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FROM THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE TO THE DIVINE KISS: THE NECESSITY OF DEATH AS VIEWED BY THE RABBINIC SOURCES

The goal of this research project is to create a composite picture of the rabbinic view of the necessity of death by examining the view of the origin of death, the finitude of human life, the expected human life span, and the failure to reach the expected human life span. This examination is limited to the generic aspect of death.

The approach of creating a composite picture of the rabbinic view of the necessity of death is the only reasonable approach as the rabbinic period does not present a singular systematic theology. Rather, themes develop throughout the sources, meaning the two Talmuds and the collections of midrashim. For the goal of this research project, the use of midrashim has been limited to collections from the early rabbinic period through the early Middle Ages.

The composite picture of the necessity of death has been created by executing a systematic search starting in the Bible and proceeding to the rabbinic sources. The composite picture is shaped around the framework of specific issues raised about the finitude of life and the nature of humanity. The methodology has been to select specific phrases in the Bible that address the above mentioned facets of death. These phrases are rich and controversial in their own right. Therefore, it was expected that the rabbis produced much addressing these phrases and their impact on defining the necessity of death. The material is presented in 13 chapters.

FROM THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE TO THE DIVINE KISS: THE NECESSITY OF DEATH AS VIEWED BY THE RABBINIC SOURCES

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for Ordination

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When a person is born . . . it is not known what he will be like when grown and what his deeds will be - whether righteous or wicked, good or evil. When he dies, however, if he departs with a good name and leaves the world in peace, people should rejoice.

- Exodus Rabbah 48:1

To Leonard C. Zamore (1934-1985)

CONTENTS

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I. Introduction

The issue of death, its necessity, and related questions are certainly intellectually and emotionally challenging. While the goal of any thesis must be to explore a broad selection of Jewish texts, comprehend and present them, this research project was designed to allow me to confront an issue that represents a great challenge to me both as rabbi and Jew.

Death, of course, defines life by its function of limiting life. However, death also shapes the living as they experience it through personal brushes with death or through outliving loved ones. Even in my limited years in the role of student rabbi, it is evident that Jews need and want to know their religion's response to the questions of death. Therefore, the opportunity to explore Judaism's view of death was an opportunity to strengthen my rabbinate. This project also had a personal motivation. As I explored the questions of death, I often thought of my father, his long battle with cancer and his early death.

II. The Goal of this Research Project

The goal of this research project is to create a composite picture of the rabbinic view of the necessity of death by examining the view of the origin of death, the finitude of human life, the expected human life span, and the failure to reach the expected human life span. This examination is limited to the generic aspect of death. It does not seek to trace the rabbinic view of specific deaths, such as Abraham or Moses' deaths. However, specific cases are referred to when illustrating the generic issues.

The approach of creating a composite picture of the rabbinic view of the necessity of death is the only reasonable approach as the rabbinic period does not present a singular systematic theology, as discussed below. Rather, themes develop throughout the sources, meaning the two Talmuds and the collections of midrashim. For the goal of this research project, the use of midrashim has been limited to collections from the early rabbinic period through the early Middle Ages. The dates of all the collections are noted throughout this paper.

The composite picture of the necessity of death has been created by executing a systematic search starting in the Bible and proceeding to the rabbinic sources. The composite picture is shaped around the framework of specific issues raised about the finitude of life and the nature of humanity. Certainly, the issue of the necessity of death raises a number of questions, including: Was man created to die? Was death introduced as a punishment for transgression? Was this transgression one specific act that permanently brought

death to the human condition? Will death cease when humanity ceases to sin? If the human condition includes death, what is the expected life span? Why are there variations in the expected life span? This is the difficult question of premature death.

The methodology has been to select specific phrases in the Bible that address the above mentioned facets of death. These phrases are rich and controversial in their own right. Therefore, it was expected that the rabbis produced much addressing these phrases and their impact on defining the necessity of death. The phrases מות תמות and עפר תשוב (Genesis 2:17 and 3:19) were chosen to focus on the introduction of the concept of death in the creation narrative; מה קצי (Job 6:11) and הודיעני ה' קצי (Psalm 39:5) to establish the expectation of a finite life span; ימי שנותינו (Psalm 90:10) to define the length of the human life span and to establish and explain variations in that life span; and והיו ימיו מאה ועשרים שנה (Genesis 6:3) to provide a contrast with ימי שנותינו.

Together the six biblical phrases and the rabbinic texts that refer to them create a picture of the rabbinic view of death and its role in the Divine economy. Death, of course, inevitably defines life. While this is not a primary goal of this thesis, it would be rewarding to uncover a glimpse of the rabbinic view of living within a limited time frame. The post-Sadducean rabbis believed in resurrection of the dead and, therefore, the span of one's life was not viewed as being totally limited. Still, the discussion of death, its necessity, and the human condition, including mortality, is relevant and multifaceted.

III. An Overview of the Research

Before presenting the texts and the composite picture that they produce, it is appropriate to give an overview of the research, for this thesis is as much about the process of research as its results.

The biblical verses used to generate a search throughout the rabbinic sources were compiled in a variety of ways. The majority of verses were obvious choices. Clearly, any question about the nature of death is rooted in basic questions about the creation of man. Therefore, it was inevitable to turn to the creation narrative to examine the introduction of death to the creation of humanity, represented by the phrases מות תמות and עפר תשוב (Genesis 2:17 and 3:19).

Establishing the introduction of death to the human condition is only part of the question of the necessity of death. It is also necessary to examine the finitude of the human life span. This was approached using two methods. The first was to examine the term קץ which when applied to the human life span implies that humanity is given a predetermined, fixed life span. מה קצי (Job 6:11) and קצי הודיעני ה' (Psalm 39:5) were chosen after a thorough examination of the term קץ in the Bible. The other method was to examine verses in the Bible that refer to a specific number of expected years in the human life span. An expanded discussion of the קץ term, its biblical and rabbinic use, can be found below.

Any discussion of the finite end of life must clearly include an examination of those biblical verses that apply a number to the human life span. Therefore, it was essential to examine שמונים שנה

ימי שנותינו בהם שבעים שנה ואם בגבורת (Psalm 90:10) and ועשרים שנה והיו ימיו מאה (Genesis 6:3). The term בגבורת in Psalm 90:10 is problematic, because its context does not help define it. While it is clear that this term means strength, it is not clear what type of strength one must have. Is it an attribute given by God or is it something to which men can strive? Is it a physical or spiritual attribute? Is it the ability to resist transgressing? There are few rabbinic texts that seek to define this term.

It was anticipated that defining the length of the human life span would lead to discussions in the rabbinic sources explaining variations in the life span. Premature death is often the most painful and thought provoking case. The questions of the necessity of death would be incomplete without consideration of this aspect of death.

While the bulk of the rabbinic texts examined address the six biblical phrases discussed above, a number of texts are cited that address the core issues of death, but do not address the biblical phrases. These texts attract attention because they provide rich and challenging comments. They have been culled from numerous sources.

A number of different indices and approaches were used to find the rabbinic texts that addressed the biblical verses mentioned above. No one approach or index produced a complete search. Surprisingly, the printed indices were just as important as the newer CD-ROM indices. In order to produce a complete search, it was essential to use all the indices possible, searching by phrase, verse, and topic. *Torah Shelamah* has supplied a brief survey of various interpretations of the Genesis verses. It is particularly helpful in

providing a broad range of texts from different time periods. The Soncino indices to the English editions of the Babylonian Talmud and Midrash Rabbah, using both verse and topic searches, were limited, but helpful. The Hebrew index *Torah HaKetuvah v'HaMesurah* has provided some resources, too. Finally, the most fruitful resource was a CD-ROM search, using Bar-Ilan University's *The Responsa Project.* It provided an amazing number of sources in seconds. However, it is not perfect. One must search by verse and phrase to find all possible references. The old fashioned hard copy indices provided references not found through the CD-ROM search.

The articles addressing death in the major encyclopedias, *Encyclopedia Judaica, Anchor Bible Dictionary, Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible,* have provided an overview of the topic, referring to significant terms and leading to other resources. Unfortunately, *Encyclopedia Talmudit* does not have an entry on מות, as the collection is incomplete at this time and does not cover the letter מ. A search of its index uncovered limited material useful for this thesis. The article on מות in *Encyclopedia Mikrait* was reviewed.

Barton Shallat's 1966 rabbinic thesis "Rabbinic Attitudes Towards Death" and Henry Bamberger's 1971 D.H.L. dissertation "The Meaning of Death in the Rabbinic Literature" provided useful models. George Foot Moore's *Judaism* and Urbach's *The Sages* also provided much thought provoking material. It must be noted that each time a secondary source revealed a useful primary source, the primary source was reviewed directly. However, the secondary source is appropriately credited in a footnote, explaining "as found in . . . ."

A few notes on the translations used throughout this thesis must be made. Unless a good standard translation was not available, translations were consistently taken from a handful of resources. In a limited number of cases, I have translated the texts. Otherwise, the Soncino translations to the Babylonian Talmud and Midrash Rabbah have been used. Other midrash collections are footnoted appropriately. The Hebrew and English biblical quotations are pasted into this document from the Davka Judaic Classics CD-ROM Library. The Hebrew biblical quotations use the sefer-regular font; other Hebrew in this thesis appears in the Hebraica font.

IV. קץ in the Bible and Rabbinic Sources

קץ attracted attention because of its use in the prominent High Holiday prayer *Unetaneh Tokef.* This prayer declares "ומי לא בקצו מי בקצו". Here קץ clearly refers to the end of an individual's life, as the prayer states that God will determine who in the coming year will be born and who will die[1] -- "מי יחיה ומי ימות". A secondary goal of this paper was to uncover a connection between the use of קץ in *Unetaneh Tokef* and its use in the Bible. While קץ is a common word found throughout the Bible, it is not usually used in the Bible to refer to the end of a singular life or death in the personal sense.

The examination of the term קץ began with the entries קץ, קצץ and קצה in Brown, Driver, and Briggs' *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament.* The Lisowsky and Even-Shoshan concordances provided a thorough search of these roots. Throughout the Bible קץ is used to communicate having a quantitative end. This is applied is several ways. קץ can mean physical end, as in "הַמַּטֶּה אֲשֶׁר בְּיָדוֹ וַיִּשְׁלַח אֶת־קְצֵה" (1 Samuel 14:27) or it can refer to a temporal end. In the Bible קץ usually refers to two types of temporal ends. The first being the end of a normal, countable length of time, as in "הַתֵּבָה וַיְהִי מִקֵּץ אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם וַיִּפְתַּח נֹחַ אֶת־חַלּוֹן" (Genesis 8:6). The second usage refers to the ultimate end of time, meaning the end of history, as in "אֱמֹר אֱלֹהִים לְנֹחַ קֵץ כָּל־בָּשָׂר בָּא לְפָנַי כִּי־מָלְאָה הָאָרֶץ חָמָס מִפְּנֵיהֶם" (Genesis 6:13) or "הַשְׁמִיעַ אֶל־קְצֵה הָאָרֶץ אִמְרוּ לְבַת־צִיּוֹן הִנֵּה יִשְׁעֵךְ בָּא הִנֵּה יְהוָה" (Isaiah 62:11).

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[1]My translation.

Only Job 6:11 and Psalm 39:5 point to the use of קֵץ as meaning the end of a personal life, in the same manner that it is used in *Unetaneh Tokef.* The Psalms verse is inarguably referring to death. A sufferer, traditionally believed to be David, can no longer take his pain and finally asks God, "יְהוָה קִצִּי וּמִדַּת יָמַי מַה־הִיא אֵדְעָה מֶה־חָדֵל אָנִי הוֹדִיעֵנִי" (Psalm 39:5). Conveniently, the phrase "יְהוָה קִצִּי וּמִדַּת יָמַי מַה־הִיא הוֹדִיעֵנִי" is parallel to the second part of the sentence "and the measure of my days, what it is?" As the sufferer inquires about the end of his life, he continues to describe the finitude of the human life span in comparison to God's timelessness, saying, "Behold, you have made my days like handbreadths; and my age is nothing before you" (v. 6). קֵץ emphasizes the limited nature of the human life.

Unfortunately, the Job 6:11 reference is not as clear as Psalm 39:5. The use of קֵץ in Job can be interpreted as referring to Job's individual death, but it may also be interpreted as referring to the end of his suffering. The context of the chapter does not completely clarify the use of the term. Throughout chapter 6 an exacerbated Job cries out for an end to his pain and suffering. Job seems to equate death with an end to suffering. He is clearly not suicidal; he does not contemplate bringing on death by his own hand. Rather, Job views death as being under God's control. Job can only petition God to hasten his end. Throughout chapter 6 Job refers to a finite life, one that has a quantitative length and definite end. More than anything, Job wants an end to his suffering. A valid interpretation of this section would include the view that death is the only definite end for Job, since even Job's sleep that potentially gives a respite

from suffering is interrupted by nightmares. Therefore, קֵץ can be defined as death in Job 6:11.

The rabbinic use of Job 6:11 is limited to two midrashim, two of which use the same text. Found in Pesikta De-Rab Kahana,[2] Parashat 5, and Midrash Tanhuma,[3] *Bo* 8, this circulated text does not discuss death. Rather, the Job verse is used to refer to the redemption from slavery in Egypt. The Israelites waiting to be released from Egypt approach Moses using the words of Job to express their impatience and discontent, declaring they do not have the strength to wait any longer. God answers their words with the declaration that the redemption from Egypt will be in that very month. While these midrashim retain Job's sense of release from suffering, they interpret the term קֵץ as redemption from suffering, i.e., being freed from Egypt. Death is not discussed.

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[2]Homiletic midrash redacted around the 4/5th centuries (H.L. Strack and G. Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash.* Translated by Markus Bockmuehl. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).323).

[3]Homiletic midrash redacted around the 6/7th centuries (Strack and Stemberger, 323).

V. An Overview of Death in the Bible

Before presenting the data, it is useful to discuss briefly an overview of the general presentation of theology, as well as the particular presentation of death, found in the Bible and the rabbinic period. The discussion of the rabbinic period will emphasize the Talmud. First, it is time to turn to the discussion of the Bible.

The key theological concern of the Bible is the sovereignty of God. Presenting the all-pervading presence of God, the Bible depicts God involved in the dealings of man. Yet, the Bible contains no systematic treatment of theological problems. It presents no concrete theological belief system, nor makes theological speculations as to God's true nature.[4]

Basic to the Bible is the belief that God has absolute power over both life and death. In fact, life is often depicted as a gift from God. This is the view of the creation narratives, as represented by Gen. 2:7: "עָפָר מִן־הָאֲדָמָה וַיִּפַּח בְּאַפָּיו נִשְׁמַת חַיִּים וַיְהִי הָאָדָם לְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה" וַיִּיצֶר יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul."[5] Creator and giver of life, God is also depicted as the one who sustains and preserves life. In Neh. 9:6 God preserves the whole of creation, while in Ps. 33:19 God keeps alive in famine those who fear God.[6] Life is given to man through the spirit

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[4]Louis Jacobs, "Theology," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Vol. 15, (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House)1104-1105.

[5]Michael A. Knibb, "Life and Death in the Old Testament," in *The World of Ancient Israel*, ed. R.E. Clements (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 395.

[6]Knibb, "Life and Death in the Old Testament," 396.

or breath of God. These two, spirit and breath, are used virtually synonymously.[7] The withdrawal of this spirit or breath by God brings on death, as seen in Ps. 104:29 "רוּחָם יִגְוָעוּן וְאֶל־עֲפָרָם יְשׁוּבוּן תִּסֹּף When you take away their breath, they die, and return to their dust."[8]

While Gen. 2:17 clearly prescribes death as a punishment for eating of the tree of knowledge, nowhere in the Bible is it stated that man was created immortal and then lost his immortality due to transgression.[9] Depicting death as the inevitable fate of all, Gen. 3:17-19 presents death as marking the end of man's toil on earth, not as prescribing a punishment. Yet, the implications of Gen. 3:22, 24, referring to the tree of life that might have given man immortality, is that man did not at the time possess it.[10]

A variety of attitudes towards death are presented throughout the Bible. They include mere acknowledgment of death as the fate of all mankind (Job 5:26; 2 Sam. 19:34-7). Acceptance of death often occurs when death is in old age (Gen. 25:8). Reversely, fear of death is also present in the Bible (1 Sam. 19:11-12; Num. 16:34). Described as a destructive force, death at times seems to have an independent power (Jer. 9:20).[11] Yet, sometimes death is longed for when faced with a difficult life (Eccl. 2:12-18). The Bible often views sudden or premature death as divine punishment, yet, outside of

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[7]Knibb, "Life and Death in the Old Testament," 398.
[8]Knibb, "Life and Death in the Old Testament," 398.
[9]Knibb, "Life and Death in the Old Testament," 402.
[10]Knibb, "Life and Death in the Old Testament," 402.
[11]*Entzyklopedia Mikrait* (Encyclopaedia Biblica), ed. U.M.D. Cassuto, s.v. "מיתה," (Bialik Institute Jerusalem, 1950) 755.

Gen. 2-3, mortality is not attributed to transgression.[12] Premature death includes dying in the prime of life (Isa. 38:10) or dying before procreating (II Sam. 18:18).[13] A "good death" is depicted as dying leaving behind many children and reaching an advanced age (Gen. 25:8; 46:30).[14]

The Bible pronounces several different ages as the predetermined life span implying that death is an inevitable part of creation. Yet, old age is often not the cause of death. Abraham is described as dying " . . . at a good ripe age, old and contented" (Genesis 25:8).[15] Moses' death is clearly not the result of old age and deterioration, rather "his eyes were undimmed and his vigor unabated." Moses responded, as it were, to the divine summons "ascend this mountain and die" (Dt. 32:50) It is "not death itself, but incompletion [that] haunts the man who has reached his life's limits."[16]

James Ponet points out that the Hebrew Bible is "saturated with the consciousness of mortality."[17] While death is directly introduced in the second creation narrative, the first creation narrative demonstrates the principles of time and limitation. The fulfillment of creation is rest and reflection on what has been created. Ponet

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[12]Knibb, "Life and Death in the Old Testament," 402-403.
[13]E. Jacob, "Death," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962) 802.
[14]Charles A. Kennedy, "Death," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, vol. 12 (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 109.
[15]Neil Gillman, *The Death of Death*. Manuscript. (Forthcoming, Jewish Lights, March 1997) 13.
[16]James E. Ponet, "Reflections on Mortality from a Jewish Point of View," in *Facing Death: Where Culture, Religion, and Medicine Meet*, Spiro, Curnen, and Wandel, eds. (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1996) 131-132.
[17]Ponet, 129.

argues that God's reflection on creation is proof that decay and decomposition are natural to the creation narrative. He points to a midrash in Genesis Rabbah 9:4 in which God, like the father of a bride, gazes at the world and thinks -- would that you could always be as beautiful to Me as you are at this moment.[18] This, of course, contradicts the assumption that death is a punishment, as Genesis 2-3 may be interpreted. (Genesis Rabbah is an exegetical collection dated around 450 C.E.)[19]

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[18]Ponet, 129.
[19]Strack and Stemberger, 304.

VI. An Overview of Death in the Rabbinic Period

Like the theology of the Bible, the theology of the rabbinic period does not resemble the philosophical thinking of the Greek tradition. Addressing the difficult nature of rabbinic theology, Louis Jacobs suggests, "One must always be aware of the rough and ready spontaneous nature of rabbinic thinking and guard against imposing on the sources a system that is basically alien to them."[20] Max Kadushin, in the *Rabbinic Mind*, emphasizes the extreme difficulty of distinguishing between authentic rabbinic dogma and the mere operation of concepts as a dynamic exercise. It is tempting even to claim that there is not a rabbinic theology.[21] Yet, the rabbis were concerned with theological questions and it is possible to isolate their theology. Perhaps, the method of presenting a composite of these themes, "a series of closely interconnected doctrines,"[22] is the best approach for capturing the rabbinic theology.

Several new theological ideas emerged in the rabbinic period, while older ones strengthen. Although rabbinic Judaism emphasizes the value of this world, it also develops the concepts of eternal life and salvation in the world to come. Eternal life naturally creates a contrast with the fleeting nature of this world.[23] The biblical doctrines of sin and repentance grow into the doctrine of the two human inclinations --*yetzer ha-ra* and *yetzer ha-tov*. A portal to the

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[20]Jacobs, "Theology," 1105.
[21]Jacobs, "Theology," 1105-6
[22]*Encyclopedia Judaica*, s.v. "Death - in Talmud and Midrash," (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House) 1422-23.
[23]Jacobs, "Theology," 1105

world to come, death is viewed as a transformative moment. One's fate in the world to come rests on one's acts in this world. Therefore, following the *mitzvot* has significant purpose.[24]

Rabbinic Judaism seeks to reconcile human beings to their mortality. In the tradition of the biblical approach to death, the rabbinic sources often present one's death as a deserved punishment. Even if every death is not directly connected to individual transgression, "still it is possible, in the spirit of 'visiting the sins of the fathers upon the children' (Ex 20), to construe each death as a derivative punishment, yet another echo of Adam's betrayal."[25]

Another, more subtle, approach is to construe death as expiation or atonement. According to the Talmud (BT, Sanhedrin 43a), these words are to be sought, if possible, from the criminal convicted of a capital offense before execution, "May my death be an atonement for all of my sins." It should be noted that these words are also part of the voluntary deathbed confession. While regular repentance can atone for most transgressions, some transgressions can be transformed by death. Of course, atonement is different from escaping punishment.

In BT, Yoma 86b R. Samuel b. Nahmani said in the name of R. Jonathan: "Great is repentance, it prolongs the years of a man." In this situation repentance extends the life span. In other cases, however, repentance does not mitigate punishment, including the death penalty. Rather, acts of repentance bring atonement that affects one's status in the world to come. Death itself is considered to

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[24]EJ, "Death," 1423.
[25]Ponet, 134.

be an atoning act for the most grievous crime. If a man has been sentenced to extirpation or death through the Bet Din (BT, Yoma 86a)-- כריתות ומיתות בית דין ועשה תשובה: תשובה ויום הכפורים תולין עבר על-- then repentance and the Day of Atonement suspend [the punishment thereon] and suffering finishes the atonement. However, one can not gain atonement for profaning God's name through regular repentance, the Day of Atonement, or suffering. Only death brings atonement (BT, Yoma 86a).

Even righteous men can die redemptive deaths to atone for their inevitable sins. These are described as dying from bowel illness in BT, Shabbat 118b.[26] The pain and suffering involved in their illness and death brings redemption.

Rabbinic Judaism distinguishes between a good death and a bad death. The rabbis analyze the age of death, as well as the length of time dying. The rabbinic texts recognize that dying suddenly at a young age is a jarring and painful experience, while dying suddenly at an advanced age can be a blessing.[27] The rabbis outlined 903 different forms of death, ranging from the most severe, dying of croup, to the most favorable, dying by the Divine kiss (Ber. 8a; BB 17a). The later type of death, the kiss, is the death of the righteous; it is described as being as gentle as a hair being drawn from a glass of milk.[28]

There is some dispute among the rabbis concerning the necessity of death. Producing a spectrum of responses, the

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[26]EJ, "Death," 1424.
[27]Ponet 134.
[28]EJ, "Death," 1423.

discussion is usually dependent on the interpretation of Adam's actions in Eden. Genesis 2-3 is often interpreted as Adam's sin having brought death upon humanity. The discussion sometimes points to a second chance given to Israel at Sinai to overturn the decree of death. The sin of the golden calf seals man's fate (Mekh., *Ba-Hodesh* 9; Ex. R. 32:1; Num. R. 9:45).[29] Many scholars interpret the Amoraic emphasis on individual sin as an apologetic rejection of the Pauline doctrine of original sin.[30]

Generally accepted is the view that death is the product of individual sin. As Shabbat 55a declares, "There is no death without sin." Even Moses and Aaron died, because they sinned (Shabbat 55b). However, Elijah who is truly righteous and sinless did not really die (Lev. R. 27:4).[31] Another approach is to blame the death of the righteous on the snake, Adam, Eve and the events in the Garden of Eden. They brought irreversible death to the world.[32] Those who hold this view "maintain that death is not dependent on sin, but the impact of the original passage [Gen. 2-3] is unclear."[33] Urbach in *The Sages* argues this point fully.[34]

In the Tannaitic period, death was viewed as inevitable, a natural part of creation. R. Meir's comment that death is good (Gen. R. 9:5) demonstrates this view.[35] The belief that the Angel of Death

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[29]EJ, "Death," 1424.
[30]EJ, "Death," 1425.
[31]EJ, "Death," 1424.
[32]EJ, "Death," 1424.
[33]EJ, "Death," 1424.
[34]Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, Translated by Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: At the Magnes Press, 1975) 430-432.
[35]EJ, "Death," 1424.

was created on the first day of creation (Tanhuma, *Va-Yeshev* 4) also contributes to the view that death is an integral part of creation. [36] An elaboration on this view is that sin hastens death, but does not cause its existence. A righteous man will either live to or exceed the predetermined life span (Shab. 156b).

[36]EJ, "Death," 1424.

VII. A Presentation of the Primary Source Material: The Rabbinic Texts Address the Six Biblical Verses

It is now time to turn to the primary sources. The following chapters present the rabbinic texts that react to the six specific biblical verses outlined above. The texts have been organized in order to emphasize their themes. They provide theological responses to the questions of the necessity of death including: the nature of humanity's creation, the impact of the Genesis 2-3 narrative on the mortality of humanity, the role of sin in death, the length of the human life span, and the reason for premature death.

This material is presented over several chapters: "Humanity was Created to Die," "Death is a Punishment for Transgression," "God is Compassionate," "Death Comes at a Fixed Time," and "Premature Death." Many of these chapters are further divided into sub-chapters.

VIII. Humanity was Created to Die

This first section contains texts that profess that humanity was created to die, meaning that death is part of the Divine plan from the beginning. Some texts moved beyond simply describing humanity's mortality to explain that death is the characteristic that differentiates man from the heavenly bodies. Other texts present death as a step on the path to resurrection. These texts commonly describe the death of the righteous.

The acceptance of the necessity of death is often rooted in the deep belief that God as Creator of all has constructed the world according to a plan. Humanity may not always understand the workings of the Divine economy, but we must recognize that God creates with purpose as well as with benevolence. This belief is well represented by a brief comment in Genesis Rabbah 9:5. This fifth century[37] midrash collection records that in the margins of his own Torah scroll Rebbe Meir wrote that Genesis 1:31 -- which reads "And God saw that all He had created and behold it was *tov m'od*, very good -- should be read as, "And God saw that all He had created and behold *tov mot*, death is good."[38] This statement and the continuation of Genesis Rabbah 9:4ff. recognize that everything God creates, "death, the evil impulse in man, sufferings . . . each of them contributed in the end to the welfare of the human race."[39]

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[37]Strack and Stemberger 303-304
[38]as found in Ponet, 130.
[39]Abraham Cohen, *Everyman's Talmud: The Major teachings of the Rabbinic Sages* (New York: Schocken Books, 1949) 39.

Death is an Intrinsic Part of the Divine Economy

Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer, Ch. 11,[40] and its parallel in Midrash Tanhuma,[41] provide a positive view of Genesis 3:19, removing from it any sense of mortality as punishment. Rather, returning to dust is portrayed as an organic process, a part of the original Divine design. The midrash says that when God created Adam, God gathered dust from the four corners of the earth, so wherever one goes and dies he returns to the source of his material being. The dust of the created individual returns to the dust of the earth that poignantly raises its voice in mourning. This midrash creates a contrast between the finite life of the human and the seemingly infinite time span of the earth that remains to mourn the dead.

This piece is especially noteworthy because it also incorporates the term קץ, meaning the end of an individual's life span. The midrash describes Adam's death as, "בא קצו להפטר מן העולם" his end comes, [the time] to depart from the earth." This קץ is viewed as a natural part of creation, beginning with Adam onwards. To be human includes dying.

Midrash Tanhuma, *VaYeshev* 4, provides an interesting commentary on the necessity of death. This midrash accuses God of designing humanity to die, but creating the false accusation against Adam in order to lay the blame for death on him. The midrash

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[40]as found in *Torah Shelamah*, vol. 2, (New York: American Biblical Encyclopedia Society, 1949) 282.
[41]Samuel A. Berman, trans., *Midrash Tanhuma-Yelammedenu* (Hoboken: KTAV Publishing House, Inc., 1995) 659.

identifies this act with the verse "אֱלֹהִים נוֹרָא עֲלִילָה עַל־בְּנֵי אָדָם לְכוּ וּרְאוּ מִפְעָלוֹת Come and see the works of God; he is awesome in his doing toward the children of men" (Ps. 66:5). The midrash plays off of the alternate translation of the key phrase "נוֹרָא עֲלִילָה" which can also mean "terrible false charge." This text creates a stunning argument against God by linking together several comments.

The first comment establishes that the Angel of Death was created on the first day when God made the world. Attributed to R. Berakhia, the comment interprets Genesis 1:2 "וְחשֶׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם and darkness was upon the face of the deep" as a reference to the presence of the Angel of death who causes darkness to spread over creation. From this, the midrash boldly accuses God, saying "תָּמוּת וּמֵעֵץ הַדַּעַת טוֹב וָרָע לֹא תֹאכַל מִמֶּנּוּ כִּי בְיוֹם אֲכָלְךָ מִמֶּנּוּ מוֹת" (Genesis 2:17) is a false accusation against Adam. After all, if God created humanity to die, Adam's actions could not cause mortality.

God's actions are likened to a man who wishes to divorce his wife and, therefore, writes out a *get* before returning to his house. In the house the husband asks his wife for a drink. When she hands him the drink, the husband slips his wife the *get* and accuses her of serving a warm drink to him, therefore, deserving of divorce. She realizes his trick and tells him, "Apparently you already knew that I would serve you a warm drink when you prepared the bill of divorce you brought with you."[42]

Like the wife, Adam realizes that he is being used as a scapegoat. Adam tells God that he knows he is falsely accused. Quoting Proverbs 8:30 "וָאֶהְיֶה שַׁעֲשֻׁעִים יוֹם | יוֹם מְשַׂחֶקֶת לְפָנָיו בְּכָל־עֵת

[42]Berman, 233.

וָאֶהְיֶה אֶצְלוֹ אָמוֹן Then I was by him, like a little child; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him", Adam says that God had the Torah for two thousand years before the world was created. (The repetition of "day" indicates two thousand years as in Ps. 90:4 "כִּי אֶלֶף שָׁנִים בְּעֵינֶיךָ כְּיוֹם".) Cleverly, Adam argues that the Torah includes the verse "זֹאת הַתּוֹרָה אָדָם כִּי־יָמוּת בְּאֹהֶל This is the Torah, when a man dies in a tent" (Numbers 19:14). This verse indicates that humanity was designed to die. Adam finishes his argument against God, declaring, "באת לתלות בי את העלילה You came to put upon me the false accusation."[43]

In Pirke Avot 3:1, an axiom attributed to Akavya ben Mahalalel, a first century C.E. member of the Sanhedrin, states:

> הסתכל בשלשה דברים ואין אתה בא לידי עברה:
> דע מאין באת ולאן אתה הולך ולפני מי אתה עתיד לתן דין וחשבון
> Reflect on three things and you will not come into the grasp of sin: Know where you are going; and know where you came from; and [know] in whose presence you will have to make an accounting.[44]

The answer to "לאן אתה הולך Know where you are going!" is "עפר למקום To a place of dust." This text is advising ways to avoid transgression. It seems that remembering the inevitability of death and, therefore, the final judgement will deter bad behavior. The sobering description of death as מקום עפר is sure to bring humility

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[43]My translation.
[44]Kravitz, Leonard and Kerry M. Olitzky, eds. and trans. *Pirke Avot: A Modern Commentary on Jewish Ethics* (New York: UAHC Press), 1993, 36.

to any human being. This reminder, in turn, should reinforce good behavior. Death and judgement are presented as being unavoidable in this text.

Death is the Characteristic which Separates Us from God and the Heavenly Hosts

The 8th century midrash[45], Ecclesiastes Rabbah 6:1 also views death as an intrinsic part of human nature. However, in this midrash Genesis 3:19 appears to be a reprimand. It is not a pronouncement of punishment, only a reminder of man's limits. After Adam's creation, the ministering angels mistook him, believing him to be Divine. To demonstrate otherwise, God caused Adam to fall asleep. This episode ends with God saying to Adam, "אַתָּה וְאֶל־עָפָר תָּשׁוּב בְּזֵעַת אַפֶּיךָ תֹּאכַל לֶחֶם עַד שׁוּבְךָ אֶל־הָאֲדָמָה כִּי מִמֶּנָּה לֻקָּחְתָּ כִּי־עָפָר" (Gen. 3:19) as a reprimand or stern reminder of Adam's basic nature to be mortal. Sleep and death are juxtaposed as signs of mortality. Variations of the Ecclesiastes Rabbah 6:1 text are found in several sources, Ecclesiastes Rabbah 8:2, Leviticus Rabbah[46] 20:2, Pesikta De-Rab Kahana 4:4, Pesikta De-Rab Kahana 26:3, and Pesikta Rabbati[47] 14:10. All these texts end with the same punch line -- Adam, surrounded by splendor and elevated to a near divine status, is warned, "כִּי־עָפָר אַתָּה וְאֶל־עָפָר תָּשׁוּב" (Gen. 3:19).

While Eccl. Rabbah 6:1 does not use the theme, Ecclesiastes Rabbah 8:2, Leviticus Rabbah 20:2, Pesikta De-Rab Kahana 4:4, Pesikta De-Rab Kahana 26:3, Midrash Tanhuma, *Achare Mot* 3, and Pesikta Rabbati 14:10 all describe 13 bejeweled canopies covering Adam and Eve in Eden. Lest they mistake this grandeur for being

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[45]Strack and Stemberger, 345.
[46]Homiletic midrash redacted around 450 C.E. (Strack and Stemberger, 317).
[47]Homiletic midrash redacted around 7th century. (Strack and Stemberger, 329).

Divine, God warns Adam and Eve of their mortality using Gen. 3:19 as a prooftext.

BT, Haggigah 13a and BT, Pesahim 94a-b contain parallel texts using Ps. 90:10 as a prooftext. Pesahim uses the rabbinic text within a discussion about how far a man can travel each day during a prolonged journey; Haggigah uses the text within a discussion about the structure of the Heavens. Beginning with a rebuke of Nebuccadnezzar by the Bat Kol, the rabbinic text continues with a general warning about the nature of man. To illustrate the limited nature of man, the piece quotes Ps. 90:10 establishing the average lifespan of man. The seventy to eighty years of life are then contrasted with the distance from earth to the firmament and beyond into the Heavens. The piece says that the distance from earth to the firmament is a journey of five hundred years. The comparison of man's lifespan to the time needed to reach the Heavens starkly reminds the reader of the limited human condition and of the infinite, expansive nature of God and God's Heavenly Host.

It is significant that this midrash chooses time and lifespan to emphasize man's limited nature, when distance or ability would equally reveal man's limits. Man's limited life ultimately defines the human condition.

Death is a Neutral Step on the Path to Resurrection

Connecting the verse to resurrection, Genesis Rabbah 20:10 provides another interpretation of Gen. 3:19. This text is limited, but it opens an interesting discussion. It provides a comment by R. Simeon b. Yohai, saying that Gen. 3:19 provides a hint to resurrection. The comment's foundation is that the verse says "to dust you will return", not "to dust you will go." Perhaps, this brief comment required more explanation than it provides, but it clearly portrays death as a necessary part of human nature, devoid of a punitive cast.

BT, Shabbat 152b provides a comical vignette that interprets Genesis 3:19 and introduces many other verses containing the concept of עפר/dust. Behind the playful text, serious theology is communicated. Discussing what happens after one dies, this text describes the plight of the wicked, to be slung across the length of the world between angels. Those who are in between, not evil and not righteous, receive "rest." The text continues quoting Rabbi Mari saying, "עתידים דהוו עפרא [Even] the righteous are fated to be dust." The prooftext of Ecc. 12:7 is used.

The text then plays with the concept of returning to dust. A group of grave diggers are digging a new grave when the dead Ahai b. Josiah makes noises at them. When R. Nahman is sent to investigate the problem, he asks the dead Ahai, "Did not R. Mari say, 'עתידים דהוו עפרא'." Ahai offers in retort the verse "וְרִקָּב עֲצָמוֹת קִנְאָה חַיֵּי בְשָׂרִים לֵב מַרְפֵּא A sound heart is the life of the flesh; but envy is the rottenness of the bones" (Proverbs 14:30), explaining that those

with envy in their hearts rot away, but the pure-hearted do not rot away. R. Nahman then feels Ahai and realizes that he is solid. But when Ahai is invited to R. Nahman's home, Ahai quotes Ezek. 37:13 explaining he can not leave. Finally, the text returns to Gen. 3:19, when Ahai resolves the apparent discrepancy between all of these verses. Ahai explains that Gen. 3:19 means that the righteous dead will return to dust one hour before the resurrection of the dead.

This comical passage reveals a certain comfort in discussing death and its inevitability. This comfort is rooted in the rabbis assuredness that the righteous (identified here as rabbis) will be resurrected. Returning to dust is not portrayed as a punitive action resulting from Adam's misdeed. Rather, the return to dust is a neutral step in the process of resurrection.

A more somber text, mishnah Pirke Avot 4:22 clearly states that death is merely a step before resurrection. It reads, "Those who are born will die. Those who die will live again."[48] Death, as well as judgment by God, is portrayed as inescapable. Those who may be tempted by their evil inclination to believe otherwise are warned that death and the judgment are inescapable. The text reasons: "מת על כרחך אתה נולד :על כרחך אתה Against your will were you born. . . . Against your will you will die."[49]

All of the rabbinic texts addressed above present death as an inevitable part of human nature. Mortality is part of the human

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[48]Kravitz and Olitzky, 68.
[49]Kravitz and Olitzky, 68.

design ordained by God from the beginning of creation. Texts, such as Midrash Tanhuma, *VaYeshev* 4, seek to reconcile Gen. 2:17 and 3:19. They struggle with the basic question of the creation narrative: Was death an original part of the Divine Economy or did Adam and Eve's sin bring about death? The texts in this chapter present death as an original part of the Divine Economy; The texts in the next chapter present sin as the cause for death. The greatest number of texts uncovered by this research project fall into the latter category.

IX. Death is a Punishment for Transgression

The rabbinic sources addressing death often discuss death as a punishment wrought by the actions of either an individual or a generation. In the cases involving individuals, the repercussions for their actions are usually limited to the individual or to a relative. Yet, in the cases involving generations, the repercussions are broader, affecting an individual, the generation itself, or even many generations. Some texts portray the actions of one generation as affecting the behavior or condition of many generations after it.

The case of Adam and Eve is an anomaly, because they are individuals, but also represent a generation. The texts addressing the creation verses often treat Adam and Eve as a generation lacking the characteristics of an individual. The matter becomes more complicated because Adam and Eve's actions affect not only their generation, but also all of humanity since they are the parents of all. Therefore, their mistakes are ours, their punishments are ours. Many rabbinic texts make it clear that Eden and the immortality accessed there are no longer available to Adam and Eve's progeny, all of humanity, because of their actions. Some rabbinic texts only discuss Adam, some discuss Adam and Eve's actions as a unit, and others only emphasis the snake's or Eve's actions. These latter texts often extend Eve's transgressions to all women, claiming all women are prone to evil actions. A completely different category of rabbinic texts reveal moments in history when immortality was offered to other generations of Israelites who then rebuffed God, therefore, losing immortality. This approach reduces the blame often placed on

Adam and Eve and on God. The compassion of God is emphasized in these and other texts.

Death was Caused by Adam and Eve's Iniquity

Genesis Rabbah 12:6 includes a discussion of six attributes or things taken away from Adam. This text can also be found in Numbers Rabbah 13:12, a 9th century homiletic midrash. These are his luster, his life, his height, the fruit of the earth, the fruit of trees and the luminaries. The number six is explained in the Numbers Rabbah version. Interpreting the meaning of the full, or מלא, spelling of the word, וקרבנו offerings (Numbers 7:13), Numbers Rabbah, explains that the extra "ו" corresponds to the six attributes taken from Adam. These will be restored to the son of Nahshon, that is, the Messiah.

Genesis Rabbah also include this messianic promise. However, Genesis Rabbah interprets the verse Genesis 2:4 by noting that there are only two occasions in which the word, תולדות, appears in the מלא spelling. These two times are "אֵלֶּה תוֹלְדוֹת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהָאָרֶץ" (Gen. 2:4), the subject of the midrash, and "וְאֵלֶּה תוֹלְדוֹת פֶּרֶץ" (Ruth 4:18). Creating a wordplay, the midrash asks why all the other generations are defective. On one level, the question is literal - why are all the other תלדות defective, or חסר, meaning why do they lack the "ו". Yet, the answer moves to an interpretive level, responding to the question - what was defective with the generations? What went wrong with the people? The assumption here is that the first mention of generations/תלדות marks a perfect time. God's creation of the world was unmarred. The second time תלדות is used describes the link of this present world to the redeemed world of the future.

The genealogy of Peretz concludes with David. The messianic overtones are clear here.

חייו is placed in this list among things that Adam had but lost and that humanity will regain with the coming of the messiah. In both texts, the prooftext provided is Gen. 3:19. חייו is problematic because it literally means "his lives", but its meaning clearly includes immortality. The list of deficient attributes begins with Adam, but they are transmitted to the generations of Adam's descendants. In this midrash, Adam represents the father of humanity, not an individual. Only with the generation of Peretz is there a glimmer of hope for restoration to wholeness. It should be noted, however, that death is not the focal theme of this midrash. Rather, the loss of immortality is only one of six deficiencies on the list.

The phrase "הראשון שצויתי אותו מצוה אחת שיעשה אותה ויהיה כאדם like Adam, the first human, who I commanded upon him one commandment that he should do it and live"[50] is a common formula circulated in many midrashim. While its exact wording and context may change, the phrase is quite commonly seen before the citing of the prooftext of Genesis 3:19. For example, the phrase is used in Midrash Tanhuma, *Shemini* 3; Midrash Tanhuma, the addition to *Shemini* 2; and BT, Shabbat 55b, and it is implied in the Midrash on the Alphabet text, as discussed below. Worth noting, the language of Midrash Tanhuma, the addition to *Shemini* 2, is quite lucid. God tells Adam that he will live forever, like God, if Adam and Eve do not sin,

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[50]My translation.

observing God's one simple command. Adam is told they, like the Heavenly host, never need to know death.

A 7th to 9th century collection,[51] Midrash on the Alphabet also interprets Genesis 3:19 as a punitive statement towards Adam that carries over to his progeny.[52] Using the voice of Solomon, the midrash brings together Genesis 3:19 with Ecclesiastes 12:7 to clarify the Genesis verse. Solomon points out the great power Adam had, yet Adam causes death to brought to himself, his wife, and all the generations after them until the end of all the generations. The midrash asks rhetorically how do we know that all the generations will be affected. It provides the prooftext, "אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר נְתָנָהּ וְיָשָׁב הֶעָפָר עַל־הָאָרֶץ כְּשֶׁהָיָה וְהָרוּחַ תָּשׁוּב" (Ecc. 12:7) showing that all the material of creation, dust, will be returned to its original source, the earth. No man will be created that will not die, returning to the earth. This midrash emphatically states that Adam caused death to be inescapable for all of humanity.

Genesis Rabbah 16:6 offers a short, but instructive comment on Genesis 2:17. The doubling of the verb, מוֹת תָּמוּת, is explained as indicating that Adam and Eve's death sentence was extended to their descendants. Many rabbinic texts make this point without much elaboration.

In the late 3rd century exegetical midrash,[53] the Sifre on Deuteronomy, Piska 323, Rabbi Judah interprets "אַשְׁכְּלֹת מְרֹרֹת לָמוֹ

[51]Strack and Stemberger, 381.
[52]as found in *Torah Shelamah*, vol. 2, 282.
[53]Strack and Stemberger, 295-7.

their [grape] clusters are bitter" (Deuteronomy 32:32) to mean that the decree of death is extended to Adam's descendants until the end of all generations.[54] Midrash Tanhuma, *Bereshit* 1:23, addresses the verse "תֵּת וְקֹדֶשׁ וְצָבָא מִרְמָס the giving over of the sanctuary and the host to be trampled under foot" (Dan. 8:13). Applying this verse, the midrash argues that the decree of death is extended to Adam and his progeny. The midrash concludes by emphasizing God's compassion. It describes God mourning for Adam and his children with the words, "הֵן הָאָדָם Behold, the man" (Gen. 3:22).[55]

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[54]as found in Gillman, 22.

[55]John T. Townsend, trans., *Midrash Tanhuma* (S. Buber Recension) (Hoboken: KTAV Publishing House, Inc., 1989) 16.

Death was Caused by Eve's Iniquity

Genesis Rabbah 19:3 tries to resolve the inconsistency between Genesis 2:17 and Genesis 3:3. While Gen. 2:17 states "מִמֶּנּוּ מוֹת תָּמוּת וּמֵעֵץ הַדַּעַת טוֹב וָרָע לֹא תֹאכַל מִמֶּנּוּ כִּי בְּיוֹם אֲכָלְךָ" (Genesis 2:17), Gen. 3:3 says, "בְּתוֹךְ־הַגָּן אָמַר אֱלֹהִים לֹא תֹאכְלוּ מִמֶּנּוּ וְלֹא תִגְּעוּ בּוֹ פֶּן תְּמֻתוּן" וּמִפְּרִי הָעֵץ אֲשֶׁר But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said, you shall not eat of it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die." The addition of "וְלֹא תִגְּעוּ בּוֹ" when Eve repeats God's instructions is puzzling. The midrash explains that Eve sought to protect God's instructions by making them more stringent. This is often referred to as putting a fence around a commandment. The midrash then presents a scene between Eve and the serpent. The serpent notices that Eve has lied and added to God's words, so he throws her against the tree of knowledge and asks, "Have you died [from touching the tree]?" Then, the serpent declares that just as Eve did not die from touching the tree, so too will she not die from eating from it. This midrash is clearly apologetic, seeking to mitigate blame towards Eve and to direct blame towards the serpent. A parallel version of this text is also found in midrash on the Psalms, 1:9. However, it vilifies the snake more than Eve. The view of rabbinic texts towards the role of the snake will be expanded below.

In a midrash addressing Gen. 6:9, Midrash Tanhuma raises the question, "For how many transgressions do women die at the time of their childbirth?"[56] This question spurs a lengthy discussion that

[56]Townsend, 31-32.

uses Gen. 3:19 as a prooftext. The text first assumes that women die in childbirth because of the sins they commit. Sin causes premature death here. Lest the reader believe the connection between sin and death is not connected to Adam and Eve, the text continues on to explain the origin of each of the three mitzvot (keeping the laws of *niddah*, taking *hallah*, and lighting the shabbat light) for which women are responsible. Each explanation links the mitzvot to Eve and her misdeed. It is Eve's sin that brings death to humanity. The mitzvot for which women are responsible are punitive in origin and, furthermore, not keeping the three mitzvot leads to death in childbirth.

This midrash explains the origin of the mitzvah of keeping *niddah* that women must observe a commandment involving the shedding of blood since Eve shed the blood of Adam by bringing death to him. A proclamation of death, Gen. 3:19 is used as a prooftext here. However, the concept of dust links the laws of *niddah* to the laws of taking *hallah* as the midrash explains that Adam was the *hallah* of the world and Eve defiled him. The midrash likens the creation of man, specifically of Adam, to the baking of hallah. God put water on the ground (dust) and then removed hallah (Adam). This image expands the concept of dust through the beautiful image of baking hallah, while the midrash interprets Gen. 3:19 as a death decree brought on by Eve's actions and Adam's compliance. This text links death to both Eve's sin and to the on-going process of sin. While it is clearly Eve's actions and Adam's compliance that introduce death to humanity, it is humanity that perpetuates it through not observing the commandments.

Discussed above Pesikta De-Rab Kahana 4:4 and Pesikta Rabbati 14:10 both have brief comments attached to them regarding Eve's role in the transgression. After Adam eats of the tree of knowledge and receives his punishment from God, Adam protests saying, "וָאֹכֵל הָאִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר נָתַתָּה עִמָּדִי הִוא נָתְנָה־לִּי מִן־הָעֵץ The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I ate" (Gen. 3:12). Note that by placing Gen. 3:12 after verse 19, these rabbinic texts change the chronology of the biblical text in order to emphasize Adam's protest against Eve.

The homoletic midrash dated between the 5th and 9th centuries,[57] Deuteronomy Rabbah 4:5 warns against the dangers of women's voices. It should be noted that this text contains common elements with Pesikta De-Rab Kahana 14:2 (discussed fully below) that discusses those who do or do not follow God's command in every generation. Here in Deuteronomy Rabbah the text shapes the issue of command in a very different way in order to address the danger of listening to women's voices and words. Commenting on the verse "וּלְאָדָם אָמַר כִּי שָׁמַעְתָּ לְקוֹל אִשְׁתֶּךָ And to Adam he said, Because you have listened to the voice of your wife" (Gen. 3:17), this rabbinic text point out that the biblical verse says voice and not words. It is the voice of the woman that has a dangerous and persuasive nature. After God commands Adam not to eat of the tree of knowledge, Eve causes him to eat of it. A comment by R. Abin explains, "She merely had to weep and wail over him, whereupon he ate of it." This midrash concludes that Adam was persuaded to listen to Eve rather

[57]Strack and Stemberger, 335.

than God, because of the power of the woman's voice. Eve by her very nature of being a woman has the power to lead Adam astray.

This text, however, makes it clear that Adam lacked the ability to resist Eve's temptation. Adam is compared to Joseph who was able to resist the temptation of a woman's voice. When propositioned by Potiphar's wife, Joseph is able to resist. This text emphasizes putting God's command above a woman's words. A group of text addressing God's commands will be discussed below.

Death was Caused by the Snake's Iniquity

Some texts deflect the blame put upon Adam and Eve by emphasizing the role of the snake. A brief comment in Numbers Rabbah 8:4 addressing the origin of the word Hivites explains the snake's actions. The midrash explains that the Hivites (חִוִּי), a branch of the Amorites, are so named, because they act in the manner of a חִוִּי that is a synonym for נָחָשׁ, or snake. Illustrating the devious nature of the snake this midrash reveals the snake's reason for encouraging Adam and Eve to eat from the tree of knowledge. The snake knew of God's warning and of the punishment of death. Believing they would die upon eating, the snake thought he would be left to rule the earth.

An exegetical midrash on Psalm 1, Midrash on the Psalms[58] 1:9, provides a string of comments emphasizing the snake's role in Eden. The comments end with a text describing the snake throwing Eve against the tree of knowledge. This section and its vilification of Eve is discussed above. However, a different introduction and conclusion to this episode creates a new interpretation of the events. Here only the snake is at fault.

The introduction puts an interpretation of Psalm 1 into Adam's mouth to demonstrate his hate of the snake. Adam proclaims, "If I had not walked in the counsel of the snake, how blessed I would have been!"[59] A comment by R. Joshua of Siknin in the name of R.

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[58]accurate dating of this collection is impossible (Strack and Stemberger, 351).
[59]William G. Braude, trans., *The Midrash on Psalms*, 2 Vols., The Yale Judaica Series, ed. Leon Nemoy (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959) 12.

Levi teaches that the snake spoke slander against God. After the snake throws Eve against the tree of knowledge, he tells her that God got the power to create the world from the tree. The snake tempts her quoting Genesis 3:5, "וִהְיִיתֶם כֵּאלֹהִים יֹדְעֵי טוֹב וָרָע you shall be as [God], knowing good and evil" and slyly warns, "every craftsman hates to have a rival in his craft."[60]

BT, Shabbat 55b provides a brief comment blaming the snake. Reacting to an earlier comment by R. Ammi that there is no death without sin, an anonymous voice argues against the absolute connection between individual sin and death. The comment is offered that there are four who died on the account of the snake: Benjamin, Amram, Jesse, and Caleb. These men who are considered to be sinless died on account of vicarious sin.

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[60]Braude, Midrash on Psalms, 13.

Death is Caused by Each Generation's Iniquity

Numbers Rabbah 16:24 struggles with the cause of mortality, expounding on the verse "עַד־אָנָה יְנַאֲצֵנִי הָעָם הַזֶּה How long will this people provoke me?" (Num. 14:11). The midrash connects mortality with human transgression, portraying God as providing opportunities for humans to receive protection against harm and humans as foiling these opportunities. A list of events and occasions on which God tried to protect the people Israel is presented. Linked to each occasion that God has tried to protect people is the way in which man has spurned God's gift. While this midrash concentrates on the Exodus narrative, citing occasions at the Sea of Reeds and the giving of Manna, the midrash addresses Adam, as well as the role of the Angel of Death.

The midrash portrays God as a protective force that tries benevolently to shield the Israelites from the Angel of Death. Avoiding the appearance that the Angel of Death is an independent force from God, the midrash includes the following dialogue between God, the creator, and the Angel of Death, the creation. The dialogue is related in two parts. First, the reader is told that at the giving of the Torah, God told the Angel of Death that he has power over the whole world, except the Israelites. The second part is presented as a comment from R. Eleazar b. R. Jose the Galilean, saying that the Angel of Death complained to God that he, the Angel of Death, was created without purpose. God answers that the Angel of Death was created to destroy idol worshippers, but not the Israelites.

In this midrash, death is a synonym for mortality, not a concept of individual death or tragic, premature death, but rather a generation being cut-off from the possibility of God's protection, i.e. immortality. God's comments to the Angel of Death equate death with a punishment for not obeying and recognizing God's power. Drawing on the dialogue between God and the Angel of Death, one may even equate these actions with idol worship. The midrash discusses Adam using the same concepts of death.

Stuck in the middle of a litany of Exodus related events, the midrash includes a lengthy discussion of Adam and of man's basic nature, addressing the question of whether or not man was created with immortality. Speaking generically of the human state, God declares, "I thought that you would not sin, that you would live and be sustained like Me who lives forever and ever."[61]

Explaining that human beings were to be like the angels that God created to be immortal, God accuses the people, "[Given the opportunity of] this greatness, you requested to die."[62] Continuing from the general comments to the specific case of Adam, the language given to God's voice is intimate and simple. God continues, "Like the first man whom I commanded to follow one law that he should do it and by it live and be sustained forever."[63] Here the law is life giving. The prooftext is given, "וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים הֵן הָאָדָם הָיָה כְּאַחַד מִמֶּנּוּ לָדַעַת טוֹב וָרָע וְעַתָּה פֶּן־יִשְׁלַח יָדוֹ וְלָקַח גַּם מֵעֵץ הַחַיִּים וְאָכַל וָחַי לְעֹלָם׃ And the Lord God said, Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, what if he puts forth his

[61]My translation.
[62]My translation.
[63]My translation.

hand, and takes also from the tree of life, and eats, and lives forever; (Genesis 3: 22) and then "בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים | אֶת־הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ So God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him; male and female He created them" (Genesis 1:27). These two verses establish that man was created, modeled after God and God's Divine hosts. The midrash spells it out clearly -- man was designed to be immortal like God. Mortality was introduced when man did not follow the commandment and, therefore, nullified the decree of immortality. The midrash connects Adam's misdeed with the decree of mortality, saying, "He ate of the tree and God declared, 'For dust you are and to dust you will return' (Gen. 3:19)." Connecting Adam's individual fate to all of humanity's mortality, the midrash introduces the verse "כְּאָדָם תְּמוּתוּן You will die like Adam" (Ps. 82:7). This implies that Adam's actions affected all of humanity.

Adam represents both one generation and the root of all of humanity. God gives the first man immortality based on adherence to one commandment. Not observing this law, Adam loses his immortality and passes mortality to his progeny. The midrash portrays immortality as being offered to the chosen Israelites on several occasions. However, each time the Israelites spurn God, not living up to their part of the bargain. In each generation immortality is lost because of their transgressions. In this midrash the blame of mortality on Adam is reduced and seen within a spectrum of generations performing obstinate misdeeds.

Pesikta Rabbati, Piska 42:8, presents a homily on Gen. 21:1 "וַיהוָה פָּקַד And the Lord commanded." An abridged parallel of this midrash is found in Midrash Zuta on Lamentations 1:37. This rabbinic text creates two categories of God's commands -- those that were obeyed and those that were not obeyed. These two categories are equal in number. The list begins with the command of Gen. 2:17 given to Adam. The homily illustrates its point by reconstructing the narrative showing the consequences of Adam's actions. Therefore, Adam disobeys the command found in Gen. 3:17 and he is punished with the words of Gen. 3:19. Adam's disobedience is juxtaposed with the Angel of death's obedience. The Angel of death is commanded to take Adam as illustrated by Gen. 3:19 and he obeys "וּשְׁלֹשִׁים שָׁנָה וַיָּמֹת וַיִּהְיוּ כָּל־יְמֵי אָדָם אֲשֶׁר־חַי תְּשַׁע מֵאוֹת שָׁנָה And all the days that Adam lived were nine hundred and thirty years; and he died" (Gen. 5:5).

This midrash lists many occasions on which human beings disobeyed God's command and non-humans were commanded to enforce punishments upon the humans. For example, the text includes the disobedience of the generation of the Tower of Babel and the fulfilled command to language to be many. The transgression of Adam stands within a list of many occasions of disobedience. Many of the unfulfilled commands are punished with death, such as the generation of Enosh and the Sodomites. This midrash presents death as a punishment for transgression. Every generation is given particular commands by God and death is the punishment for disobedience.

The rabbinic texts that portray death as a punishment for transgression are certainly plentiful, yet diverse. While some texts directly blame Adam and Eve for the introduction of death to humanity, others seek to mitigate the blame by emphasizing the role of just Eve or the snake. Other texts extend the blame for mortality to the generation of Sinai or even to every generation. The entire process of labeling the guilty party and linking transgression to punishment rests on the principle of justice. The next chapter reveals the other side of justice-- compassion. God punishes the guilty, but God also combines justice with compassion.

X. God is Compassionate

To interpret death as a punishment opens up a host of questions regarding God's nature and role in creating humanity. The rabbis are aware of the implications of declaring that death is punitive. Many of the texts seek to emphasize God's compassion. As discussed above, some rabbinic texts refer to Genesis 2:17 as אחת מצוה, the one [simple] command. This implies that God was compassionate in not over burdening Adam with many commandments. Rather, Adam had the simple task of upholding only one law. Other rabbinic texts emphasize God's compassion by highlighting a lenient enforcement of "מות תמות".

Genesis Rabbah 19:8 is actually a series of exegetical comments on the verse Gen. 3:8. It provides several interpretations on the individual words and phrases in the verse. An alternative interpretation of the phrase "לרוח היום" includes a debate as to whether God's decree of death was lenient or severe. Typical of aggadic freedom, both opinions are presented openly and equally. The rest of this midrash is discussed below.

Genesis Rabbah 22:1 strives to cast the decree of death in a good light. While it does not say it directly, this midrash addresses Gen. 2:17 as a decree of punishment, yet it emphasizes God's compassion. God is portrayed as gracious and forgiving despite pronouncing the awful decree. Using Ps. 25:6 "וַחֲסָדֶיךָ כִּי מֵעוֹלָם הֵמָּה זְכֹר־רַחֲמֶיךָ יְהוָה Remember, O Lord, your compassion and your

loving kindness; for they have been from of old," the midrash demonstrates God's compassion for Adam by emphasizing that God gave him one day to live after eating from the tree of knowledge. However, the one day was based on God's timeline, not man's. One God day is equivalent to 1,000 human years. In this way, Adam had time to procreate. This midrash desires to resolve the paradox within the Gen. 2:17 verse "כִּי בְיוֹם אֲכָלְךָ מִמֶּנּוּ מוֹת תָּמוּת". The verse appears to proclaim that Adam would die within a day's time, yet Adam lives many years. It does not, however, directly address the transmission of death to Adam's descendants. Midrash on the Psalms, 26:8, also mentions that God gave Adam one of God's days, equivalent to 1000 years. In this way, Adam and Eve could procreate.

Pesikta Rabbati, piska 40:2, includes a parallel text to Genesis Rabbah 22:1. While the gist of both pieces is the same, Pesikta Rabbati provides a lengthy discussion of God's compassion. Unlike Genesis Rabbah, Pesikta Rabbati makes this statement:

> כשבא לבראותו ונסתכל שהוא חוטא בעץ אמר אם אני בורא אותו במידת דין אין לו תקומה
>
> When God was about to create him, and God observed that he would sin with the fruit of the tree, God said, 'If I create him according to the measure of justice alone, there will be no lifting him up [after his fall].[64]

God has knowledge of man's capacity to sin previous to man's creation!

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[64]William G. Braude, trans., *Pesikta Rabbati*, 2 Vols., The Yale Judaica Series, ed. Leon Nemoy (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968) 704.

The midrash continues debating what must be the balance between justice and compassion in the world. Finally, justice and compassion are brought into the world as equal partners. Therefore, when Adam eats of the tree of knowledge, he is judged according to the warning of Gen. 2:17 "כִּי בְיוֹם אֲכָלְךָ מִמֶּנּוּ מוֹת תָּמוּת". But judgment is meted out with compassion, for "בְּיוֹם אֲכָלְךָ מִמֶּנּוּ" is one of God's days.

Numbers Rabbah 5:4 also contains a reference to "אֲכָלְךָ מִמֶּנּוּ בְּיוֹם" as being the length of one of God's days, because God is compassionate towards man who transgresses. Explaining why God says to Moses and Aaron, "וְזֹאת עֲשׂוּ לָהֶם וְחָיוּ וְלֹא יָמֻתוּ" But thus do to them, that they may live, and not die" (Numbers 4:19), the rabbinic text explains that God protects the wicked and, therefore, how much more so the righteous. With his wrongful actions, Adam incurs sin upon himself, Eve, the snake, and all the earth. This rabbinic text blames Adam alone for the decree of death being brought upon humankind. Yet, God's compassion lengthens one day into 930 years. This figure is based on God-time.

While Pesikta Rabbati 40:2 states that God knew that Adam would sin and did not prevent his transgression, Pesikta De-Rab Kahana 14:5 explains that God, out of compassion, tried to warn Adam, but Adam did not listen. Using a close reading of Gen. 2:17 and its context, Pesikta De-Rab Kahana 14:5 declares that God is not at fault in the creation narrative, rather Adam was clearly warned not to eat of the tree. During a dialogue with Israel, God declares,

"Adam found no iniquity in Me, but you found iniquity in Me."[65] Then the midrash compares Adam to a sick man whose doctor gives him specific instructions. When the sick man disregards his doctor and eats whatever he wants, he becomes gravely ill. When asked if the doctor gave him bad treatment, the sick man declares that it was he who brought death upon himself, because he disregarded the doctor's advice. It is the same for Adam. When all the generations approach Adam and ask him if God has treated him justly, Adam replies, "גרמתי מיתה לעצמי I brought death upon myself."[66] God had the compassion to warn Adam, yet Adam did not listen, and, therefore, Adam brought death upon himself and his progeny. A particularly poignant detail of this midrash is that the generations who inherited death get to ask Adam if God was fair in the punishment.

A commentary on Exodus 31:2, Midrash Tanhuma (Give reference) addresses the very nature of man and his creation. Connecting Genesis 1:26 "Let us make man" to Genesis 3:19 "For dust you are," this text interprets Gen. 3:19 literally to explain the substance of man. This midrash is a whimsical one, creating a discussion among God, the Torah, and the earth. When God declares, "Let us make man" (Gen. 1:26), the Torah objects saying that man is destined to sin. God replies that God is "Slow to anger and plenteous in loving kindness" (Num. 17:18). Another part of this midrash is discussed above. Although it is a short interchange, the dialogue

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[65]William G. Braude and Israel J. Kapstein, trans., *Pesikta de-Rab Kahana*, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1975) 270-271.
[66]Braude and Kapstein, 271.

between God and the Torah is telling. The declaration by the Torah that man is destined to sin even before his creation is only answered by God saying that God will have compassion for man. In this text sin is not linked to death or Adam and Eve's actions.

A text discussing the cities of refuge, Numbers Rabbah 23:13 elaborates on God's compassion to Adam and his descendants. Quoting Psalm 25:6 "זְכֹר־רַחֲמֶיךָ יְהוָה וַחֲסָדֶיךָ כִּי מֵעוֹלָם הֵמָּה" Remember, O Lord, your compassion and your loving kindness; for they have been from of old," the text presents in David's voice praise of God's compassion. David refers to Genesis 2:17 and praises God for allowing Adam to live to be 930 years old. David asks and then answers why was Adam thrown out of the Garden of Eden. Since Adam brought death upon the future generations, he deserved to die immediately, but instead God exiled him. A halakhic midrash, this rabbinic text likens this act to the treatment of the person who has murdered and must be driven out from his home into exile and finds refuge.

These rabbinic texts beautifully illustrate the belief in God's compassion. The underlying message is clear. God as creator has the right to punish humanity. And yet, God continually has compassion for humankind from Adam and Eve until today. Many texts emphasize the singular, simple command to which Adam and Eve had to adhere. Others describe the lenient punishment meted out by God. Both acts are rooted in God's compassion.

Now that the extensive discussion of the origin of death is complete, it is time to turn to the question of the length of the human life span.

XI. Death Comes at a Fixed Time

While the necessity of death prompts one treatment, the length of life opens up another discussion. The Bible presents several ages as the predetermined life span and provides many personalities who live to a variety of ages. The rabbinic texts take notice of the discrepancies in the Bible text and often seek to explain them. This discussion leads into the issue of premature death.

Perhaps, the most famous rabbinic text connected to Psalm 90:10 does not directly quote the verse. However, it is clear that Pirke Avot 5:21 finds its roots in the verse "ואם בגבורת שמונים שנה ימי שנותינו בהם שבעים שנה" (Psalm 90:10). Outlining the stages of life, Pirke Avot 5:21 lists ages from 5 to 100 with the expected capacity at that age. Addressing the later stages of life, this text declares:

בן ששים לזקנה
בן שבעים לשיבה
בן שמונים לגבורה
בן תשעים לשוח
בן מאה כאלו מת ועבר ובטל מן העולם
At sixty [one reaches] old age.
At seventy [one reaches] the fullness of age.
At eighty [one reaches] the strong old age.
At ninety [one is] bent.
And at one hundred, it is as if one had already died
and passed from the world.[67]

[67]Kravitz and Olitzky, 88.

Pirke Avot simply presents the stages of life without discussion of the reason for death or for deviations from these ages. Rather, the text communicates a sense of natural progression from youth to death. The years of old age are realistically presented. It is interesting to note that one hundred is the highest age listed, not one hundred and twenty as "והיו ימיו מאה ועשרים שנה" (Genesis 6:3) states.

Another notable feature of this text is the treatment of the ages seventy and eighty. While Psalm 90:10 states, "בהם שבעים שנה ימי שנותינו" implying that seventy would be the age of death, the mishnah states, "בן שבעים לשיבה". Not only are there three more stages of life, representing thirty years, that follow the age of seventy, but also לשיבה, meaning old age,[68] describes this stage of life. Seventy is clearly not portrayed as the end of life.

In Psalm 90:10 eighty is presented as the oldest age one can expect to reach, and this is only under special conditions. Only if one has strength, ואם בגבורת, can one expect to reach the age of eighty. The mishnah presents the age of eighty differently, declaring "לגבורה בן שמונים". The difference between בגבורת in the biblical text and לגבורה in the mishnah is important. In the biblical text, the structure of the sentence points to בגבורת as being a quality one must have in order to live a longer life span. The biblical text is limited, having no parallels within the same sentence or section, and, therefore, is harder to decipher. However, in the mishnah, the structure of the text provides many parallel sentences. The message here implies that upon reaching the given age, one acquires the

[68]Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Talmud*, (Jerusalem: חורב) 1557.

characteristic, as in an aging process. Although the Psalms text inspired this mishnah, the Pirke Avot text implies that death coincides with the disintegration of the body and the ability to function.

An extremely brief comment found in Midrash Tanhuma (Buber), *Mitzora* 3, comments on the definition of בגבורת of Psalm 90:10. This midrash explains the connection between having sex with one's wife during her menstruation period and causing one's children to suffer with skin plague. The text notes that the human life span is seventy years long, citing Psalm 90:10 as its prooftext. Then, it mentions that reaching the age of eighty is possible בגבורת. The key to this text is that it defines בגבורת as "זכה לשמונים he merits [to reach] the age of eighty." It should be noted that זכה ambiguous, as זכה can be translated as to gain, to obtain a privilege, to be found worthy of, or to succeed.[69] The context of this passage, however, points to the interpretation that longevity is linked to righteous action.

An exegetical midrash on the phrase לרוח היום in the verse Gen. 3:8, Genesis Rabbah 19:8 provides an expanded discussion of the concepts presented in Genesis Rabbah 22:1 (discussed above). Both midrashim start with the idea that God caused Adam to live one day after he ate from the tree of knowledge and, therefore, punished Adam and his progeny with death. Both midrashim follow the tradition that the one day was based on God's concept of time and,

[69]Jastrow, 398-9.

therefore, was equivalent to 1000 human years. Genesis Rabbah 22:1 leaves one question open. It does not reconcile the 1000 years with the verse Gen. 4:5 that clearly states that Adam died at the age of 930. BR 19:8 introduces Ps. 90:10 to resolve this inconsistency. Accounting for the missing 70 years, BR 19:8 explains that God allowed Adam to live to 930 and left the balance of 70 years for his children. Defining the average life span as 70 years long, Ps. 90:10 is provided as a prooftext.

Both the mishnah and gemara of BT, Gittin 28a suggest that the ages of death outlined by the Bible are rough estimates rather than fixed promises. Discussing the delivery of a *get*, the mishnah states that if the husband is old, the one delivering the *get* should still deliver it on the presumption that the husband is still alive. The gemara seeks to define זקן, old. Rabah suggests that old refers to a man who has not yet reached לגבורה, the age of strength-- eighty. Abaye objects, saying that even if the husband was 100 when the messenger left, it should be assumed that the husband is still alive. After all, the husband has unusual longevity, therefore, there is a good chance that he is alive.

While these rabbinic texts shape their discussions of the human life span around the biblical verses that suggest determined ages of death, there is also an understanding that these ages are flexible. This theme will be fully examined in the discussion of premature death. Personal transgression continues to be emphasized in these discussions.

XII. Premature Death

Perhaps, the most difficult, yet compelling, facet of the discussion of the necessity of death is the question of premature death. Some of the rabbinic texts deal with the abstract question of why did the people in the early chapters of the Bible live to such old ages. There are also texts that carefully outline ranges of ages, trying to define and understand the death of the relatively young. Other rabbinic texts present tragic stories of premature death. The majority of texts link transgression to premature death. This view is clearly expressed in a baraita found in BT, Yebamot 50a and Ecclesiastes Rabbah 3:4. In this text R. Akiba teaches that one will reach one's predetermined life span, if worthy. However, if he is unworthy his life is shortened.[70]

Many rabbinic texts subscribe to the view that people lived longer in the biblical time period. In fact, length of life span is inversely proportional to the length of time that has passed since that time period. Therefore, those who live in this age can expect to have a much shorter life span than those who are mentioned in the Torah. This explains the extremely old ages of many biblical personalities. A short comment in Yebamoth 64a illustrates this point of view. As part of a discussion regarding laws of divorcing a wife who is barren, Yebamoth 64b explains the different perception of time between generations, stating:

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[70]as found in Urbach, 265.

לא שנו אלא בדורות
הראשונים ששנותיהן מרובות אבל בדורות האחונים ששנותיהן מועטות
This was taught only in respect to the early generations who lived many years. In respect of the later generations, however, whose years of life are few . . . .

This text goes on to point out that the life span was already reduced by the later biblical period. Attributing the Psalms to King David, the text explains that already in the time of David the life span was reduced, and it cites as a prooftext Psalm 90:10. According to this rabbinic text, later biblical personalities even lived shorter lives than earlier ones.

Genesis Rabbah 96:4 is another rabbinic text illustrating that even within the Bible the length of the human life span diminishes with every generation. R. Samuel b. Nahman said in the name of R. Jonathan that the verse "וַיִּקְרְבוּ יְמֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לָמוּת And the time drew nearer that Israel must die" (Gen. 47:29) indicates that their years did reach their father's age. This comment is clearly illustrated by listing the ages of fathers and sons from the Bible. For example, Amram lived to be one hundred and thirty-seven, while Moses only lived to be one hundred and twenty. The list of examples ends with David who lived to be seventy which is less than his father's life span. The verse "יְמֵי שְׁנוֹתֵינוּ | בָּהֶם שִׁבְעִים שָׁנָה" (Psalm 90:10) without the reference to eighty years is used as the prooftext.

Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1:15 attributes the limited human life span not to the sin of every generation, but to the sin of a particular

generation. Assuming the inevitability of death, this midrash is unusual, because it does not mention Adam and Eve. Rather, it blames the generation of the flood. Commenting on the verse "לְתַקֵּן מְעֻוָּת לֹא־יוּכַל That which is crooked cannot be made straight" (Eccl. 1:15), this rabbinic text explains that the generation of the flood became crooked in their evil deeds and, therefore, God reduced their life span to 120 years. Genesis 6:3 is given as a proof text. This section of the midrash concludes saying that the life span of man will not be restored.

Shabbat 33a presents an extended conversation about the connection between sin and punishment. Enumerating many different kinds of sins and punishments, the text discusses everything from the destruction of the Temple to personal illness, like boils and gastro-intestinal distress. The text includes this general comment:

> R. Joseph son of R. Shemaiah said: when there are righteous men in the generation, the righteous are seized [by death] for the [sins of the] generation; when there are no righteous in a generation, school-children are seized for the generation.

The righteous who are sinless suffer for those in their generation who have transgressed. Children are also considered to be sinless. Clearly, this text seeks to explain the deaths of the righteous and the young. In every age, these types of deaths raise difficult questions.

Pesikta Rabbati, piska 27:1, comments on the verse "בְּשֶׁלַח יַעֲבֹרוּ וְאִם־לֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ But if they do not obey, they shall perish by the sword (Job 36:12). This midrash connects Job 36:12 to Ps. 90:10 explaining that if one hearkens, he or she will live out the full span of their years, i.e. 70 years, in prosperity. If one does not hearken, premature death is inevitable. This rabbinic text sites a specific life span and explains premature death through individual sin.

כרת

The concept of כרת extirpation , being cut off, is introduced in the Bible as the penalty for a number of sins committed deliberately such as: idolatry, desecration of the Sabbath, the eating of leaven on Passover, incest and adultery. No previous warning is needed in these cases. In the rabbinic texts the Halakhah explains כרת as premature death.[71] Commenting on the verses Lev. 23:29-30

כִּי כָל־הַנֶּפֶשׁ אֲשֶׁר לֹא־תְעֻנֶּה בְּעֶצֶם הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה וְנִכְרְתָה מֵעַמֶּיהָ׃
וְכָל־הַנֶּפֶשׁ אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲשֶׂה כָּל־מְלָאכָה בְּעֶצֶם הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה וְהַאֲבַדְתִּי
אֶת־הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהִוא מִקֶּרֶב עַמָּהּ׃

> For whatever soul it is who shall not be afflicted in that same day, he shall be cut off from among his people.
> And whatever soul it is who does any work in that same day, the same soul will I destroy from among his people.

the Sifra, *Emor* 14:4, attempts to define כרת. The Sifra is a 3rd century halakic midrash collection on Leviticus that comments verse by verse, often addressing each word.[72] In this case, the Leviticus verse is particularly useful, because "וְנִכְרְתָה מֵעַמֶּיהָ" is parallel to the phrase "וְהַאֲבַדְתִּי אֶת־הַנֶּפֶשׁ". In this sentence structure כרת is defined. Reinforcing this definition, the Sifra concludes that "כרת does mean losing one's life."[73] Of course, the definition of losing one's life also creates more questions: Does כרת affect the life span here in this life

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[71]Israel Moses Ta-Shma, "Karet," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 10. (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House) 788.
[72]Strack and Stemberger, 287.
[73]Ta-Shma, "Karet," 788.

or does it affect eternal life? In the commentary מסרת התלמוד on the Sifra, a comment by Hillel is offered to tighten the definition of כרת. Hillel believes that כרת only shortens one's life span in this world and it does not affect one's status in the world to come. Hillel draws his conclusions from the Lev 23:29-30 verses. He interprets the words "מֵעַמֶּיהָ from among his people" as meaning כרת only pertains to this world.[74]

The definition of כרת provided by the Sifra and Hillel creates the question -- Is every premature death caused by כרת? A baraita found in both BT, Moed Katan 28a, and JT, Bikkurim 2:1, 64b, concludes that כרת only applies to death at or before the age of fifty.[75] The same rabbinic texts also present amoraim who hold that it refers to death between the ages of 50 and 60.[76] Both passages apply the concept of כרת to the amount of time spent dying. These rabbinic texts will be discussed below.

Another rabbinic text that uses Psalm 90:10 as its foundation is Moed Katan 28a. Exploring many aspects of death, this text discusses the connection between both the time spent in the process of dying and the length of one's life span and transgression. Moed Katan draws upon many of the concepts previously discussed regarding Psalm 90:10 and Pirke Avot 5:21. While Moed Katan utilizes the ages mentioned in both of these texts, it also seeks to explain why different people die in various ways and at various ages. By doing

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[74] *Sifra*, ed. Yaakov Weiss, New York: Adam, 1947 (Reprint Vienna), 102.
[75] Ta-Shma, "Karet," 788.
[76] Ta-Shma, "Karet," 788.

this, Moed Katan creates a new schema of ages and their connections to death.

The discussion in Moed Katan 28a begins with pondering the meaning of sudden death. According to the anonymous Tannaim, to die suddenly is to be taken by force[77] "זו היא מיתה חטופה"; to die after three days of illness is a rebuke "גערה"; and to die after five days of illness is the death of ordinary men "זו היא מיתת כל אדם". This midrash recognizes the need to prepare for death, while not addressing prolonged illness. The worst type of death, dying suddenly, reflects sinful action in life.

The midrash then connects the time before dying to the age at which one dies. It states that dying at or below the age of fifty is a death of being cut off because of transgression "זו היא מיתת כרת". In light of the discussion regarding illness before death, it is clear that this text regards dying at or before the age of fifty as being torn away too soon. Dying before the age of fifty is considered to be a premature death; it is placed in the same category as dying suddenly. Both are associated with the term כרת. In all cases, premature death is attributed to the transgressions of the individual who dies.

Portrayed in a positive light, death at age sixty is by the hand of Heaven "זו היא מיתה בידי שמים". This age sets the boundary between premature and appropriate death. The age of sixty was also referred to in Pirke Avot 5:21. Here in Moed Katan a comment by Mar Zutra explains the root of this age. It is based on the verse, תָּבוֹא בְכֹלַח אֱלִי־קֶבֶר כַּעֲלוֹת גָּדִישׁ בְּעִתּוֹ" You shall come to your grave

[77]My translation.

with a rich harvest, like a full sheaf of grain which comes up in its season." (Job 5:26). Sixty is the numerical value of בְּכֶלַח indicating ripeness. It should be noted that the number is referred to in other rabbinic texts, often without any explanation of its roots. Discussing the higher ages, the Moed Katan text quotes the Pirke Avot 5:21 text on the ages seventy and eighty and juxtaposes it against the Psalm 90:10.

In the middle of this schema, it is mentioned that Samuel died at age fifty two. This clearly creates an embarrassing problem since Samuel's age of death at fifty two is so close to fifty, the age of death caused by transgression. A corrective comment is offered later in the midrash, stating that actually the ages of death by being cut off are from fifty to sixty. The corrective comments continues to explain that it was in deference to Samuel that it was previously stated incorrectly. Clearly, there is discomfort regarding the premature death of Samuel.

After the age schema is set, Moed Katan presents a light hearted narrative illustrating these ages and drawing some final conclusions. The setting is R. Joseph's sixtieth birthday party at which he is celebrating passing the age of being cut off -- כרת, or in other words, dying prematurely. Abaye challenges him asking if he has also escaped dying suddenly. At that very moment a member of the party R. Huna dies instantly. Of course, everyone at the party is very upset believing that R. Huna's sudden death must have been caused by his own transgression. However, Zoga from Adiabene explains the situation, teaching that everything they have learned concerning the ages of death and the time before dying only applies

before the age of eighty, הגיע לגבורות. The age is referred to by its definition as seen in Psalm 90:10 and Pirke Avot 5:21. Zoga explains that once one has reached the age of eighty, however, dying suddenly is a good death, for it is dying by the [Divine] kiss "נשיקה זו היא מיתת". (Moses died by the [Divine] kiss "זו היא מיתת נשיקה".) It should be noted that לגבורות combines לגבורה which is the formula used in the Mishnah and בגבורת which is used in the Bible.

Throughout this midrash individual transgression is linked to premature death, while the inevitability of death is clearly stated. The righteous, however, are to die painlessly by the kiss of God at the age of eighty or older.

It should be mentioned that the concept of the Divine kiss is rooted in the verse "וַיָּמָת שָׁם מֹשֶׁה עֶבֶד־יְהוָה בְּאֶרֶץ מוֹאָב עַל־פִּי יְהוָה So Moses the servant of the Lord died there in the land of Moab, according to the word [lit. mouth] of the Lord" (Deut. 34:5). The phrase "by the mouth of the Lord" has been interpreted literally by the rabbis, as depicted in Deut. R. 11:10. The Divine kiss removed "the agency of the Angel of Death, who was not granted dominion over" Moses, Aaron, Miriam, and the three patriarchs.[78] In Moed Katan 28a, the Divine kiss is described as being as gentle as drawing a hair out of a glass of milk.

The material discussed above in BT, Moed Katan 28a is also found in YT, Bikkurim 64c-d. The Jerusalem material is not as well organized, but it includes some additional comments that will enrich the discussion at hand. This rabbinic text grapples with the

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[78]Harry Freedman, "Death, Kiss Of," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 5. (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House) 1427.

difference between death, מות, and extirpation, כרת. Discussing Heave-offerings and first fruits, Bikkurim 64c notes that Lev. 22:9 addresses the improper use of Heave-offerings. In this verse, the penalty for improper administration of Heave-offerings is death -- מות. The rabbinic text notes that the usual punishment for misappropriation of holy things is not מות, but extirpation, כרת. Not citing a prooftext, YT, Bikkurim 64c merely states that "מת וחוזר ומת כבר כתיב כרת בקדשים ויהא מיתה כרת בקדשים וכי יש The penalty of extirpation is assigned by Scripture to holy things." The question then becomes how can one both die and be extirpated since both are the penalties for misappropriation of holy things. Of course, the underlying question is what exactly is כרת as opposed to death. YT, Bikkurim 64c even quips that perhaps one is meant to die twice, once for each punishment of מות and כרת.

This rabbinic text then proceeds through the same discussion reported above. The ages of 50 through 80 are outlined and the meaning of dying at these respective ages is explained. The adjectives describing the ages are similar in tone, but different words are used. Dying under or at the age of fifty is still described as כרת. The problem with Samuel dying at 52 is also raised. The Jerusalem text adds an apologetic comment in order to explain Samuel's early death. The text blames Hannah for praying too much and starting his fifty year service as a Levite at the age of two after he was weaned.

An interesting comment is unique to the Jerusalem text. Addressing ages above 80, the text states, "מיכן הילך חיי צער life is a life of pain" (64c). This echoes Pirke Avot's statement, "And at one hundred, it is as if one had already died and passed from the

world."[79] Living to ages above eighty is not considered to be a blessing in both these texts.

The Jerusalem text asks an interesting question: What if one has lived beyond the age of fifty and then commits a sin punishable by כרת. The answer is not clear in the text. However, it follows the same reasoning that was evident in the Babylonian text. Both texts create a schema in which מות pertains to dying either a righteous death or a premature death brought about by transgression, while כרת pertains to the number of days between knowing one will die and when he actually dies. The Jerusalem text explains that being in the process of dying for one to five days reflects כרת. Dying after six or seven days is a positive death. However, dying after more than seven days is death through suffering "מת ביסורין".[80]

Both BT, Moed Katan 28a and YT, Bikkurim 64c-d define מות as pertaining to the age at which one dies and כרת as pertaining to warning time before dying. The one challenge to the definitions of מות and כרת that the Jerusalem text presents is found in the following statements:

> If one survives for fifty years and did a deed which is subject to extirpation, but he grew yet older, he should rejoice. If one survives for sixty years and did a deed which is subject to extirpation, but he grew yet older, he should rejoice. (64d)[81]

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[79]Kravitz and Olitzky, 88.
[80]*The Talmud of the Land of Israel*, translated under Jacob Neusner, general editor. 35 vols. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990) Vol. 1, 158-162.
[81]Neusner, vol. 1, 161.

These statements seem to imply that one can sin and get away with it. The fifty or sixty year old in each case grows older and does not die suddenly. These statements are not integrated into the rest of the text and are left unaddressed. These two sentences belong to a genre of texts that present the biblical ages as rough estimates of the human life span, not fast rules.

It should be noted that Jacob Neusner translates עון מיתה as extirpation, thereby implying that it is a synonym for כרת. This is a traditional reading of this passage, based on the fact that כרת appears in the previous sentence in a parallel usage.

A Case of Young Death

Although it is not connected the biblical verses shaping the presentation of this rabbinic material, BT, Ketubot 8a provides a poignant narrative that deserves attention. The setting is that Rav Hiyya bar Abbah's son has died and the child's Bible teacher is called upon to offer some words of comfort to the family and friends who have gathered in the mourners' house. It is noted in this text that the teacher does not visit the mourners on the first day. This conveys the natural fear that people feel when confronting death. When he finally speaks, the teacher blames the child's death on the transgressions of Rav Hiyya bar Abbah. An alternative version of the teacher's words are presented in the same gemarah. In the second version, the child is said to be a young man who died because of his own sins. An anonymous speaker evaluates the teacher's words, saying, "אתא לנחומי צעורי קמצער ליה" He came to comfort and he grieved him." The gemara then presents another speech by the teacher. It is not clear if this is to be read as an alternative version or a revised version reacting to the criticism. The teacher says of the child, "השיב את לאתפוסי אדרא" You are important [enough] to be held responsible [for the shortcomings of] the generation." The teacher is then asked to say something about God. His full praise of God ends with an acknowledgment that God resurrects the dead "מחיה המתים".

This text delicately narrates the difficulty of understanding premature death. The teacher struggles to find an explanation for the child's death. All of his explanations draw a connection between

death and transgression. The final explanation praises, rather than denigrates, the righteous Rav Hiyya bar Abbah. The teacher completes his words with a praise of God and the promise of resurrection. The final message is clear. Even though the child's death is tragic, the death is seen only as a pause on the way to resurrection. Also, none of the characters in the midrash want to blame the sinless for the tragic death.

Only God Knows the Length of Days

BT, Shabbat 30a-b, Ruth Rabbah[82] 3:2 and Ecclesiastes Rabbah 5:10 share an interesting text that portrays King David asking, "אֲנִי הוֹדִיעֵנִי יְהוָה קִצִּי וּמִדַּת יָמַי מַה־הִיא אֵדְעָה מֶה־חָדֵל" (Psalm 39:5) and receiving an answer from God. David asks, "הוֹדִיעֵנִי יְהוָה קִצִּי" and God replies, "גזרה היא מלפני שאין מודיעין קצו של בשר ודם It is a decree before Me that the end of a mortal is not made known." David persists with the question, "וּמִדַּת יָמַי מַה־הִיא" and God gives the same response. Finally, David asks, "אֵדְעָה מֶה־חָדֵל אֲנִי" and God replies that David will die on Shabbat. David asks to be spared until the next day. Refusing David's request, God explains, "שלמה בנך כבר הגיע מלכות The reign of your son Solomon has already become due."

The text continues (Ruth Rabbah does not include this section) describing David studying Torah as he does every Shabbat all day. On the Shabbat on which he is meant to die, the Angel of Death arrives at David's house and must wait until David takes a break from Torah study. This implies that Torah study repels death in some way. So, to trick David the Angel of Death climbs into the trees in David's garden and shakes the trees. David leaves his studies and climbs a ladder in order to investigate the sound. The ladder breaks and David dies.

This piece adds several concepts to the issue of the necessity of death. While other rabbinic texts reviewed in this thesis have sought to predict the age of death and to connect sinful action with death,

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[82]Midrash redacted around 500 C.E. (Strack and Stemberger, 344).

Shabbat 30a-b, Ruth Rabbah 3:1, and Ecclesiastes Rabbah 5:10 do not attempt to do this. Rather, this circulated text clearly states that while God knows when man will die, man is not to know. Yet, God gives David a clue saying that he will die on Shabbat.

In this text, the Angel of Death acts as God's agent. The role of the Angel of Death is neutral here, unlike in Numbers Rabbah 16:24 (discussed above) in which the Angel of Death pursues sinners. Rather, in this present text sinful action is not associated with death in any way. When David asks for more time, God explains that it is time for Solomon to become King. This points to death as a necessity for the renewal of life. One generation must die in order for the next generation to take its place.

Mazal

A surprising comment is attached to the conversation on death in BT, Moed Katan 28a that is discussed above. While much time is spent outlining ages of death and defining premature death, an alternative view is presented. In the first discussion, premature death is attributed to the transgressions of the individual. In this second piece from Moed Katan, death is attributed to another force. This comment is attributed to Raba, "לא בזכותא תליא מילתא אלא מזלא חיי בני ומזוני Life, children, and sustenance do not depend on merit, but rather on *mazal*." These three things are frequently discussed in biblical and rabbinic literature as being rewards for merit. Therefore, this comment is shocking. Creating many questions about its meaning, the term מזלא, however, is not defined. Jastrow's *Dictionary of the Talmud* suggests the definition of constellation, luck, or angel of destiny.[83]

This general statement attributed to Rabah is followed by the specific comparison between Rabbah (note this is a different rabbi than Rabah) and R. Hisda's lives and deaths. This comparison embodies the basic questions of suffering and of death itself. While many other texts reviewed in this thesis have been described academically, neatly outlining life expectancies and describing the consequences for transgression, this text, however, presents an emotional and challenging comparison. Both Rabbah and R. Hisda are described as righteous men "רבנן צדיקין". Yet, Rabbah had a difficult life and early death, and R. Hisda had only prosperity and longevity.

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[83]Jastrow, 755.

No further explanation is attached to this comparison. It only illustrates Rabah's comment concerning *mazal.*

While these comments do not directly state that God does not have control over death, it must be noted that God is noticably absent from this text. The question must be raised what exactly is the relationship between God and *mazal.* Other texts, however, establish God as the source of death. BT, Baba Batra 10a respects the strength of death, yet clearly states that death is among the ten strong things God created in the world. Discussed above, Genesis Rabbah 9:5 recognizes God as the creator of everything, including death. While humanity may not understand the role of death, R. Meir proclaimed faith in God, death's creator, writing in the margin of his Torah, "death is good," as a play on "Behold, it is very good."

The issue of premature death is closely linked to the questions of theodicy. Faith in God and God's compassion are challenged as the rabbis, just as we today, struggle with the issue of premature death. While many of the texts above link premature death to individual sin, other rabbinic texts present cases of premature death in which individual sin appears to be absent. The deaths of the righteous and young in any time are always the most challenging. Most surprizing is the final text that seems to imply that God may not have control over death. Further research on the concept of *mazal* may shed more light on this issue.

XIII. Conclusions

The primary sources discussed above produce a composite picture of the rabbinic theology of death that closely mirrors the survey presented in chapter VI. Tracing six biblical verses throughout the rabbinic sources creates a rich, deep discussion of the necessity of death. This discussion successfully extends the basic survey of the rabbinic view of death presented in chapter VI revealing the fullest depth of rabbinic theology. As expected, the primary texts do not produce a conclusive, systematic theology of death. Yet, within the composite picture there are several trends that should be emphasized.

While it was expected that the creation narratives would produce much material, it was surprising to find such an overwhelming emphasis on Gen. 2:17 and Gen. 3:19. The rabbinic discussion returns over and over to these verses and the creation narrative. The Divine economy holds a great fascination for the rabbis as they (and we today) struggle to understand the role and nature of humanity in creation. It is clear that the questions of death are deeply rooted in the questions of life for the rabbis. Death is presented as being part of the human condition. Humanity is created by God; death is part of the Divine design.

A majority of the texts address the connection between transgression and death. Given the rabbinic emphasis on human nature and behavior, this is not surprising. The rabbinic sources, however, do not agree on whose transgression exactly has introduced death to the human condition. The blame is directed towards the

characters of the Genesis narrative or even to each individual in every age. However, the rabbinic message stresses the importance of following God's command. God created humanity purposely, therefore, humanity must follow God's command. When generations or individuals sin, humanity is fortunate that God, like a benevolent parent, tempers punishment with compassion.

The discussion on the variations in the human life span is inconclusive, as the rabbinic texts strive to reconcile the various ages provided by the Bible. There is a sense that these are not predetermined life spans, but rather the biblical verses provide a loose reflection of reality. The biblical ages reflect common definitions of old age.

The discussion of premature death is also inconclusive. The difficult case of premature death is frequently linked to transgression. The rabbinic texts addressing this issue reveal the pain and confusion that people in every age have felt in the face of premature death. Eliminating God from the discussion on death, the BT, Moed Katan 28a text addressing *mazal* was surprising and requires further research in the future.

In conclusion, it is important to offer a few personal comments on the research process and findings. I was surprised to find the limited secondary material addressing the general topic of rabbinic theology and the specific topic of the rabbinic view of death. The sources that do exist are quite inbred quoting each other and the same rabbinic texts. Much work should be done in the future to wide this discussion. A study of liturgy may expand the rabbinic sources addressing theology and death.

This research project has been personally satisfying as it has exposed me to many rabbinic texts that have inspired me intellectually and spiritually. The range of writing has amazed me, as the rabbinic texts discuss death with humor, irony, anger, and pain. The rabbinic view of death is very human. I find much comfort in the rabbis' struggle to understand death, for it mirrors the endeavor of every generation to understand death, human nature and God. Many Jews would benefit from knowing this side of the discussion of death.

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