - should remain in Gehenna for eternity.[39] As the next chapter explains, Jewish tradition was reluctant to impose a penalty of eternal suffering based on such ambiguous terms as "truly wicked." Accordingly, the Rabbis were willing to do so when the sin was well-defined (as Hillel does) and represented a clear transgression against society.[40]

For example, the Rabbis showed positively no mercy towards Noah's generation, for whom a sentence of twelve months was just the beginning of their suffering. At the end of the year, God boiled every drop of rainfall during the Flood and poured it down upon them, destroying body and soul and depriving them of a place in the World to Come.[41] While Noah's generation technically received a punishment of just twelve months, it was, in effect, just a waiting period prior to God's full and unmitigated wrath.

Although the punishment endured in Gehenna was limited in duration, its severity may have raised some doubts about sending everyone - the wicked and the righteous - to the same location. While the Rabbis do not elaborate on the fate of the

[38] Lamentations Rabbah 1:40.
[39] Rosh Hashanah 16b - 17a.
[40] Id.
[41] Genesis Rabbah 28:8.

righteous in the Gehenna literature, it is clear that they may escape the fate of Gehenna through good deeds. Just how good one has to be to qualify for such an honor remains deliberately vague, but these midrashim suggest two very important developments in the Rabbis' theology. First, if the righteous can avoid their fate in Gehenna, perhaps it is a strictly punitive designation where only the non-righteous will endure some form of retribution. Second, if the righteous are exempt from Gehenna, it suggests that some of the Rabbis believed in the existence of Gan Eden as a possible afterlife, even prior to the World to Come.

Accordingly, the Rabbis incorporate the eternal ideal, Gan Eden, as a place for the righteous in the afterlife. As noted earlier, the Rabbis wrote that Gehenna and Gan Eden shared eternal space, and that the separation between them was merely a hair's breadth.[42] In theory, the midrashim suggest that the righteous will dwell in Gan Eden after they die. But, it is entirely unclear whether Gan Eden exists as a counterpart to Gehenna (as an eternal dwelling place for the righteous), or if God enables the righteous to inhabit Gan Eden only after He ushers in the *olam haba* .[43]

In the Rabbis' most formulaic conception of the afterlife, Gan Eden and Gehenna symbolize the human struggle between good and evil. For those who build up credit through Torah study and mitzvot, Gan Eden awaits their arrival after death. For those who do not, their fate belongs to Gehenna.[44] In a similar comparison, "he who keeps the Torah has entry to Gan Eden, but he who does not keep it is faced with Gehenna."[45] The interaction between the worlds continues even after death. Before the righteous are taken to Gan Eden, they are shown what eternity might have been like in Gehenna. Likewise, before the wicked are taken down to Gehenna, they see

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[42] Pesikta de-Rab Kahahna, Piska 28:1.

[43] Raphael, Jewish Views of the Afterlife, 127-28.

[44] Genesis Rabbah 11:9.

[45] Exodus Rabbah 2:2.

what their eternity might have been like in the rarefied air of Gan Eden.[46] Thus, just as Gehenna serves as a warning to sinners to lead a virtuous life, Gan Eden serves as a goal for the righteous and an inspiration - a possibility of hope - for the wicked.[47]

In one midrash, the Rabbis consider the *zichut* of a man's familial relationships as the crucial factor for exemption. Even if the person under consideration was not righteous himself, if his father **and** his son were righteous, that is enough evidence to exempt him from the fate of Gehenna.[48] The other midrashim, however, require a much more personal accountability in judging a person's ultimate fate.

In seeking to inspire a more faithful response to God and the mitzvot, the Rabbis use Gehenna as an unpleasant threat to keep people on the correct path. The Rabbis cite positive deeds - tzedakah, Torah study, humility, good deeds, and an appropriate fearfulness - as the way to avoid the fate of Gehenna.[49] In addition, in what might be classified as an early proto-Reform midrash, the Rabbis teach us that God keeps a righteous person from Gehenna because his ethical life exempts him from such a fate. In essence, this partnership model between God and humanity affirms the merit of a person's choice to do good, and God's recognition that such conduct deserves an appropriate and just reward.[50] While the Rabbis do not elaborate on where the righteous will go in the afterlife, God can obviously play a crucial role in determining a person's fate.

Other midrashim suggest that Gan Eden will exist only in conjunction with God's messianic era. In Exodus Rabbah, the Rabbis contend that in the World to Come, God will establish peace among all the nations, and they will sit and eat together in Gan

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46 Midrash on Psalms 6:6. See also 31:6.
47 Raphael, p. 152.
48 Leviticus Rabbah 36:3.
49 Bialik, 666.
50 Numbers Rabbah 11:5.

Eden.[51] And in another more extensive midrash, the righteous will be rewarded in the World to Come because they will emerge from Gan Eden, see the wicked judged in Gehenna, and their souls will be very glad. In the obverse, the wicked will emerge from Gehenna, only to see the righteous sitting peacefully in Gan Eden, and their souls will shrink.[52] In this instance the association between Gan Eden and the World to Come is explicit; Gan Eden will be the righteous' dwelling place in the World to Come. One does not precede the other.

This midrashic view suggests that no matter how righteous a person may have been, the opportunity for paradise will be available only when God provides it for everyone. Gan Eden must remain as an inspiration for the collective society, not a reward for performing deeds that have already been commanded. Thus, it appears, as so often is the case when examining this literature, that contradictory perspectives stand side by side, revealing not a definitive answer, but a variety of theological biases and preferences.

In one of the later midrashim, however, the righteous - those who study and engage in Torah - avoid Gehenna's fate altogether and simply remain in their graves. The dead who reside in their graves remain just below the surface, and on Shabbat and holidays, they rise up from their graves to sing praises to God's name. In contrast, those who are wicked during this life go down to the lowest levels of Gehenna, where their praise of God's name remains unheard.[53] Even in death the righteous desire the highest possible resting place, the one closest to the living.

Although the Rabbis' concerns remain the same - the relationship between the level in Gehenna and the degree of punishment received - this midrash takes this theme one step further. By imagining "the grave" as a potential afterlife dwelling, the

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[51] Exodus Rabbah 15:7.

[52] Leviticus Rabbah 32:1.

[53] Pesikta Rabbati 50:1.

Rabbis envision a much more fluid afterlife experience, where the living and the dead mingle together to praise God. Instead of the more universal "everyone goes to Gehenna" approach, where a multitude of levels within Gehenna suggest a wide variance of afterlife experience, the Rabbis separate the righteous altogether, establishing another domain that more closely approximates life on earth. The righteous are not only exempt from Gehenna's punishment, they no longer go there at all.

This midrash also supports the conclusion that Gan Eden is a dwelling place for the righteous in the World to Come. If the most righteous person avoids Gehenna's punishment and instead goes to his grave, it suggests that the goal of the afterlife is not to ascend to Gan Eden, but to be as close as possible to the living. It is clear that in the Rabbis' view, the living - by virtue of their life - will always be closer to God than the righteous dead. Sharing space with God in Gan Eden was something the Rabbis could only conceive of in the World to Come.

While the midrashim are replete with spirits moving between the realms of Sheol and Gan Eden, the Rabbis do not emphasize bodily resurrection. In just a minor reference in Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer, God's revelation at Sinai is so powerful that when God speaks the first commandment, the dead who were in Sheol revive and stand with the Israelites. This resurrection scene is just one part of the proof for the verse, "and with those who are not here today."[54] In this instance, God resurrects neither for reasons of justice nor to establish the World to Come. Rather, God wishes everyone, living or dead, to stand at Sinai with the Israelites. In this instance, God's power is not only extraordinary, but also theologically compelling.

In a passage explaining why the pious suffer in this world, the Rabbis imagine the righteous in Gan Eden, looking out upon the wicked suffering in Gehenna. To show their appreciation, they proclaim their love of God for allowing them to suffer in

54 Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer, 325, citing Deuteronomy 29:14.

this world so that they would be saved from such torment. The midrash then gives the obverse, claiming that when the wicked ascend from Gehenna to see the righteous sitting peacefully in Gan Eden, their souls will shrink within them.[55] Thus, resurrection is utilized in the service of the Rabbis' theodicy, but with an interesting variation. The wicked's punishment is not externally imposed by God's judicial decree. Rather, the torment is in observing the happiness they might have had if they had behaved. As a result of their envy and jealousy, their soul shrinks within them. The punishment is not caused by God, but by the wicked's own response to the righteous.

The Midrash also uses the Korah story to comment on resurrection. Since Korah and his men go down alive into Gehenna they go with both their body and soul intact. Therefore, when the flames of Gehenna burned Korah's wife, her wickedness was so intense that they consumed both her body and soul. Accordingly, she could not be resurrected.[56] The Rabbis use the Korah story as an exception to prove the rule. Since Korah and his followers are the only people who are swallowed up by Sheol, body and soul, they are precluded from a place in the World to Come. For resurrection to occur, the midrash implies that the body and soul must separate at death, so that they may be reunited at the end of days. For Korah, his wife, and their followers, such separation did not occur.

Despite all of the attention and text devoted to it, many of the Rabbis write about Gehenna in purely theoretical terms. This is particularly true when they are debating the phenomena of the World to Come, a time when sin and evil are supposed to be eradicated.

In Genesis Rabbah, one finds profound disagreement regarding Gehenna's viability in the World to Come. Rav Jannai and Resh Lakish contend that in the World to Come, there will be no Gehenna, except for one day when the wicked shall be

55 Leviticus Rabbah 32:1.

56 Numbers Rabbah 18:15.

burned.[57] This "day of judgment" theme is echoed in the Pesikta de-Rav Kahana, which adds that the heat of judgment day will be so intense that only those who dwell in a sukkah will be protected.[58] This "one day" theory is also supported by *gematria*, where the Hebrew name "HaSatan" adds up to the number 364. Just one shy of the total number of days of the year, the Rabbis interpret this to mean that for 364 days, Satan accuses people of their sins. On the one remaining day - Yom Kippur - Satan has no power, and the person is judged accordingly.[59]

Still another rabbi argues that in the World to Come, Gehenna will neither be a specific time nor a specific place. Instead, it will be known as the time for judgment when the wicked, without regard to the calendar, spontaneously burst into flames and burn up.[60] Notwithstanding these minority opinions, the Rabbis (as a group) still believe that Gehenna - as a dwelling place for sinners - will continue to exist in the World to Come.[61]

The above midrashim reflect the apparent complexity of what might occur when the world shifts from an imperfect, sinful society to a perfect world of heaven on earth. For some, the World to Come requires that God (or humanity) will confront and expunge the reality of evil. Not surprisingly, they rely on various systems of divine judgment and punishment (Yom Kippur, Hoshanah Rabbah, fire,) to eliminate the evil and transform the earth into God's Paradise. For the majority,however, the place known as Gehenna will continue to exist because evil will always be a reality, and the wicked must still be punished.[62] As Scripture states, "Whose fire is in Zion, and his

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57 Genesis Rabbah 26:6.

58 Pesikta de-Rab Kahana, Piska Supplement 2. The midrash appears to presume that judgment day will occur during Sukkot, perhaps on Hoshanah Rabbah, and that the wicked will not find their way into a sukkah.

59 Leviticus Rabbah 21:4.

60 Genesis Rabbah 26:6.

61 Id.

62 Genesis Rabbah 87:6.

furnace in Jerusalem."[63]

Perhaps the most interesting view of this dilemma can be found in the later midrashim, in Pesikta Rabbati. The authors contend that in the World to Come, all the nations shall be gathered for judgment in the valley of Jehoshaphat. All of the idol worshippers (the nations other than Israel) will be ordered to walk across a bridge over Gehenna. When they reach the middle of the bridge, it will shrink to the mere thinness of a thread, and everyone will plunge into Gehenna. But, when God's kingdom on earth is firmly established, the sinners will come forth from Gehenna, fall on their faces, and declare God and the nation of Israel to be blessed.[64] This account reflects a World to Come shaped not by God's power to simply destroy evil. Rather, this World to Come is a triumph of God's justice and redemption, transforming a world beset by struggle and evil into a world of universal *teshuvah* and blessing. The Rabbis' conception recognizes that Paradise can never be created through God's destruction; rather it is created by a return to God and holiness, where Gehenna will truly be superfluous.

Gehenna's versimilitude also extended to the world of metaphor, where the Rabbis employed it as a symbol of Roman rule, their own Gehenna on earth. In the sophisticated literary genre of midrash, the figures of Jacob and Esau frequently serve as paragons of good and evil, symbolizing the struggle of Israel's (Jacob's) morality against their enemy's (Esau's) brute force. While Esau's (Rome's) presence is shadowed by Gehenna's venality, Jacob (Israel) is bathed in the scent of Gan Eden.

First, the Rabbis comment on Isaac's blessing of Jacob, when Isaac said, "See, the smell of my son is like the smell of a field that Adonai has blessed."[65] Even the *pshat* suggests that Jacob brings with him the fragrance of Gan Eden. Then the

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63 Genesis Rabbah 26:6, citing Isaiah 31:9.

64 Pesikta Rabbati, Piska 35.

65 Genesis 27:27.

Rabbis seek an explanation as to why Isaac "trembled with great trembling"[66] after he had just (mistakenly) given his paternal blessing to Jacob. The biblical narrative suggests a simple, straightforward reason: Isaac was trembling because when Esau walked into their home, Isaac knew that he had been deceived, and had given his most coveted gift to his younger son. A mistake of such enormous significance might result in fear and trembling.

The Rabbis cleverly ignore the surface narrative, and ask, rhetorically, why a father (Isaac) would be trembling because one son departed and another son entered. Such an occurrence would not produce trembling. Accordingly, the Rabbis deduce that Isaac was trembling because when Esau came in, Gehenna came in with him, and the walls of the house began to seethe from the extraordinary heat.[67] This interpretation is supported by a scintillating play on the word "*Ayfoe*", which begins Isaac's bewildered statement, "Who then was he that hunted down hunted game and brought it to me?"[68]

The Rabbis interpret "*Ayfoe*" not only as "Who then" (the word "*Mi*" already serves that purpose in the verse), but also as "*Aleph - Fay - Hay*" the root of "baked." Thus, the verse should read, "Who is it that is to be baked (*ayfoe)* [in Gehenna] I (Isaac) or my son (Jacob)?" And God responded, "Neither you nor your son, but he (Esau) that hunted down hunted-game."[69] For God's response, the Rabbis interpreted the repetition of "*hatzad tzayid*", "hunter of hunted-game," as superfluous. Thus, Esau himself becomes the game - the one who is hunted and will be roasted in Gehenna. Accordingly, the Rabbis read the verse as, "Who is the hunter who has become game?"[70]

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66 Genesis 27:33.
67 Genesis Rabbah 67:2.
68 Genesis 27:33.
69 Genesis Rabbah 67:2.
70 Midrash Tanhuma, Trans. John T. Townsend, (Hoboken NJ: KTAV 1989) Toledot 11.

As the above midrash on the word "*ayfoe*" demonstrates, the Gehenna material is an extraordinarily inventive genre. Whether it is describing the cool tears of teshuvah dousing Gehenna's flames, or Abraham, standing at the entrance re-attaching foreskins on to wicked Jews, the Rabbis paint with evocative, colorful brush strokes about the afterlife.

Although the Midrash and Talmud share similar thematic concerns - God's control of Gehenna, repentance in the afterlife, God's mercy and righteousness - the Midrash explores this material from a lyrical, poetic perspective. In contrast, as this survey proceeds to the talmudic passages, the Rabbis' perspective is, primarily, a sober, practical guide to avoiding punishment in the afterlife. While these passages may, at first glance, appear to be little more than a laundry list of sins that lead to Gehenna, the Rabbis' pragmatic approach sheds light on many important subjects, including their views on God as the judge of each individual, the role of teshuvah in this world, and the relationship, in terms of one's morals and ethics, between this world and the next.

Chapter Four

Analysis of the Talmudic Literature

The Talmud's Gehenna literature is notable for its emphasis on personal behavior. The Rabbis employed Gehenna not as a demonstration of God's ultimate power, but as a symbol of God's desire for moral progress. Gehenna's punishment served to reinforce God's natural order and hierarchy: the divisions between men and women; limitations on sexual behavior, and the strict enforcement of civility and personal moral rectitude. Gehenna is the destination of the conceited, the gossip, the verbal abuser, and those who prey on the weakness of others. Gehenna's fire awaits below as an unpleasant reminder of the rules of civility and consideration.

Even the creation of Gehenna focuses not on God's majesty, but on Gehenna's ultimate purpose: as a severe deterrent against sinful behavior. In Tractate Nedarim, Raba expounds on an oft-cited textual problem: if the biblical verse, in reference to Sheol, says, "*Veim Bereah yivrah adonai*" - "But if the Lord creates a creation,"[1] Raba wonders if Sheol/Gehenna was created at that moment, or at some previous time. He then answers his own question, concluding that Gehenna was one of seven things that were created before the world.[2]

These seven things - Torah, Repentance, the Garden of Eden, Gehenna, the Throne of Glory, the Temple, and the Name of the Messiah[3] - concern humanity's moral and spiritual progress in relationship to God. The Torah is

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[1] This is the beginning of the last verse of Moses' speech just before Korah and his men are swallowed up by the earth, (Numbers 16:30).

[2] Raba's conclusion - that God had created Gehenna prior to the Korah story - is supported by the text. God's new creation is not Gehenna itself. Rather, it is Gehenna's animated presence; its apparent ability to come to life and snatch its victims instead of passively waiting for them to die.

[3] Raba cites prooftexts for each, using words such as "before," "old," or "beginning" for his textual support.

God's supreme law, and Repentance is the recognition that if God's law is not obeyed ("to err is human"), humanity must have an opportunity to repent and try again; the Garden of Eden and Gehenna represent God's carrot and stick, both encouraging morality and discouraging sin; God's Throne of Glory and The Temple, symbolizing that God's kingdom must be established on earth (the Temple) as it is in heaven; and finally the Name of the Messiah, which is God's assurance that paradise will eventually be realized at the End of Days.

Raba's analysis implies that the purpose of creation is humanity's struggle to obey God's laws in order to perfect the world. Gehenna and Gan Eden exist to assist us in our never-ending struggle to be good. If the temptation to sin is too powerful, the potential of Gehenna is there for us to lean on, to help us choose the right path. Thus, the creation of Gehenna is not just God's cosmological answer to wickedness. Rather, it is an example of God's divine pragmatism; a daily, powerful influence on our desire to avoid immoral deeds. In the rabbinic mind, God's priorities and the Rabbis' priorities naturally coincide. Accordingly, Gehenna serves as one of God's prerequisites for humanity's moral progress.[4]

This passage turns up again in Pesachim as part of a larger discussion of God's creation sequence. In a rather lengthy, convoluted argument, the Gemara analyzes a number of conflicting traditions regarding Gehenna's creation. First, Gehenna's cavity (that swallowed up Korah and his men) was one of ten things created on the eve of the Sabbath. Second, Gehenna's fire was created on the eve of the Sabbath.[5] Third, Gehenna was one of the seven things God created prior to the world. Fourth, God created Gehenna's fire on

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4 Nedarim 39b, in The Babylonian Talmud (London: Soncino Press 1935-65). All talmudic citations are from this edition.

5 Gehenna's fire is in addition to the ten things created on the eve of Sabbath. Pesachim 54a.

the second day, when God did not use the phrase, "it was good" to describe His creation.[6]

On the literal level, the Gemara carefully distinguishes between certain aspects of Gehenna in order to reconcile these apparent conflicts. If God created Gehenna (the place) prior to the creation of the world, how could Gehenna be created on the eve of Shabbat? The Rabbis explain that God created Gehenna prior to the world, but the power to open its mouth and swallow Korah occurred on the eve of Shabbat. Then, if God created Gehenna's fire on the second day, how could God create Gehenna's fire on the eve of Shabbat? They explain that on the sixth day (the eve of Shabbat), when God saw that "everything that He had made, and behold it was very good,"[7] God incorporated the fire of Gehenna that He had created on the second day. For the Rabbis, the fire of Gehenna was officially recognized on the eve of Shabbat.[8] Therefore, despite these apparent discrepancies, the teachings surrounding Gehenna's creation are talmudically consistent.[9]

On a more practical level, however, the passage demonstrates more than just the Rabbis' interest in logic and *pilpul*. Although they allege that Gehenna's cavity and fire were created prior to the world (before Creation and on the second day, respectively), their logic leads them to conclude that Gehenna - as an actual fact - came into existence on the eve of Shabbat. Why the emphasis on the eve of Shabbat? Because the Rabbis viewed Gehenna as inextricably linked to man's creation on the sixth day. In the absence of humanity's potential for good or evil, Gehenna had no reason to exist. Thus, the Rabbis conclude that Gehenna's pit and its fire were created on the eve of

6 Pesachim 54a.

7 Genesis 1:31.

8 Pesachim 54a.

9 Logically consistent, that is, within the context and structure of talmudic thought.

Shabbat, coinciding with Adam's creation. Once again, the Talmud's logic is employed in the service of the practical. Gehenna's significance is viewed not in terms of God's creative power, but in terms of its application to humanity's relationship to God: first, as the light of Shabbat, and then, in its power to punish Korah and his followers.[10]

The Talmud, like the midrashim discussed in the previous chapter, also delved into Gehenna's physical dimensions. Its characteristics - location, size, color - were all described in practical, neo-realistic terms. Although the Rabbis' descriptions were certainly fanciful, they were almost always rooted in the reality of their experience and their environment. Gehenna may have been a dangerous, subterranean world, but in describing its particular menace, it usually shared a certain geographic relationship with its earthly and celestial counterparts.

In attempting to calculate Gehenna's actual size, the Rabbis begin with a familiar measurement, the size of Egypt. At 400 *parasangs*[11] square, Egypt is one-sixtieth the size of Ethiopia, which is one-sixtieth the size of the world, which is one-sixtieth the size of Gan Eden, which is one-sixtieth the size of Gehenna.[12] The discussion ends with an analogy that Gehenna is so enormous that the whole world is like a pot lid in relation to it.[13]

In this passage, the Rabbis impart both practical and theological insights. By providing us with statistical comparisons about these places, Gan Eden and Gehenna become as real as Egypt and Ethiopia. Indeed, if Gehenna can be quantified or measured, particularly in comparison with other actual places, it

[10] Although Gehenna's pit was actually created on the eve of Shabbat, its true power was revealed when the earth opened to swallow Korah. Up until then, Gehenna was just a theoretical realm. After Korah, however, its practical impact could no longer be doubted.

[11] A "parasang" is an ancient measurement which is roughly equivalent to "x" number of miles.

[12] Doing the Rabbis' math, Gehenna is 5,184,000,000 square parasangs.

[13] Pesachim 94a.

acquires the factual specificity of something that truly exists. In addition, Gehenna's immense proportions underscores the Rabbis' own biases regarding sin in the world. Gehenna must be sixty times larger than Gan Eden in order to accomodate all of the heathen nations and sinners who will be sent there. For the Rabbis, Gehenna is not just a reality; it positively dwarfs every other measurable place. The world is little more than a "pot lid" compared to how much space is needed to house the wicked.

Gehenna's gates - the places where a person actually enters the netherworld - are also assigned to real, geographic locations. One gate is in the wilderness, where Korah and his men went down alive,[14] one gate is in the sea, where Jonah prayed from the belly of the whale,[15] and the last gate is in Jerusalem, where the Lord's "furnace" symbolizes Gehenna's gate.[16] These prooftexts are employed to show that Gehenna's gates are nearby, accessible, and located in all possible environments. These texts emphasize Gehenna's size and ubiquity, since one may enter through the land (desert), the sea, or the ancient center of the world, Jerusalem. In contrast to the midrash's mythic description of Abraham, guarding Gehenna's gate and re-attaching foreskins to the wicked, the Rabbis' describe a netherworld anchored in geographic proximity, where any place might serve as a point of entrance.[17]

The Gemara, like the Midrash, also describes Gehenna in terms of light and darkness. The wicked in Gehenna are likened to the "beasts of the forest" who creep forth in the darkness of night.[18] Gehenna's wicked must reside in the

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14 Numbers 16:33.

15 "Out of the belly of the nether world cried I and you heard my voice," (Jonah 2:3).

16 "Saith the Lord whose fire is in Zion, and his furnace in Jerusalem," (Isaiah 31:9).

17 Eruvin18b - 19a.

18 Psalm 104:20

blackness of night, while in contrast, God's light shines on the righteous.[19] Despite these typical allusions to the light/darkness dichotomy, Gehenna's immense size influences the quality and appearance of the sun. The Rabbis taught that the sun was red at sunrise and sunset because at sunrise it passed through the roses of Eden, while at sunset it passed through the fire of Gehenna.[20] Although Gehenna's impact occurs at sunset, on the way towards darkness, the relationship between Gehenna and our world [the sun] is established on a daily, ongoing basis.

This theme reaches its zenith, however, in a brief passage that implicates Gehenna's fire as an underground source of heat. In a rather arcane *makhloket*, the Rabbis debate the finer distinctions between objects that are heated by the sun as opposed to objects heated by fire.[21] The Rabbis use the hot springs of Tiberias as an example of the potential for confusion. While the people believed that the springs were heated by the sun, the Rabbis forbade their use because they passed over an entrance to Gehenna, and were heated by its fire. Thus, Gehenna's fire was directly attributed to an earthly process, thereby lending further proof to the belief in Gehenna's actual existence.[22]

Gehenna and Sinful Behavior: Public Speech

The Rabbis' primary interest, with respect to Gehenna, extended far beyond issues of its creation and structure. The Rabbis utilized Gehenna not as a way of explaining or rationalizing apparent injustice, nor as a window into

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19 Baba Mezia 83b

20 Baba Batra 84b. Others taught the opposite; that the sun was red at sunrise because of Gehenna's reflection and red at sunset because of the roses' reflection.

21 Shabbat 39a. The Rabbis are apparently attempting to distinguish between forms of cooking, for purposes of defining what constitutes labor on Shabbat.

22 In a subsequent commentary, Maimonides dismisses the Rabbis contention as utter nonsense. He concludes that the Tiberian springs are hot because they pass a sulpher source. See his Mishnah Commentary, Nega'im 9:1.

God's sense of mercy or vengeance. Rather, Gehenna is employed as a potential deterrent against unwanted, aberrant behavior that, in the Rabbis' view, directly threatens the social order.

The Talmud's interest in discouraging socially maladaptive behavior is hardly surprising. However, one might have thought that the Rabbis would use Gehenna as a punitive threat against graver, more violent transgressions such as murder, rape, theft or assault. But Gehenna is not mentioned at all in association with this kind of misconduct. Perhaps God's punishment was so obligatory for crimes of this sort that a direct reference to Gehenna would have been superfluous. Instead, the Rabbis focus their attention on personal and moral offenses, the sort of behavior that most people today consider relatively innocuous. These sins include: slander, obscenity, idolatry, intermarriage, public humiliation, haughtiness, anger, shaming one's neighbor, adultery, fraternizing with the opposite sex, and masturbation. All of these transgressions resulted in at least a visit to Gehenna, while some warranted a sentence for eternity.

These offenses have one common theme; in one form or another, they constitute a direct threat to the social order. These kinds of sin, if left unchecked, have not only the potential to violate the *halakhah*, but also to destroy the carefully constructed rules of civility and hierarchy that maintain an orderly society. Perhaps the Rabbis understood that the absence of moral authority and social harmony would lead to a further erosion of public trust and responsibility, and the emergence of chaos and anarchy at the expense of law and order.[23]

[23] This debate - between moral relativism and personal responsibility - continues to confound society. On one side,social liberals contend that private, consensual behavior between two adults does not impact on the community and should be viewed as irrelevant. In contrast, social conservatives, echoing the Rabbis' position, argue that adultery or homosexuality are serious offenses that undermine the basic integrity of the social order.

In a communal, close-knit society, where religious, social and professional relations were probably governed by a handshake and one's personal reputation, the Rabbis sought to deter virtually every form of socially provocative behavior. Gehenna was invoked as punishment not only for one's treatment of others, but also as a check on one's internal behavior. These passages demonstrate the Rabbis' obsessive concern with personal rectitude, particularly the values of personal self-control, discipline and discretion. Indeed, the Rabbis' standard of behavior is so lofty that few people, if anyone, would have escaped Gehenna's wrath.

For example, the Gemara explains that any person who loses his temper will be exposed to all the horrors of Gehenna. Citing the prooftext, "Therefore remove anger from thy heart; thus will you put away evil from thy flesh,"[24] the Rabbis use *gezara shava* to equate the word "evil" with "Gehenna."[25] Thus, once anger is removed from the heart, Gehenna is no longer a threat to the flesh. By this usage, Gehenna is no longer an aspect of theodicy - a meaningful response to inexplicable injustice. Rather, it is cited as an all-purpose deterrent against any socially unacceptable behavior.

The Rabbis extend their pragmatic view of Gehenna even further in this passage, equating it with medical ills suffered in this life. In response to anger, the Lord causes abdominal troubles, which lead to a trembling heart, failing of eyes, and sorrow of mind. These medical problems, which cause pain, suffering, and anxiety, are understood to be Gehenna.[26] In the Rabbis' view, Gehenna is more than just the punitive realm of the afterlife; it also represents

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[24] Ecclesiastes 11:10

[25] The second prooftext, Proverbs 16:4, states that "The Lord has made all things for himself; yea even the wicked for the day of evil." Thus, in the Rabbis' view, "evil" can only be understood as Gehenna.

[26] Nedarim 22a, citing Deuteronomy 28:65.

the punitive events of this life in the guise of medical and emotional problems.[27]

In this passage, the Rabbis' expansive view of Gehenna creates certain interpretive ambiguities that are problematic. If a person experiences the torments of Gehenna in this life, will he then be exposed to similar tortures in the afterlife?[28] Is the punishment for losing one's temper merely the negative effects on one's body and mind? If so, one could reasonably conclude that "Gehenna" is a "catch-all" expression for the unpleasant physical or emotional consequences of socially maladaptive behavior. Indeed, losing one's temper may not be a sufficient reason for sending a person to Gehenna in the afterlife. Rather, the punitive effects of "Gehenna" may be nothing more than the kind of pain and suffering that was thought to occur in the realm of Gehenna.

The Rabbis were particularly incensed by personal haughtiness and self-aggrandizement. They believed that the haughty would be brought low, while the humble would be raised up. As evidence for their beliefs, the Rabbis examined God's own humility in speaking with the Israelites. Rather than raising Sinai up to Himself (as He might have done), God caused the Shechinah to come down and dwell amongst the people. Moreover, God might have addressed Moses from one of His own beautiful trees, but instead chose to reveal Himself in an ordinary bush. Indeed, the Rabbis' view of haughtiness and pride is so negative that they conclude that God and a prideful man cannot dwell together.[29] The Rabbis hardly have to stretch a prooftext, however, when Proverbs states directly, "Everyone that is proud in heart is an abomination to

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[27] The Rabbis are, once again, ahead of their time. They determined that anger is a major cause of abdominal problems (ulcers), and can lead to heart disease and depression. The Rabbis intuitively understood that anger and stress had a significant impact on one's overall mental and physical health.

[28] Do the Rabbis have a conceptual understanding of "double jeopardy?"

[29] Citing Psalm 101:5, "him that hath a high look and a proud heart will I not suffer." The Rabbis read this verse as "with him...I cannot dwell."

the Lord."[30]

Based on these texts and examples, the Rabbis conclude that if the haughty and God cannot dwell together, the haughty will be sent down to Gehenna to live in a world where God does not reside. In Baba Batra, it is said that "whosoever is arrogant falls into Gehenna." The text then states that those who depart from the words of Torah [e.g. the arrogant], will fall into Gehenna. "The man that strays out of the way of understanding shall rest in the congregation of the shades."[31] Therefore, arrogance will not only lead to social problems in this life, it will also result in Gehenna's punishment in the afterlife.

The Rabbis reach a similar conclusion in Sotah, but in a slightly more poetic fashion. Playing with the word "*efer*," the Rabbis claim that a man who is haughty will not have his remains - his dust - disturbed at the time of the Resurrection. As proof, they cite, "*Hakitzu viraninu shochnay afar*," "Awake and sing, ye that dwell in the dust." The verse does not say, "Ye that **lie** in the dust," which might imply that everyone who has died will be awakened [resurrected]. Rather, the verse says "dwell in the dust," which the Rabbis interpret as a reference to those who, during their lifetime, dwelled in the dust by their humility.[32] The verse teaches that it is only the humble who will be resurrected, while the arrogant will not enjoy a place in the World to Come.

The Rabbis treat the sin of obscenity - literally "folly of the mouth"[33] - as a sin against both the community and God. In contrast to the haughty individual,

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[30] Proverbs16:5. Interestingly, the Rabbis were not quite as hard on themselves. They understood that as the leaders of the community, they had to have a certain degree of pride and ego in order to exercise authority. They conclude that too much pride is sinful, but that too little pride (at least for them) is just as bad.

[31] Baba Batra 78b-79a, citing Proverbs 21:16. As noted earlier, the shades are Sheol's inhabitants.

[32] Sotah 5a, citing Isaiah 26:19.

[33] In more modern parlance, obscenity would be considered speaking lewdly or sexually in some public manner. See Shabbat 33a.

who is personally tormented by the flames of Gehenna, one who practices obscenity brings about communal suffering. The Gemara explains that as punishment for obscenity, "troubles multiply, cruel decrees are renewed, the youth of Israel dies, and the fatherless and widows cry out and are not answered."[34] This stark, almost plague-like passage, reveals that the Rabbis viewed obscenity as such a breach of community standards that only communal punishment could wipe away the sin. In this instance, Gehenna's wrath is brought into this world, and imposed not only upon the individual sinner, but on the community as well.

The actual miscreant does not get off lightly either. The Gemara teaches that even if the speaker had been sealed for seventy years in the Book of Life, the sin of obscenity would reverse it for evil.[35]

The Rabbis also invoke the more traditional view of Gehenna, sending the lewd one down to the depths of Gehenna. As it is said, "A deep pit is for the mouth [that speaks] perversity."[36] As noted above, the use of "deep pit" language is clearly intended to symbolize Gehenna. Moreover, the Rabbis were not content with just punishing the speaker. Anyone who hears the obscenity and does not protest its use will also end up in Gehenna.[37] Not unlike our modern criminal law, which prosecutes those who know of a crime but do not report it, the Rabbis wished to punish those who heard obscenity but failed to rebuke the speaker. The Rabbis understood that obscene words, in order to offend community norms, had to have an audience. Accordingly, the threat of Gehenna would serve as a sufficient deterrent to anyone who might tolerate obscene language.

[34] Shabbat 33a.
[35] Shabbat 33a.
[36] Proverbs 22:14.
[37] Shabbat 33a.

The sins of speech directed toward others are also treated quite harshly. The Rabbis believed that a person's reputation was his most valued possession, and that any attempt to willfully damage that reputation would result in severe punishment. Indeed, this speech is directly condemned by God. "He who slanders his neighbor in secret I will destroy."[38] The Rabbis explained that such gossip - that is, speaking behind the person's back - is a very grave offense.

First, the Rabbis are particularly offended by the clandestine nature of the speech. By slandering his neighbor in secret, the wrongdoer not only demonstrates his cowardice (he cannot confront his neighbor directly), but also deprives his neighbor of the chance to defend himself. Moreover, a sin performed in secret demonstrates an utter disrespect for God. While public sins are subject to the scrutiny and opprobrium of the community, a sin performed in secret is known only to God. Therefore, a secret slanderer is aware of God's knowledge and disapproval, but still commits the sin. For the Rabbis, the absence of fear and respect for the Lord is particuarly heinous.[39]

Second, the Rabbis declared that such slander is an even graver offense than sins committed in the marketplace. A sin that involves a monetary transaction is at least in the public eye, where the victim will at least know who was responsible for his loss. In the case of secret slander, however, the sullied person is left to fight against ghosts and shadows. In addition, a monetary wrong affects only the victim's pocketbook, which may eventually be restored. For a person's reputation, however, no such remedy is available.[40]

Given the serious consequences of such behavior, the Gemara does not hesitate to condemn it with the most dire of punishments. In a lengthy commentary on

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38 Psalm 101:5

39 The Rabbis cite the passage, "And thou shalt fear thy God" as proof for their belief, (Lev. 25:17).

40 Baba Mezia 58b. As one of my law professors once said, "When it comes to a person's reputation, you can't put the toothpaste back in the tube." In other words, a damaged reputation can never be recovered.

"verbal wrongs," the Gemara explains that putting others to shame must be avoided at all costs. Rav Hanina states that everyone descends into Gehenna except for three sinners. He then clarifies this statement, and explains that everyone descends into Gehenna and then subsequently **re-ascends**, except for three sinners; one who commits adultery with a married woman, one who publicly shames his neighbor, and one who gives his neighbor a disparaging nickname.[41]

But even amongst this group of sins, publicly shaming one neighbor is the gravest offense. The Gemara explains that it is better for a man to live with a woman who may be married[42] than to publicly shame his neighbor. Similarly, even though a man who seduces a married woman is subject to the death penalty, he still has a portion in the World to Come. But the man who publicly shames his neighbor has no portion in the World to Come.[43] Indeed, the Rabbis are so certain of Gehenna's wrath that they declare that it is better for a man to throw himself into a fiery furnace than to publicly shame his neighbor.[44] The Rabbis' logic appears to be that since the sinner will ultimately be sent to the "fiery furnace" (Gehenna), for slandering his neighbor, he should spare his neighbor the humiliation and simply punish himself before his words do any damage.

The Rabbis also clarify the last sin of this group - giving one's neighbor a hurtful nickname. Even though the victim may be accustomed to his nickname, or perhaps not even take offense at the name, it is still a sin that is punished for eternity. The fact that the damages may be less apparent does not vitiate the seriousness of the offense. The harm is not in the damage (or lack of damage) that is caused. It is the intention of seeking to demean someone in a deliberately cruel and public way that must be punished. While the consequences may be mitigated, the sinner's intention remains

41 Baba Mezia 58b.

42 A woman whose divorce is still open to question, (Baba Mezia 59a).

43 Id.

44 Id.

the same.

In this example, the Rabbis demonstrate their acute psychological sensitivity. They recognize that society's outcasts might enjoy the celebrity of a mean-spirited nickname just because of the attention they would otherwise not receive. Regardless of how the victim feels about the nickname, the Rabbis could not tolerate behavior that intentionally humiliated another.

Sexual Relations

Gehenna's wrath was not just limited to unwanted or harmful speech. The Rabbis were very concerned about relations between the sexes, particularly those outside the marriage contract. The prohibitions they established, however, not only precluded inappropriate sexual contact, but also improper [for their culture] relations of any kind. Thus, the Rabbis viewed even the most apparently innocent interaction between a man and a woman as fraught with sexual desire. They understood that if they simply forbade the innocent encounter, then *kal vachomer*, the opportunity for greater intimacy would simply not arise.

The Rabbis' interest in gender relations extended far beyond the Middle Eastern patriarchal culture in which they lived. While the Rabbis surely had an interest in deterring adultery and prostitution, their interest in prohibiting certain kinds of conversation between husband and wife could only be viewed as intrusive. Moreover, each sexual or non-sexual activity that is commented upon takes the sinner one step closer to Gehenna. While masturbation may warrant a severe punishment (perhaps a limited stay in Sheol), the use of Gehenna to deter a man from walking behind his wife, or conversing with her about certain subjects, seems to be the height of folly.[45]

While the Rabbis strongly condemn adultery, they also recognize that not everyone will succeed in battling their fiercest demons. Adultery is classified as one of

[45] In such cases, the Rabbis are trying to kill a gnat with an elephant gun. Could Gehenna be viewed as a serious punishment when it was applied so vigorously to even such minor transgressions?

only three sins for which a man descends to Gehenna, but does not reascend.[46] But this apparent "death penalty" offense is qualified just a few sentences later, when Raba recounts David's explanation to God concerning his own conduct with Bathsheba. David states that although the penalty for adultery is death by strangulation, the adulterer will still have a portion in the World to Come.[47]

The Rabbis' lack of certainty regarding the appropriate punishment may be the result of their own discomfort with sexuality. On the one hand, the marriage covenant had to be maintained as entirely sacrosanct. On the other hand, the Rabbis were quite cognizant of the power of a man's sexual drive. Accordingly, the desire to enforce the social order of marriage and family was tempered by their keen awareness of human (e.g. man's) failings in this area.

Indeed, the Rabbis view of women as both saviour and temptress is a recurring theme of the Gehenna material. In an astounding passage of reverence and misogyny, the Rabbis alternately praise and degrade this utterly foreign, inexplicable creation known as "woman." When a man gets married all of his sins are buried, but a bad wife is as troublesome as a rainy day.[48] And Raba explains that when a man has a bad wife, it is a praiseworthy act to divorce her. But if she is a bad wife with a large dowry, then it is better to correct her behavior by giving her a rival, than to punish her with thorns. Such advice appears to suggest that the threat of another woman will

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[46] The other two sins are shaming one's neighbor and giving someone an unpleasant nickname. Interestingly, the Gemara does not specify whether the man is married. In the example, the man is guilty of adultery, but it isn't clear whether he has cheated on his wife or just the community. We do know, however, that the woman has committed adultery outside the bounds of her marriage. Notwithstanding this information, it is the man who is punished in Gehenna.

[47] The Gemara implies that in David's mind, he did not commit adultery with a married woman because every soldier gave his wife a conditional divorce before going to the front. Therefore, he could make the argument that Bathsheba was not a married woman. See Baba Mezia 59a.

[48] Yevamot 63b.

improve her attitude as a wife.[49]

Perhaps the most blatant contrast of good and evil women is in the Rabbis' direct comparison to Torah and Gehenna. While the good wife is considered as precious as Torah, the bad wife is considered as evil as Gehenna.[50] The allusion to Gehenna, however, is more than just the negative counterpart to Torah. Gehenna implies an evil force that ensnares and tortures, a trap from which there is no escape. Likewise, a woman with a large ketubah - a woman from whom divorce is not realistic - is like an indefinite sentence in Gehenna. "Behold I will bring evil upon them, which they shall not be able to escape."[51] In this unflattering prooftext, the "evil," which is often used as a code word for Gehenna, refers to a woman with a substantial ketubah.

Gehenna was also reserved for those who engaged in sex with a prostitute. The Gemara teaches that Rav Zadok was once called by a prostitute, but he was too tired to have sex. When he asked her for something to eat, she told him the food was unclean. He then asked rhetorically if she offered him *treyf* because he was already a sinner. When she started to prepare the *treyf*, however, Zadok sat on top of the oven (a symbol for Gehenna's fire) to prevent her from cooking. When she asked him why he was doing this, Zadok replied that one who has relations with a prostitute would surely fall into the fire of Gehenna. She then tells him that had she known the punishment was so severe, she would not have tormented him.[52]

Rav Zakok's tale confirms two important points. First, sexual relations with a prostitute is forbidden, immoral, and outside the boundaries of Jewish law. Such activity will surely result in punishment in Gehenna. Second, it appears that Zadok is a

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[49] Yevamot 63b. This counsel suggests that the threat of adultery was preferable to seeking a divorce. Such advice was only applicable, however, when there might be a significant economic loss. Otherwise, divorce was preferable. Such utilitarian advice reinforces the notion of marriage as, first and foremost, a financial arrangement between families.

[50] Yevamot 63b.

[51] Yevamot 63b, citing Jeremiah 11:11

[52] Kiddushin 40a.

victim of the prostitute's sexual wiles. Zadok may be seen as virtuous because he is summoned by the prostitute; he is strong enough to withstand temptation and demurs from any sexual activity; he refuses her *treyf* food, and even sits on the oven [Gehenna] to acknowledge his sin; and the prostitute apologizes to Zadok for tormenting him. Therefore, the tale demonstrates Zadok's strength in resisting a sinful woman's temptations,[53] and that one who does resist such invitations will avoid the fire of Gehenna (at least for that particular sin).

The Rabbis' attitude towards masturbation, however, is unequivocally negative. While adultery and prostitution invoke Gehenna's wrath, these sins also involve temptations, women, and the potential exploitation of fundamental male weaknesses. Thus, the Rabbis' beliefs about these sins may be qualified by other factors. Masturbation, however, cannot be blamed on anyone or anything else. Aside from its purely solipsistic nature, it is also a distraction of one's thoughts from God and a sinful waste of sperm.[54]

The Rabbis considered the sin of masturbation so taboo that they could not wait for Gehenna to punish the transgressor. According to Rabbi Tarfon, a person caught masturbating would have his hand cut off upon his belly. When his students asked if it was appropriate for the punishment to include a split belly, Tarfon replied that it was better to split a man's belly than to have him go down to Gehenna.[55] There was apparently no dispute regarding the amputation.

In contrast to some of the other sins discussed above (temper, obscenity, slander), for which punishment would be imposed (primarily) in Gehenna, the punishment for masturbation was imposed in this world as a way to stave off

[53] Curiously, Zadok appears to be completely absolved of any responsibility for visiting the prostitute. One assumes that he knew who she was and what she wanted. Still, he accepted her invitation and came to her home. Perhaps his acknowledgement of his own complicity is enough to save him from any further punishment.

[54] See Nidah 13b.

[55] Nidah 13b.

punishment in the next one. The real deterrent against masturbation was swift and certain amputation. Gehenna was just a logical back-up response in case the transgressors were not brought to justice. This reversal - actual versus theoretical punishment - shows just how obsessed the Rabbis were with sexual discipline and control. Even though all of the other sins involved the abuse of another, masturbation stands alone as a victimless sin. Nevertheless, the punishment for masturbation stands apart as particularly cruel and disproportionate to the offense. Indeed, just a couple of generations ago in religious circles, hell was still a possible destination for masturbators. For the Rabbis though, the threat of Gehenna didn't carry enough weight. They wanted an actual amputation - which they believed would be the most effective deterrent against this unpardonable sin.

These three sexual sins - adultery, prostitution, and masturbation - all fall outside the boundaries of normative sexual behavior.[56] Therefore, the Rabbis' use of Gehenna as a method of keeping people's sexual behavior within well-defined parameters is not surprising. What is surprising, however, is the Rabbis' use of Gehenna for even the most minor social infractions. In these passages, Gehenna exists not only as an enforcer of sexual norms, but also as an instrument of societal conformity and order.

The Rabbis speak out vehemently against men and women fraternizing together. These kinds of interactions were apparently dangerous because they could have led to inappropriate contact, sexual indiscretions, or other forms of immorality. Thus, when men sing and women join in, it is licentious; but when women sing and men join in, it is even worse because the womens' voices arouse the mens' uncontrolled passions.[57] The latter scenario is also more sinful because the men

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[56] The first two are still considered to be sinful, in both legal and moral circles, while masturbation, though recognized as a form of sexual expression, is a private experience which is often thought of as taboo.
[57] Sotah 48a.

willfully put themselves in a position to listen to womens' voices.[58] For this kind of conduct, the Rabbis declare that "Sheol has enlarged her desire and opened her mouth without measure."[59] In these situations, Gehenna's overwhelming power has been reduced to enforcing a boundary line between male and female voices.[60]

The same is true for enforcing rules concerning a man and woman's conduct during a business transaction, or their proper place while walking on the street. The Gemara explains that a man should never walk behind a woman, even if he is her husband. And the man who crosses a river behind a married woman has no place in the World to Come.[61] In the same vein, a man who counts out money from his hand into a woman's hand, or vice-versa, so that he might have an opportunity to look at her, will be judged in Gehenna.[62] Even if the man has, in all other respects, the character of Moses, the same punishment will apply.

These prohibitions appear to limit a man's opportunity to be a voyeur, either from behind or in front. From the Rabbis' perspective, the fewer times a man looks at a woman, the fewer times his thoughts will turn lustful.[63] Even if the Rabbis are correct in their assessment, the threat of Gehenna's wrath or the denial of a place in the World to Come for these sins seems grossly punitive. At its very worst, a man might be leering at a woman, or perhaps thinking lustful thoughts. But where is the behavior? Is there any negative interaction between a man and a woman that does not result in Gehenna? Is there a possibility of teshuvah or forgiveness? Should one weak

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58 Id.

59 Sotah 48b, citing Isaiah 5:14.

60 I do not wish to be frivolous in the use of these examples. I have no doubt that infractions of the social order were deemed to be serious offenses. Whether Gehenna's wrath should have been invoked as a method of enforcement is a legitimate question.

61 Eruvin 18b.

62 Id.

63 In this instance, the Rabbis appear much less psychologically acute. By limiting the kinds of interactions a man may have with a woman, each encounter becomes fraught with tension and desire. Indeed, it is this sort of minutia that creates an environment of fear and "otherness" that poisons any potential for normalcy between men and women

moment of desire tip the scales to Gehenna? The Rabbis do not say. On the basis of the material, however, the use of such bald threats in this context seems to be little more than moral manipulation.

In addition, by employing Gehenna as a punishment for virtually every sin, it becomes so diluted that it has no practical significance at all. The Gemara teaches that a man who consults with his wife on general or religious matters will descend into Gehenna. The husband who does not, and who only consults his wife concerning household or secular affairs, will be spared.[64] In an attempt to preserve the social hierarchy of the sexes and fundamental marriage dynamics, the Rabbis have moved from a Gehenna that punishes sin and evil to a Gehenna that punishes for poor marital conversation patterns. Such prohibitions virtually assure that every adult will be sent to Gehenna for one offense or another, thereby removing most, if not all, of Gehenna's retributive teeth. Indeed, the Rabbis' invocation of Gehenna for practically any social malady or challenge to the social hierarchy effectively transforms Gehenna from a torturous afterlife environment into a universal waiting area.

If the Rabbis view Gehenna's punishment as part of a larger system of behavioral control, they do not excuse themselves from its power. Indeed, Gehenna's threat serves as a measure of self-control and discipline even for the Rabbis. Gehenna reminds the Rabbis to stay humble and reassures the community that their leaders are not only capable of sin, but also (like them) must work hard to restrain themselves from temptation.

Despite the Rabbis' education and position in the community, they were not afraid to expose themselves in an unflattering light. In the aforementioned story, Rav Zadok is found in the company of a prostitute.[65] In another example, Rav and Rav

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64 Baba Mezia 59a. The Soncino edition notes that this law is not an indictment of the status of women; rather it is an acknowledgement that women are accustomed to dealing with household affairs.

65 Kiddushin 40a.

Judah were walking down a road, when they noticed a woman walking in front of them. Rav said to his companion, "Lift your feet before Gehenna," implying that unless they increased their speed and passed her, they might be tempted to sin and wind up in Gehenna. Rav Judah replied, "But you yourself said that in the case of respectable people it [walking behind a woman] is well." Rav then replied, "Who says that respectable people mean such as you and I."[66]

This story illustrates the Rabbis' belief in the universality of the *yetzer hara*. These two pious, apparently respectable men, are first and foremost, human beings capable of sin. Their self-awareness not only precludes them from assuming a haughty attitude, but also reminds them that sin is always just outside the door waiting for an opening. The story teaches that *kal vachomer*, if the Rabbis must be vigilant in warding off sin, then how much the more so for the rest of the community.

The Rabbis were also not free from jealousy, especially regarding other rabbis. The Gemara tells the story of Rav Zera who emigrated to Palestine and fasted for one hundred days in order to forget the methodology of the Babylonian yeshivot (pilpul and logical argument) and learn the Palestinian method (transmitting the law). He then fasted another one hundred days to prolong the life of Rabbi Eleazar, and then another one hundred days to neutralize the fire of Gehenna. Every thirty days he heated the oven and sat in it, but the oven's flames did not burn him.[67] Then one day the Rabbis cast an evil eye upon him, and his legs were singed by the oven's heat.[68]

In this instance, the Rabbis' evil eye was directed towards a new, foreign rabbi, which apparently caused his legs to be burned. Indeed, the Rabbis' collective envy was so powerful that it actually summoned the flames of Gehenna. In addition, the

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66 Kiddushin 81a.

67 Numbers Rabbah teaches that Korah's men were stirred up in Gehenna and once every thirty days were returned to the spot where the earth swallowed them. Thus, Gehenna's "cycle" was thought to be thirty days.

68 Baba Mezia 85a.

consequences of the Rabbis' actions highlight one of the central tenets of the Talmud's Gehenna tradition: the public humiliation or shaming of a neighbor warrants punishment in Gehenna. In this case, however, the humiliation was so intense that it actually brought forth Gehenna's flames into this world.

The story also illustrates the Rabbis' apparent disdain for the overly pious. Rav Zera's excessive fasting, as well as his obsessive interest in testing his flesh, shows a man more interested in his personal reputation than in gemilut hasidim. Perhaps the Rabbis' evil eye was a comment upon Zera's preference for demonstrating his personal piety. While the Rabbis' conduct was certainly improper, their "evil eye" might also be viewed as a negative commentary on those who arrogantly exalt their personal piety above all others.

This concern for the overly pious is clearly demonstrated in the famous story of Rabbi Simeon and his son, who escaped Roman persecution and lived in a cave for twelve years. Their lives were simple: food and water were plentiful (the miracles of a carob tree and well), and to save on the wear and tear of clothing, they spent the day buried up to their necks in sand. Their only activities were study and prayer. After twelve years, the prophet Elijah came to tell them the king had died and the decree against them had been annulled. When they emerged and saw a man ploughing his field, they were offended by his work and exclaimed, "They forsake life eternal and engage in life temporal." Thereafter, whatever Simeon and his son looked at was immediately extingushed. God then called out, "Have you emerged to destroy My world. Return to your cave." They dwelled in the cave for twelve more months saying, "The punishment of the wicked in Gehenna is twelve months." At the end of this time, they emerged and recognized the ordinary person's commitment to do the mitzvot, and they were relieved.[69]

The story conveys two important rabbinic themes. First, it is a direct attack on

[69] Shabbat 33b.

the overly pious who have chosen to live lives of contemplation and study. While the Rabbis admire devotion to study, it must not be at the expense of engagement in the practical world. The Rabbis valued - as we do today - lives that are based on a commitment to God and the performance of mitzvot. It is, ultimately, a life of action. The life of the pious Jewish monk, disengaged from the world, is hardly the rabbinic ideal.

Second, it reinforces the idea that Gehenna's punishment is to last no more than twelve months. This principle is cited directly in the MIshnah,[70] and is mentioned here as well. For all of the emphasis on Gehenna's punitive role in one's daily life, Gehenna's punishment is limited to just twelve months. Gehenna was not intended as an instrument of eternal punishment. Just as it is treated in the midrashim, its punishment is just one part of a system of repentance that assigns blame, penalizes (appropriately), and forgives. Gehenna is not a vindictive place; it seeks only to teach and prepare the soul for its existence after Gehenna (in whatever form that may be).

Finally, although the Rabbis may have recognized the importance of a practical, ordered, mitzvot-based existence, certain professions, in their view, were like gateways to Gehenna. The Mishnah reviews a list of common professions that should not be taught to a son, including ass-drivers, camel-drivers, wagoners, sailors, or shopkeepers, because all of them lend themselves to robbery.[71] This is particularly true of shopkeepers who claim to be selling pure goods, but who are, in fact, selling an adulterated product. This same criticism is also leveled at butchers, who are so despised that the worthiest is referred to as "Amalek's partner."[72]

The only people, however, who are virtually guaranteed to wind up in Gehenna

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70 Eduyot 4b.

71 Kiddushin 82a. But, in the same Mishnah, another rabbi disagrees, claiming that camel drivers, and most sailors, are worthy men. Given the awe-inspiring nature of the sea and the desert, these men appear closer to God than the others.

72 Butchers are like shopkeepers, only worse, because they knowingly sell impure meat as kosher meat.

are doctors. While the Mishnah does not explain why, Rashi contends that doctors are unafraid of illness, and therefore are haughty before God. He also notes that when doctors err, their actions can be fatal, and when they fail to help the poor, they may indirectly cause someone's death.[73] The Rabbis may have also perceived a challenge to their community leadership, since doctors were believed to have "advanced" views that might not have corresponded with the traditional rabbinic outlook.

Although the Rabbis may have been critical of other, more secular professions, they were also conscious of their own shortcomings in their role as judges. They were aware of their extraordinary power - to sit in judgment over others - and accepted the responsibility with integrity and humility. They understood that their decisions not only affected the litigants before them, but also the community's belief in the legitimacy of the system. Therefore, the Rabbis exercised the utmost care in the discharge of their responsibilities.

Indeed, the Rabbis believed that every time they made a judicial decision, it was as if their life depended on its correctness. In Tractate Sanhedrin, Rav Samuel ben Nahmani said that whenever a judge unjustly confiscated the money of one person and gave it to another (i.e., the judge made an incorrect decision), God would take the judge's life.[74] But for Rav Samuel, even the threat of death was an insufficient burden. He said that when a judge was making his decision, he should always imagine that he had a sword hanging over his head, with the gaping mouth of Gehenna below waiting to swallow him.[75]

In Yevamot, the Rabbis use the same Gehenna imagery, but provide a more detailed explanation of the judge's obligations in formulating a decision. The Rabbis

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[73] Rashi's views are surprisingly modern, as many people today share a basic distrust of the health care profession in general, and doctors in particular.

[74] Sanhedrin 7a.

[75] Sanhedrin 7a - 7b.

caution against making a decision based entirely on the *halakhah*. If, for example, a judge is familiar with a precedent of a similar, prior case, and he refers only to the precedent in making his decision, the Gemara labels the judge as one who "rivets himself to the word of the *halakhah*."[76] Such a decision was thought of as harsh and inflexible, and not considerate enough of the actual circumstances of the litigants.[77] Indeed, the judge who based his decision entirely on precedent, and failed to seek out the guidance and wisdom of his teacher, would surely be sentenced to Gehenna.[78]

Despite all of the Talmud's emphasis on the rule of *halakhah*, the Rabbis' view of justice is obviously much more flexible and nuanced. The judge who has a teacher must seek out his guidance, or otherwise face the wrath of Gehenna. Such a declaration confirms the Rabbis' view of how the truth should be discovered. Precedent is certainly a guide, but precedent alone, will only bring about an unjust verdict. Instead, the judge must consider the special circumstances of the litigants before him, and the uniqueness of their particular case. More importantly though, the judge must seek out his teacher, since it is the teacher who can ultimately provide the greater wisdom.[79]

Although such deference to age and hierarchy was surely an important rabbinic norm, the Rabbis' brand of justice transcends values of respect and authority. The

76 Yevamot 109b.

77 This conflict between precedent and the judge's own view of justice continues to be the single most important debate in the law. As a society based on the words of the Constitution, we look to the text, and to past decisions, as guides for the present. But, judges must also have the flexibility to recognize that changing times or conditions sometimes demand that precedent be overruled. Boiled down to its essence, this is the core dispute between judicial activism and judicial restraint. Of course, the debate itself is a chimera, since those who protest against"judicial activism" are merely complaining about decisions they don't agree with. Perhaps Mordecai Kaplan understood the problem best when he said, "The past has a vote, not a veto."

78 In this passage, Rav Samuel's Gehenna imagery is cited again, only this time, the sword is not hanging over the judge's head, but laying between his thighs.

79 This principle is also reflected in the Gemara's view of the teacher-student relationship. The student must never, upon pain of death, give a legal decision in the presence of his master. Even if the student answers a single halakhic question in the presence of his teacher, the student will be sent down to Sheol childless. The deaths of Nadav and Abihu are attributed to this principle; in the presence of their master, Moses, they brought novel fire to the altar, thus contravening Moses' will, (Eruvin 63a - 63b).

Rabbis' greatest concern was administering justice; that is, making sure the decision was correct. For them, justice was more than just the application of precedent. It had to have the human element, the kind of careful consideration that only years of living and experience can provide. Indeed, the strict application of the law was the pathway to Gehenna. The application of wisdom, principle and discretion was the pathway to justice.

Redemption and the World to Come

The primary focus of the Talmud's Gehenna literature was the documentation of sins that would lead to punishment in the afterlife. In contrast, the Rabbis made only a few references to conduct that might save a person from Gehenna. Just as the Rabbis associated the major sins with Gehenna, likewise good behavior was associated with a place in the World to Come. It appears that the Rabbis were far less interested in redeeming recalcitrant sinners than they were in assuring that good behavior was rewarded.

There is, of course, the typical metaphoric contrast between Torah and Gehenna. God, through the vehicle of Torah, is able to lure sinners (idolators) out of the mouth of Gehenna/death, and into the ways of life/Torah. Such redemption not only delivers a person from the torture of Gehenna, but also provides him with the joy and fulfillment of living according to the ways of Torah.[80] This teaching, however, adds little to what we already know; good conduct, as defined by Torah, will lead away from Gehenna and towards the World to Come. Similarly, if a person fears God - that is, can withstand the afflictions of this world without complaint - he will be delivered from Gehenna's judgment. Accordingly, the one who suffers in silence will be justly rewarded.[81]

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[80] Menachot 99b - 100a.

[81] Yevamot 102b. Clearly God favors those stoic Midwesterners, who endure long winters without even so much as a hint of protest.

The Rabbis also mention specific mitzvot that will deliver a person from Gehenna's punishment. For example, regardless of a man's income, he is obligated to give a share of it to tzedakah. If a man's livelihood is barely enough to support himself, he must still donate a portion to tzedakah. Moreover, even if a man's sole support is from other people's tzedakah, he must still set aside a portion of it for others. Such righteousness will not only deliver a man from Gehenna's clutches, but also save him (at least in theory) from the hardships of poverty.[82]

In the same vein, those who perform the mitzvah of *bikur cholim*, visiting the sick, will be delivered from Gehenna. This refers back to the teaching that those who visit the sick cause him [the sick] to live, while those who do not visit the sick cause him [the sick] to die. This zero-sum analysis derives from a simple axiom: the one who visits the sick - that is, has the sick in mind - prays for the sick person to live. On the contrary, the one who does not visit the sick, and therefore does not have the sick in mind, prays (unwittingly) for the person to die. Thus, the Rabbis teach that those who visit the sick will be saved from the evil of Gehenna. The Gemara also notes that their reward will not just occur in the afterlife. The mitzvah will also redound to the benefit of the person in this world, as the Lord will preserve him, save him from suffering, and prolong his days.[83]

Once again, the Rabbis emphasis for the performance of these mitzvot is not on saving a soul from punishment. Instead, the Rabbis stress the benefits of the good deed itself (tzedakah, visiting the sick), and the rewards that will be realized in this lifetime (an end to poverty, prolonging one's days). While saving a soul from Gehenna is one benefit, it is only one aspect of the deed itself. The Rabbis apparently did not wish to emphasize the performance of the mitzvot as a way to avoid punishment. Rather, the observance of the mitzvot was encouraged as the most efficacious way to

82 Gittin 7a - 7b.

83 Nedarim 40a.

honor God, not as a way to avoid Gehenna.

Perhaps the most interesting passage on this subject is an analysis of the prooftext, "Therefore Sheol has enlarged herself, and opened her mouth without measure."[84] Resh Lakish interpreted this verse to mean that one who leaves even a single mitzvah undone will descend into Gehenna. But an alternative translation notes that if "*chok*" is interpreted as "measure" - one whose evil deeds are balanced out exactly by one's good deeds - than the observance or non-observance of a single mitzvah would tip the scales in favor or against Gehenna.[85] Rav Yohanan then tried to soften the interpretation even further, when he said that one who did not observe even a single mitzvah would be sent to Gehenna.[86]

This passage demonstrates the full spectrum of views concerning the relationship between the observance of mitzvot and Gehenna. While the first interpretation of Resh Lakish's view is certainly untenable (such a high threshold would guarantee that every person would end up in Gehenna), and Rav Yohanan's view is altogether too lenient (Gehenna would only exist for the truly criminal or unrepentant),[87] the middle view is a logical extension of Deuteronomic theology. The awareness that the observance of a single mitzvah might make the difference between reward or punishment in the next world would be a powerful incentive to do just one more mitzvah. Such an approach would surely be consistent with the Rabbis' understanding of Gehenna as an external motivator of moral conduct.

The Rabbis also did not write extensively about the relationship between Gehenna and the World to Come. In their minds, once the Messiah appeared and the

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84 Isaiah 5:14.

85 Sanhedrin 111a, fn. d10.

86 Sanhedrin 111a.

87 Rav Yohanan sounds like he might be comfortable in a classical Reform environment. One could certainly envision a classical Reform rabbi telling his/her congregants that Gehenna surely does not exist, but that even if it does, the observance of a single mitzvah would exempt them from its punishment. Who could worry about a Gehenna with all the firepower of a Hannukah candle?

World to Come was established, the concept/place Gehenna would be superfluous. In Nedarim, Rav Simeon ben Lakish said that when the World to Come arrives there will be no Gehenna, because God will take the sun out of its sheath and the righteous shall be healed by its warmth while the wicked shall be condemned by its heat.[88] Rav Simeon cites the prophet Malachi to prove his assertion. "For behold, the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble; and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the Lord of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch."[89] In the next verse, God delivers the righteous, stating that those, "who fear My name shall the sun of righteousness arise with healing in its wings." [90] The Rabbis envision that once God takes the sun out of its protective sheath, its heat will be so intense that the wicked will quickly be consumed. Thus, it is the sun's heat - not Gehenna's - that will be the wicked's ultimate destroyer. For the Rabbis, when God ushers in the World to Come, He will put an end to all evil, including Gehenna. Accordingly, the question is no longer who will go to Gehenna, but who will have a place in the World to Come.

The Talmud's view concerning an individual sinner's portion in the World to Come remains remarkably obscure. As the thesis noted earlier in this chapter, it is clear that everyone who descends into Gehenna will reascend, except for three categories of sinners: those who commit adultery with married women, those who publicly shame their neighbor, and those who assign a person with a disparaging nickname.[91] Notwithstanding these exceptions, the Gemara immediately qualifies this statement, noting that adulterers still have a place in the World to Come, while those

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88 Nedarim 8b. See also, Avodah Zara 3b, which cites the same passage.
89 Malachi 3:19.
90 Malachi 3:20.
91 Baba Mezia 58b-59a.

that shame their neighbor do not.[92]

The Rabbis' commentary on this subject fails to address several crucial questions regarding the typical sinner's status when Gehenna's punishment has concluded. The Rabbis are clear that Gehenna's sentence will last for a maximum of one year. Moreover, the Rabbis assert that at the conclusion of their punishment, most sinners (with the exception of the aforementioned three categories) will "reascend." To where are these souls reascending? Do they go up to Gan Eden? Do they go back to their graves? Will they have a place in the World to Come?

A *kal vachomer* analysis suggests that if the adulterers have a place in the World to Come, then surely all sinners who serve their sentence and reascend will also have a place in the World to Come. But, such an approach does not provide a solution to the soul's intermediate status: what happens between the time that the sentence in Gehenna ends and the World to Come begins? Are these souls redeemed, and if so, how? Or are they simply in a holding pattern? The Rabbis omit any discussion of this crucial time frame. Indeed, they have not offered us any window into these souls.

The Rabbis do provide commentary, however, on whether past generations will have a place in the World to Come. The sins of our biblical ancestors were, apparently, not as easily forgiven. For example, the generation of the Flood will not enjoy a place in the World to Come. God provided them with a wonderful bounty, but rather than demonstrate their gratitude, they became haughty and filled with pride at their own skills. As a result, when God ushers in the World to Come, and restores the soul to the body, the souls of the flood generation will mourn them from Gehenna.[93] This passage suggests that everyone's soul continues to exist after death, waiting to

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[92] Those who assign an evil nickname are not mentioned again. Logic dictates, however, that they would not have a place in the World to Come, since it involves the same kind of intentional slander as publicly shaming a neighbor.

[93] Sanhedrin 108a.

be reunited with its former bodily host. It also contradicts other passages that prophecy the end of Gehenna at the time of the World to Come.[94]

Rabbi Akiva also declares the same fate for the men of Sodom, the Assembly of Korah, the generation of the wilderness, and the ten lost tribes of Israel. He believes that each group will be denied because of God's anger at their behavior, and because of the applicable prooftexts, which demonstrate their deaths not only in this world, but also in the World to Come. For example, after Moses' spies report on the terror that lies ahead, God's anger will not be contained, and He tells Moses, "I will surely do it unto all this evil congregation that are gathered against me: in this wilderness, they shall be consumed, and there they shall die."[95] The Rabbis assert that, "*yitamu*," (consumed) signifies their death in this world, and "*yamutu*," (die), signifies their death for the World to Come.[96]

Each example that Rabbi Akiva introduces is challenged by Rabbi Eliezer, who believes that in the World to Come, God will restore everyone's soul to their bodies. Eliezer cites the words of Hannah, "The Lord killeth and maketh alive. He bringeth down to the grave and bringeth up."[97] Eliezer's view is that if God is solely responsible for life and death, then God will resurrect all who have died in the World to Come. Rabbi Eliezer's more liberal, compassionate view was not adopted. Apparently, the Rabbis could not accept that such blatant sins against God could still result in a place in the World to Come.

The Rabbis' ultimate concern was the assurance that this world and the World

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94 Of course, the souls in Gehenna might exist for only a very brief period. As the prior passage in Nedarim suggests, the sun's heat may consume these souls at the time of the World to Come.

95 Numbers 14:35.

96 For the Flood, the Rabbis cite Genesis 7:23, "And every living substance was destroyed which was upon the face of the ground," ("destroyed" signifies this world, "face of the ground" signifies the next); for Korah, Numbers 16:33, "and the earth closed upon them; and they perished from among the congregation," ("the earth closed" signifies this world, and "perished" signifies the next). For Sodom, the Rabbis do not cite a specific prooftext.

97 1 Samuel 2:6.

to Come were governed by principles of justice and integrity. Therefore, God was obligated to send the wicked and the unfaithful to Gehenna, and to resurrect only the righteous and/or the repentant for the World to Come. For the Rabbis, the afterlife was not just significant because it ensured that life would go on after death. Rather, it was significant because it was the time when one's behavior was judged by God. God's judgment assured that reward and punishment were based on evidence, and not simply on a whim or caprice. For the Rabbis, life in this world and the World to Come would have been rendered meaningless if everyone, regardless of their wicked deeds or nature, could have shared in its rewards.

Conclusion

The renewed Jewish interest in the afterlife certainly parallels society's obsession with life after death. Perhaps such interest stems from a genuine, logical fear of death; a fear that the sum total of one's experiences - insights, loves, losses, and moments of pure splendor and dread - will simply be extinguished. Indeed, without an afterlife, the deeds of the righteous may simply be lost to the dust and ashes. Likewise, without the prospect of Sheol/Gehenna, the wicked might never have to account for their behavior. A belief in the afterlife - whether it is the *olam haba*, Gehenna, or both - enables one's relationship with God to continue, in one form or another, in perpetuity.

A survey of the Sheol literature reveals that its power and importance is directly related to the historical circumstances of the literature itself. In the Torah, the authors were intent on establishing the covenantal, redemptive relationship between God and the Israelites. The emphasis was on God's divine authority and whether or not the Israelites could live under His rule of law. Accordingly, the deeds of the living assumed paramount importance.

However, when Sheol played an active role in the narrative - as it did in the story of Korah's rebellion - it was portrayed as a realm of condemnation and punishment. Korah and his chief followers were not just executed by one of God's lightning bolts (as the other 250 supporters were). Rather, they were swallowed alive by a rapacious organism, buried alive in an awe-inspiring demonstration of God's wrath and power. This Sheol is an example of God's most vengeful self; an example to anyone who might doubt God's power and authority.

Even in the book of Genesis, where Sheol is shown in its most neutral, non-judgmental light, Jacob is evidently concerned about his fate in the afterlife.

He worries that if his beloved sons, Joseph and Benjamin, were both to predecease him, he might go down to Sheol with "ill fortune." Such language implies that one's experience in Sheol may be affected by what occurs in this life. Therefore, even as early as the Torah, divine judgment may have been a factor in the afterlife schema of the Israelites.

The major themes surrounding Sheol truly begin to emerge in the Prophets and Writings. During the First Temple period - the prelude, the destruction, and the exile - Sheol became a realm of collective punishment for Israel's enemies. For the Prophets, particularly Isaiah and Ezekiel, God's collective punishment of the nations in Sheol was the only possible explanation of how idolaters could triumph over God's people Israel. Indeed, God's sense of divine justice required that the greater the nation's triumph was in this world, the more severe the punishment would be in the next. Divine justice in the afterlife became the lynchpin for reconciling the Jewish people's chosenness with the triumph of their idolatrous enemies over them.

This divine collective judgment stands in marked contrast to the Writings, where morality and individual freedom largely determine one's personal fate. Thus, particularly in Psalms, Job, and Ecclesiastes, the authors' fear of death and abandonment provide a view of Sheol as a repository for God's collective and individual moral judgments. If God had the power to punish nations collectively for conquering Israel, then *kal vachomer*, surely God had the power to punish wicked individuals whose lives had been triumphant over the righteous.

As Judaism transformed from the biblical period to the rabbinic period, the Rabbis' portrait of Gehenna suggested that it had lost much of its menacing grandeur. While the midrash described Gehenna as a universe so large that

the earth was like a small pot in comparison, the Talmud described Gehenna as the appropriate punishment for adultery. While the midrash described Gehenna's inmates alternating between months of roasting in the heat and months freezing in the snow, the Talmud described Gehenna as the destination for those who lost their tempers. How did God's demonstration of divine power and justice transform into a simple deterrent against communal transgressions? Did Gehenna really exist for the Rabbis? Was it a place where the wicked were sent to suffer through God's punishment? Or did they believe that Gehenna was little more than a symbol for the maintenance of social order?

In the Rabbis' discussion regarding the collective punishment of Israel's enemies, Gehenna certainly appears to be a real place. Gehenna is an expression of God's divine justice: it assures that the righteous who suffer in this world will receive a commensurate reward in the next; conversely, if the wicked are rewarded in this world, they will receive commensurate punishment in Gehenna. Israel's enemies - who reject Torah, who persist in idolatry, who concern themselves with power, ego and control over others - must surely be punished in Gehenna. The outright disavowal of God, coupled with the enemy nation's success in subduing Israel in this world, require that they receive their comeuppance in the next world.

Moreover, such punishment in Gehenna is not limited to Israel's enemies. Many biblical generations, including Noah's, Sodom's, the wilderness, and the ten lost tribes, were sent down to Gehenna and denied a place in the world to come. Despite their association with Israel, these men behaved in haughty or idolatrous ways, and accordingly, were punished in Sheol. The more difficult question is, how do we account for those who are judged and found wanting on an individual basis?

The Rabbis believed that just as every positive act would ultimately be rewarded in this world or the world to come, likewise every negative act would ultimately be punished either in this world or in Gehenna. Accordingly, if the righteous suffer in this world for a few transgressions, they have already been punished and may move on to the next world with a clean slate. But, if the wicked are rewarded in this world despite their transgressions, they must be punished for them in the next world.[1] This approach enables the Rabbis to explain why righteous individuals in this world suffer while questionable characters succeed.

More importantly, however, such a theodicy explains why the Rabbis truly believed that Gehenna's punishment was applicable to even the tiniest moral infractions. The Rabbis presumed that the aforementioned social sins - haughtiness, slander, public shaming of one's neighbor, etc. - might lead to an unfair advantage or an unjust reward. Even if the wicked did receive such a reward, Gehenna assured they would be punished in the next world. Regardless of the infraction, every negative act, without exception, counted against the sinner in the world to come.[2] Accordingly, the trivial nature of the sin does not affect divine judgment. What matters is that God judges the sin and counts it against the sinner in the next world.

Perhaps the Rabbis' most significant contribution to Gehenna's theology is the importance of repentance in the rabbinic system. In contrast to the apocryphal texts which sentenced sinners to Sheol for eternity, and to Christian texts which did the same, the Rabbis believed that with very few exceptions, punishment in Gehenna would be limited to no more than twelve months. The emphasis is not on the flames of punishment, but rather on the sinner's

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[1] See Rabbi Akiva's summation of this principle in Genesis Rabbah 33:1.

[2] David Sofian, Entry into the World to Come, (Unpublished HUC Thesis, 1977), 22.

teshuvah. Instead of imposing punishment in order to inflict cruelty and suffering, Gehenna's punishment is regenerative in nature. It is designed to purify the soul, to assure that the soul is ready to move on to the next phase of its journey, whatever that may be.

While most modern, liberal Jews would, in all likelihood, dismiss Sheol as a fantastical medieval concept, the Rabbis' teachings remain as extraordinary lessons of mercy and compassion. Tne Rabbis did not believe in punishment for the sake of punishment; rather, an average stay in Gehenna was designed to be morally rehabilitative. The Rabbis understood that God was more than capable of redeeming a sinner from Gehenna, and that a sinner who did *teshuvah*, who turned back to God, would surely have a place in the World to Come. Indeed, in our best moments, we share the Rabbis ultimate goal: to live as righteous men and women in accordance with Torah, and to eliminate any need for Gehenna's existence in fact or theory.

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