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Harris Bor

Death appears in many guises within Judaism. The Hebrew Bible, which forms the basis for all subsequent thinking, treats death as a punishment for sin and source of ritual impurity. While it acknowledges the virtue of a timely death, the emphasis remains on embodied life and the present moment. References to postmortem existence and resurrection appear, especially outside the Pentateuch, but these are understated.

One reason for this may be a weak version of the self, lacking firm boundaries between the inner and outer worlds. Only in later biblical texts do we see the emergence of the idea of a distinct soul capable of surviving bodily death. A strong division between this world and the next also served to distinguish Israelite religion from other cultures that worshipped ancestors. The biblical message is that only God, as the source of life, and his prophets can be counted on to guide human beings in this life.

Rabbinic literature, especially the Talmud (c. 500 CE), continues the biblical focus on life and expresses discomfort with death. It elaborates on laws of corpse impurity, mourning practices aimed at reintegrating mourners into the community and discourages martyrdom. Yet a counter-current valorizes dying for God, either through martyrdom or ritual enactments of death, viewing it as the ultimate expression of love. This may have been influenced by Roman persecutions post-70 CE and served as a psychological defence against the fear of death.

While the rabbis maintained the biblical view of the embodied self, they also absorbed Hellenistic ideas of the soul as ethereal. Rabbinic texts oscillate between belief in bodily resurrection, where body and soul are judged together, and the notion of a soul that exists independently and survives death. Like their Greek contemporaries, the rabbis envisioned the afterlife as a realm of divine judgment.

Rabbinic views on death were not systematically organized and remained open to external influences. Central to their thought was the belief in God's omniscience and justice, ensuring that individuals would be rewarded or punished, if not in this life, then in the next. The tension between bodily resurrection and spiritual afterlife persisted until the medieval period, when a more structured view emerged: souls of the deceased reside in the world to come before returning during the messianic era. Death also served an ethical function, reminding individuals of mortality, prompting repentance, and offering hope.

Medieval Jewish rationalists, influenced by Greek philosophy, developed more systematic, though not always consistent, views of death. They expanded on biblical and Rabbinic

ideas, describing multiple levels of the soul, with *neshama* as the highest. Jewish mystics adopted similar frameworks but added vivid depictions of the afterlife, often drawn from meditative experiences. Both traditions upheld the virtue of cleaving to God in death and the belief that love transcends mortality.

With the Enlightenment, Jewish thinkers retained belief in the afterlife but sought to rationalize it. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, modern Jewish philosophers like Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, and Joseph B. Soloveitchik display an interest in death characteristic of the age in which they lived. Authenticity requires death to be faced, rather than avoided. Soloveitchik grounded these reflections in traditional Jewish law, emphasizing the enduring value of life and trust in divine justice.

The current entry has attempted a largely historical approach tracing Jewish conceptions of death from biblical times through Rabbinic, medieval, and modern periods. The entry also attempts to address the theological meaning of Jewish rituals surrounding death.

This approach allows the reader to gain a sense of the development of ideas, including the move from a communitarian view to one focused more on the individual, and the interplay of ideas of embodiment and belief in a soul capable of existing apart from a body.

Keywords: Judaism, Afterlife, Resurrection, Embodiment, Fear, Love, Hell, Heaven, Mourning, Burial, Kaddish, Transhumanism

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1 The Hebrew Bible

1.1 The origin of death

Within the Hebrew Bible, death first makes its appearance in the third chapter of Genesis. Adam and Eve are forbidden by God from eating of the tree of knowledge, ‘for as soon as you eat of it, you shall die’ (Gen 2:17; see also Gen 3:3). The consequence of failing the test for Eve is pain in childbirth and becoming subservient to her husband (Gen 3:16). The consequence for Adam is a life of toil and death, ‘for dust you are, and to dust you shall return’ (Gen 3:19).

The association between knowledge and death found in the story is suggestive. On eating from the tree of knowledge, Adam and Eve became self-aware. Self-awareness leads to an appreciation of our own temporality and inevitable death, something which the existentialists urge us to embrace. Knowledge also leads to scientific advancement, which both benefits humanity and has the power to destroy if not developed alongside a moral sensibility. As humans we also strive for endless knowledge in the form of data, yet data can obscure and overwhelm us.

1.2 Death as punishment

From death in the abstract, the Hebrew Bible moves to murder, more specifically fratricide, the slaying of Abel by Cain, for which Cain is placed into eternal exile (Gen 4:8–14). We also learn early on that death is a fitting punishment for serious crimes. The corrupt generation of the flood deserve destruction (Gen 6:13). Death also strikes individuals such as Aaron’s, the High Priest’s, sons, after they bring a ‘strange fire’ into the tabernacle. Aaron ‘remained silent’ (Lev 10:1–3), which could reflect an acceptance of God’s decree, shock, or the expected response to personal loss of a person with obligations to the public (Held 2017: 32). The appropriate response to death more generally is a limited period of mourning followed by a return to the community (Gen 25:1–11; Num 33:38; Deut 34:1–12).

Biblical law details sins for which capital punishment is sanctioned, including murder (Exod 21:12; Lev 24:17; Num 35:16), but the rabbis limited the applicability of such laws by imposing conditions on them, including the requirement that the two witnesses required by biblical law provide a warning to the perpetrator prior to the offence (TB *Sanh.* 40b).

According to biblical law, someone who kills accidentally might claim asylum in one of the designated cities of refuge and cannot be avenged if found innocent of murder, provided he remains there until the death of the High Priest (Num 35).

Sin in a more general sense does not always result in death. Repentance is forever possible (Jonah 4:2–11). Justice must always be tempered with mercy (Ps 89:15). There is

also a Jewish tradition of challenging God on his actions and seeking to persuade him to spare those who might otherwise be destroyed.

In Genesis, Noah is described as 'righteous in his generation' (Gen 6:9), which suggests to the rabbis that he would not have been righteous in other generations (b. *Sanh.* 108a). The problem, it seems, is that Noah failed to pray to God to withhold his anger or encourage the people to repent. Abraham, in contrast, was fully righteous because he objected to God's decision to destroy the wicked city of Sedom, bargaining with God to allow that city to be spared (Gen 18:22–25). Abraham did not succeed but his approach is adopted by others, including Moses following the Hebrews' worship of the golden calf when God threatened their destruction (Exod 32:11–14). Intercession becomes an important characteristic of the Hebrew prophets (Jer 12:1), and in later Jewish theology.

While Abraham displayed a sense of justice and mercy when it came to Sedom, he took a more passive position in the episode of the binding of Isaac. Abraham was told by God to sacrifice his son and was willing to do so, but God stayed his hand at the last moment (Gen 1:18–22). There are numerous interpretations of this episode, but one firm message is that God does not desire death as a form of devotion, a characteristic of pagan sacrifice (Raphael 2009: 30; although some have doubted whether this extended to child sacrifice at the time, Boehm 2004: 145–156).

1.3 Embracing life

The value of life over death is confirmed explicitly in Moses' speech in Deuteronomy:

> I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life – if you and your offspring would live. (Deut 30:19)

The call to choose life reflects later wisdom literature in which the godly and wise path is associated with life, and the ungodly and ignorant path is associated with death (Prov 11:19; 14:27).

Underlying the association between the godly path and life is a belief in God's justice, but the advice is good regardless. A wise person will likely follow a healthy regimen which ought to increase longevity. The godly path is also inherently life affirming. Ibn Ezra (1089–1167), the medieval exegete, comments on the words 'choose life' that 'life is love' (Deut 30:19:3). The theme that love stands contrary to death is found in other Jewish literature (e.g. Song 8:6).

Death, then, including contact with the dead, in the Hebrew Bible is to be avoided: 'Those who touch the corpse of any human being shall be impure for seven days' (Num 19:11; see also 31:19). A person or open vessel in a tent with a corpse becomes unclean

(Num 19:14–15). There are elaborate codes dealing with the specifics of impurity and purification, including the rite of the red heifer, whose ashes are used to purify one from death but makes the priest involved in the ashes' preparation impure (Num 19:1–22). The suggestion is that one can never truly remove the effects of death. The commandment of the red heifer is seen as the prime example of a law without a reason (Rashi on Num 19:2), maybe because death (its presence and purification) is the ultimate mystery. Priests must not come in contact with the dead and are permitted to defile themselves only for seven close relatives (Lev 21:1–4). The High Priest's restrictions are even greater. He cannot defile himself for anyone (Lev 21:11).

Yet, there are aspects of the biblical tradition which encourage sacrifice. Jon D. Levenson (1993) identifies several approaches to human sacrifice within the biblical tradition. One approach allows for human sacrifice (see Exod 22:28, 'You shall give me the firstborn among your sons'; Micah 6:7; Judg 11:29–40; 2 Kgs 3:26–27). Another requires redemption of the firstborn in place of sacrifice (Exod 13:2, 11–13; Exod 34:19–20). A further approach views child sacrifice in negative terms (Gen 22; Jer 19:5; Ezek 20:25–26). The attitude to firstborn sacrifice is relevant because the People of Israel are associated with the firstborn of God (Exod 4:21–23) (Levenson 1993: 37).

Levenson sees a progression from an attitude which perceives value in child sacrifice to one which decries it, but the notion of sacrifice remains. The Levite is substituted for the firstborn and dedicates himself to divine service, and this provides the background to the law of the redemption of the firstborn son with coins (Num 18:15–16), practised to this day (Levenson 1993: 47).

1.4 The soul and afterlife

Although the Hebrew Bible contains no developed view of the soul or the afterlife, the later books do appear to hold to some form of postmortem existence.

In Genesis, Jacob warns his son, Reuben, that if harm befalls Reuben's brother Benjamin on his journey to Egypt 'you will cause me to descend to Sheol with my white head bowed in grief' (Gen 42:38). No detail is provided on what takes place there. In the Prophets, Sheol is portrayed as a subterranean world in which the dead seemingly reside. King Saul summons Samuel, the prophet, from there with the help of the witch of Endor (1 Sam 28:3). Sheol is described variously as a land of dust (Dan 12:2), as being divided into chambers (Prov 7:27), gated (Ps 9:14), secured with bars (Job 17:16), or under the sea (Job 26:5). Other biblical words to describe the place of the dead are *abbadon* (ruin) (Job 26:6), *bor* (pit) (Isa 14:15), and *shakhat* (pit of destruction) (Isaiah 38:17). However, the nature of postmortem existence and what happens in these realms is never explained.

Death is often expressed in the Bible as a ‘gathering in’ to one’s people. Jacob says: ‘I am about to be gathered to my people. Bury me with my fathers […]’ (Gen 49:29). The same phrase is used in connection with other biblical figures including Moses and Aaron (Num 27:13). Although tempting to see the expression as referring to the reunification of the deceased with his dead relatives in the afterlife, the text makes no such claim. The expression may be intended to mean that the deceased has gone the same way as his forebears or achieved a ‘social immortality’ by becoming part of the communal memory, as suggested by the philosopher Hermann Cohen (1842–1918) (Raphael 2009: 35)

Medieval Jewish exegetes assumed that the term *nefesh*, and associated terms *ruach* and *neshama* (all taken to refer to the soul), mean that the Bible believed, like the Greeks, that humans have souls independent of their bodies. Simcha Paull Raphael, the psychotherapist and founder of the Da'at Institute for Death Awareness, considers there to be a difference between a *nefesh chaya* (living soul) (Gen 2:7) and a *nefesh Met* (dead soul) (Lev 21:11; Num 6:6). Death transforms a person from a *nefesh chaya* into a *nefesh Met*. He writes that a *nefesh Met* is ‘a depotentiated psychophysical entity’ – the dead continue but in a ‘weakened, faded condition’ (Raphael 2009: 55).

Matthew Suriano, a professor of the Hebrew Bible, in contrast, maintains that *nefesh* relates in its earliest uses only to the life force which illuminates a person during their lifetime, not as in later Greek and Jewish literature in which a spirit exists apart from the body, constituting the essence of the individual. He writes that the term *nefesh* is ‘best understood as an organizing principle. It is a principle of being that could be enacted within certain contexts, embodied through different means, and empowering in its ability to affirm identity’ (Suriano 2018: 176).

James Kugel, another professor of the Hebrew Bible, who has considered the broader question of selfhood within the biblical tradition, makes a similar claim when he writes that

> for much of the biblical period, there simply were no souls. People were people. They had breath that came into their lungs, and went out again, and so long as this happened they were alive; it is this that neshamah mostly refers to. Similarly, when ancient Israelites talked about their nefesh or their ruach, for the most part they meant nothing like ‘soul’ in our sense; they mostly meant ‘me’. (Kugel 2018: 191)

Kugel considers also that the original biblical ‘soul’ was not thought to be immortal, but instead comprised a semipermeable mind ‘whose innermost chambers are accessible to an inquisitive God’ (Kugel 2018: 187).

Only later did Israelites begin thinking of the soul as an internal essence of the human being and repurposed the earlier terminology to convey this. While some consider this change to be a result of Greek influence, Kugel links the change to a new conception

of God as transcendent and the development of a stronger sense of self, reflected in statements like the following from the Thanksgiving Hymns found in the Dead Sea Scrolls: ‘I have known You, my God, through the ruach that you put inside me’ (Kugel 2018: 199).

A case could indeed be made that humans first perceived of themselves as being part of the totality; there being no hard edges between the human and divine and that they eventually gained a sense of self or independence, which allowed them to form inter-human and divine–human relationships, which lie at the heart of our humanity. The process reflects that undergone by individuals. There is value in both these positions. The first position reminds us of our commonality; the latter allows for difference and relationship (Bor 2021: 29, 124–128).

An important element in human maturation is the ability to put the ‘we’ before the ‘I’. The biblical focus on the life of the community might assist in this process of unselfing. The reward promised by the Bible for following God’s commands is this-worldly and communal rather than individual (Deut 1:14–15; Isa 13:9). Similarly, the primary concern of the prophets are the Israelites or other nations, not individual selves (Amos 3:2; Ezek 11:17–21; 36:25–32).

Some see the absence of interest in the afterlife found in early biblical literature as a protest against the prevalent culture (Raphael 2009: 50). It was not uncommon for ancient cultures to worship dead ancestors or offer them food, practices absent from the Hebrew Bible (Hos 9:4; Jer 16:6–7). An attitude which sets the ancestors at a distance from the living may better allow the living to forge their own path without being shackled by the perceived judgment of their forebears.

1.5 Resurrection

The concept of resurrection first appears in the prophecy of Ezekiel (sixth century BCE). He sees a valley filled with dry bones that are transformed into living bodies: ‘They came to life and stood on their feet, a vast multitude’ (Ezek 37:1–8, 10). The image may have initially been intended to refer to national renewal rather than a literal resurrection, but the latter idea took hold. A concern with resurrection upholds embodied outlook in which body and soul will be reunited at some point in the future.

In the prophecy of Isaiah, righteous Israelites are rewarded at the end of days through physical resurrection:

> Oh, let your dead revive! Let corpses arise! Awake and shout for joy, You who dwell in the dust! – For your dew is like the dew on fresh growth; You make the land of the shades come to life. (Isa 26:19)

By the second century BCE, Daniel speaks of the resurrection of both righteous and wicked Israelites. The righteous will awaken to everlasting life and the wicked to everlasting abhorrence (Dan 12:1–2; Raphael 2009: 64–65).

2 Afterlife in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha

The period of the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha (fifth century BCE to second century CE) bridges the biblical and Rabbinic periods and is pivotal in the development of Jewish teachings about the afterlife. Although the rabbis referred to such works as ‘extraneous’ (m. *Sanh.* 10:1), they nevertheless exerted an influence on Jewish thought. Views of death and the afterlife in these works are not consistent, but they share similar themes.

The works frequently refer to resurrection, the final judgment, the afterlife, and the different fates which await the righteous and wicked. In early Apocryphal texts the idea of the last judgment is viewed as applying to the nation, but later writings evince a stronger focus on the individual (Raphael 2009: 88).

In the Testament of Abraham (possibly first to second century BCE), the angel Michael is sent to prepare Abraham for death. Michael finds the task difficult because Abraham is too good to die and attempts to defeat death (a subject treated in the work with humour). Abraham eventually dies but, through his encounters, he learns about justice and intercedes for others. The message of the work is to embrace acts of kindness and to trust in the wisdom which recognizes this world as futile and the future world as one of ‘peace, fervent joy and eternal life’ (20:15; see Allison 2003: 51).

Other apocryphal and pseudepigraphal works display a body/soul dualism typical of Hellenistic literature. So, in Jubilees (c. 170 CE) the souls of the righteous are said to ‘increase in joy’ while their bodies ‘rest in the earth’ (Jubilees 23:31).

However, as indicated, the concept of resurrection suggests a close connection between body and soul. In 2 Maccabees (c. 150 BCE) resurrection is promised only to Israelites, perhaps as a solace to the families of those warriors fighting the Syrian Greeks, but other works promise resurrection to other nations too (4 Ezra 7:37). In some works, the resurrected body is spiritualized. In 2 Baruch (c. 100 CE), for example, the faces of the righteous postresurrection are described as turning into a luminous beauty (53:1), as having angelic splendour (51:5), and as ageless (51:9; Figueras 2019: 44). Through such imagery the mind/body divide is made less extreme.

The term Sheol also makes frequent appearance. In 2 Baruch, Sheol is a realm of silence (2 Baruch 11:5). In Ben Sirach (c. 200 BCE), it is a place of darkness where the dead cannot praise the Lord (7:28; 22:11l).

The First Book of Enoch (c. 160 BCE) introduces the notion of *gehenna* (hell), 'the accursed valley' (1 Enoch 22:11) or 'abyss […] full of fire' (1 Enoch 90:26) to which wicked souls are banished after the final judgment. *gehenna* is modelled on the Valley of Hinom found in the South of Jerusalem, which may have been the place of child sacrifice in ancient times (Raphael 2009: 77). *gehenna* is sometimes associated with Sheol (1 Enoch 22:11).

The same book introduces imagery drawn from Greek myth. Enoch describes the netherworld as containing a river of fire, a great sea, and great rivers (1 Enoch 17:5). He also describes three 'hollow places' where the dead wait pending the resurrection; one for the righteous, one for sinners, and one for irredeemable sinners (1 Enoch 22:3–15; Figueras 2019: 15).

The Fourth Book of Ezra (c. 100 CE) discusses resurrection and a final judgment at which the righteous and the wicked will be judged separately. There is also a heavenly abode where the righteous are destined to 'shine as the sun' and 'be made like the light of the stars' (7:98). Perhaps interpreting the call to 'choose life' in Deuteronomy, the book places the ability to attain eternal life firmly in human hands: 'Choose life, that you may live!' (4 Ezra 7:127–130; Figueras 2019: 46).

3 Death and the afterlife in Rabbinic Judaism

Rabbinic writings on death represent both a continuation of earlier traditions and a development, but are not always consistent.

As in the Hebrew Bible, throughout the Talmud the rabbis are most interested in life in this world. The body and soul are a combined entity and will be judged together at the end of days:

> The Holy Blessed One puts the soul back into the body and judges them both as a single being. He calls on the heavens to bring forth the soul and he calls on the earth below so that he can judge the body along with it. (b. *Sanh.* 91a)

In a similar vein, the messianic world is sometimes portrayed as a world similar to this one but without the usual hardships:

> In this world one has the trouble to harvest grapes and press them; but in the World to Come a person will bring a single grape in a wagon or a ship, store it in the corner of his house, and draw from it enough wine to fill a large barrel. (b. *Ketub.* 111b)

This future world, into which people will be resurrected, is referred to as *olam haba* (the world to come) (b. *Ketub.* 111b).

The rabbis' concern with physical existence is reflected in Jewish legal concerns, which cover every aspect of life. A life of renunciation is most often looked down upon. One Talmudic passage tells the story of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, the sage later associated with the *Zohar*, a mystical work, spending years in a cave where he went to escape the Romans. On emerging, Rabbi Shimon noticed a man ploughing a field and sneered at him on account of forsaking 'the life eternal for the life temporal' (b. *Shabb.* 33b). Rabbi Shimon is castigated for his attitude. The physical and temporal is where meaning is to be found. This concern with the physical earned the rabbis opprobrium from early Christians who referred to the Jews as 'carnal Israel' (Augustine, *Tractatus adversus Judaeos*; Boyarin 1995: 1).

On the other hand, there are numerous other statements which adopt Hellenistic dualistic conceptions of the soul. The soul exists separately from the body (*Genesis Rabbah* 100:7; *Leviticus Rabbah* 18:1), and in the future, it will be judged independently (*Leviticus Rabbah* 4:5). After death, the soul will dwell in a postmortem realm, not a messianic future. This realm is also referred to as *olam haba*.

As in later biblical texts, as well as the apocrypha and pseudepigrapha, the rabbis are keen to portray the future world as one of judgment:

> when a man departs to his eternal home, all his deeds are enumerated before him and he is told: such and such a thing have you done, in such and such a place on that day. (b. *Ta'an* 11a)

Even superfluous remarks that pass between a husband and wife are judged (b. *Hag.* 5b).

Other than judgment, what precisely takes place in *olam haba* is unclear because '"no eye has seen, and no ear has heard, O God, beside You" [Isa 65:3], so God alone knows what He prepared for him that waits for them' (b. *Ber.* 34b). However, several statements depict righteous souls continuing to learn Torah in the 'Academy on High' (b. *Ber.* 17a–18b; b. *B. Metz.* 85b–86a; b. *Mak.* 11b). A Midrash similarly says of death:

> [M]y law will guide you in your path in this world; it will watch over you in your sleep, at the hour of death; and when you awake, it will converse with you in *olam haba*' (*Sifre* Lev 18:4; see also m. *Avot* 6:9).

The idea blurs the distinction between this world and the next. One is a continuation of the other. A person attains closeness to God through learning Torah in the world to come, just as he does in this world. Torah on this view has infinite and cosmic significance. The idea of the 'Academy on High' also implicitly explains why the Hebrew Bible does not concern

itself with the afterlife. There is strictly speaking no afterlife, only a life with God and life without God.

Michael Fishbane deals with a related theme in his discussion on Rabbinic statements that ‘whoever wants to live should kill himself’ (b. *Tamid* 32a) and ‘[t]he Torah is realized only by one who kills himself for it’ (b. *Git.* 57b). This injunction becomes associated within the Rabbinic tradition with the biblical command to love God with all one’s heart, soul, and might (Deut 6:5). The ultimate love is being ready to give up one’s life in the service of God.

Another Talmudic passage similarly associates Torah and death, but this time at the point of revelation. In it, Rabbi Joshua ben Levi states that the children of Israel expired on hearing each of the Ten Commandments, and needed to be resurrected after each one (Fishbane 1994: 17). The statement is based on the phrase: ‘my soul departed when he spoke’ (Song 5:6; b. *Shabb.* 88b). As above, revelation operates on the border of the material and spiritual realms, and can transport one from one to the other.

The idea of seeking death has its parallel in Plato’s statement that the ‘philosopher desires death’ (*Phaedo* 64b). The purpose of such death is to release the soul from the confines of the body. Philo of Alexandria, the Jewish Hellenist, adopts this idea when commenting on the death of Aaron’s sons, Nadav and Avihu (Lev 10:1–3), described above. They died in order to live (Fishbane 1994: 20–21).

Fishbane further explains how the idea of self-sacrifice becomes associated with the ‘kiss of God’, another idea found in the biblical Song of Songs: ‘Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth’ (Song 1:2). The truly pious including Moses are said to have died this way (m. *B. Batra* 17a).

He writes that medieval Jewish rituals aimed at simulating death, suppressing earthly desires, and releasing the soul from its confines. At the core of such practices is a ‘self-nullification’ and ascetic piety (Fishbane 1994: 92). Such practices form part of a tradition within Judaism which views martyrdom as virtuous:

> Not only can physical death help atone for sins committed on earth, but a perfect martyrdom has the singular power to repair spiritual realities in the divine realm. At this level […] heavenly love is activated by human death. (Fishbane 1994: 126)

The *Eleh Ezkara* prayer, recited on Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement), provides an example of how martyrdom became integrated into Jewish practice. The prayer is based on ancient midrashim (b. *Avodah Zarah* 17b–18a; p. *Ber.* 9.7; p. *Sotah* 5.7) and describes the cruel deaths of ten rabbis said to have been carried out during the Hadrianic persecutions (second century CE). Rabbi Akiva, the most famous of the rabbis murdered, has his skin

raked with iron combs. Before dying, he utters the Shema prayer declaring God's oneness with great intent and is pleased that he has the opportunity to fulfil the command to love God with all his heart and soul.

Although there is Rabbinic literature valuing martyrdom, the Talmud (and what has become normative Jewish Law) forbids martyrdom except when a person is faced with choice of whether to die or commit murder, certain types of immorality or idolatry, or during times of open persecution (b. *Sanh.* 74a; see also Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Basic Principles, 5:1–3).

Rabbinic statements depicting *olam haba* as a postmortem realm may reflect a waning belief in resurrection following the destruction of the temple in 70 CE. Raphael considers such a conception to always have 'remained secondary to the view that *Olam Ha-Ba* was a collective time of redemption at the end-of-days' (Raphael 2009: 102).

Indeed, in the second blessing of the Amidah, the standing silent prayer instituted in the Second Temple Period (586 CE–70 CE) and still recited today, God is described as the 'resurrector of the dead'. While there is also a reference to God keeping faith with those who 'lie in the dust', there is no explicit mention of a postmortem existence other than resurrection.

In general, the rabbis absorbed the imagery and ideas of earlier texts and the surrounding culture when describing death. They used these to creatively explore earlier concepts, often for a moral purpose such as to instil fear or encourage better behaviour. The concepts of *olam haba* and *gehenna*, for example, allow God to put right apparent injustices in this world, and serve a pedagogic purpose by offering both a carrot and stick.

With the Rabbinic tradition, there are repeated references to the angel of death, sometimes called Samael (*Targum Jonathan*, Gen 3:6; *Deut Rabbah* 11:10), and descriptions of the experience of the soul following death, including the punishment to be meted out to the wicked in *gehenna* or the reward with the righteous in *olam haba* or *Gan Eden* (Garden of Eden) (*Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* 30, 191b; *Ex. Rabbah* 2:2; Midrash on Ps 6:6, 31:6).

gehenna is sometimes associated with Sheol and the other places where the dead go as listed above (Midrash on Ps 11:6), and there are elaborate speculations about its size (b. *Ta'anit* 10a) and location. Like Sheol, *gehenna* is underground (b. *Rosh Hash.* 16b). It is also variously described as a place of fire, snow, hail, brimstone, smoke, and darkness (b. *Hag.* 13a; b. *Menah.* 99b). *Gan Eden*, paradise, has both a heavenly and physical aspect (b. *Tamid* 32b).

There are frequent discussions about what types of people are deserving of *olam haba* or *gehenna*. For example, those excluded include those who make derogatory remarks

about scholars after their deaths (b. *Ber.* 19a), those who cause the community to sin (b. *Yoma* 89a), or 'rich men of Babylon' (b. *Betzah* 32b). 'All Israelites have a share in the World to Come' (m. *Sanh.* 10.1). However, Gentiles and even the wicked are also capable of participation (*Genesis Rabbah* 8:6), but those who deny *olam haba* are excluded (m. *Sanh.* 10:2–3). *gehenna* is generally thought of as a temporary state, lasting just twelve months and having a purifying purpose (b. *Rosh Hash.* 17a).

In the late Rabbinic period, there are numerous texts dealing with the afterlife which follow the style of Christian and Islamic writings. *Masekhet Hibbut Ha-Kever* (Tractate of the Pangs of the Grave) and *Masekhet Gehinom* (Tractate of Hell) (both c. first century CE) contain vivid descriptions of what goes in the realm of punishment. The latter, for example, depicts hell as containing compartments, and in every compartment 7,000 holes, and in each hole 7,000 scorpions (Raphael 2009: 135). *Masekhet Gan Eden* (Tractate of the Garden of Eden), in contrast, contains descriptions of the rewards that await the righteous in the afterlife (Raphael 2009: 137).

4 Medieval Jewish philosophy

In the medieval period, Jews engaged for the first time in systematic philosophical speculation on the soul, reward and punishment, and the afterlife, and numerous works were produced under the influence of Greek, Arabic, and Christian thought. These works tend to view at least one aspect of the soul as existing independently from the body and see immortality in largely intellectual terms.

In *Sefer Ha-Emunot Ve-Ha-Daot* (The Book of Beliefs and Opinions), Saadia Gaon (882–942) discusses the soul's origins and essence. Sadia considers the soul to be a substance implanted into the foetus prior to birth with a power to become immortal (VI, ch. 1). The soul has three divisions: *ruach* (appetitive awareness), *nefesh* (emotion), and *neshamah* (reasoning and cognition) (VI, ch. 3); but ultimately the soul constitutes one agent (VI, ch. 5).

Saadia synthesizes Rabbinic and Greek philosophical thought. Like the rabbis, Saadia accepts that a person's conduct in this world will be judged in the world to come and effects the quality of the future world, but good conduct is not enough to secure immortality. A person must also connect to the 'active intellect' through the study of philosophy (Raphael 2009: 177).

Saadia further espoused the belief in bodily resurrection (Raphael 2009: 178). He saw this as comprising two stages. The first stage is bodily resurrection of righteous Jews in the Land of Israel. The second stage involves the righteous and wicked. In this second stage, the world will be renewed (VI, chs 7–9).

Moses Maimonides (1138–1204), the great Jewish rationalist, follows Saadia Gaon in framing Rabbinic views of the afterlife through concepts drawn from Greek philosophy. As in the Rabbinic tradition, Maimonides portrays both a postmortem individual immortality (which for him centres on the intellect) and a world of bodily resurrection. While there are attempts to reconcile these two conceptions, there is room for debate on how successful this is and where Maimonides places his strongest emphasis.

In his *Commentary on the Mishnah* (*Perek Chelek*), Maimonides notes that there have been many misconceptions regarding Rabbinic teaching about the afterlife. He wishes to lead his readership to a more philosophical understanding of the afterlife than the one they likely hold by clarifying terms used by the rabbis to describe the afterlife.

In both *Perek Chelek* and his *Mishneh Torah* (his major Halakhic work), Maimonides insists that *olam haba*, the postmortem afterlife, is free from corporeality. In the latter, he writes:

> In the world to come, there is no body or physical form, only the souls of the righteous alone, without a body, like the ministering angels. Since there is no physical form, there is neither eating, drinking, nor any of the other bodily functions of this world like sitting, standing, sleeping, death, sadness, laughter, and the like […] Rather, the righteous will sit with their crowns on their heads and delight in the radiance of the Divine Presence [*Tractate Berachot* 17a]. (*Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance 8:2; Maimonides [n.d.])

Ultimately, however, he adopts the position we have seen in the Talmud that the good that lies beyond this life (and even beyond the messianic period) cannot be known (*Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance 8:7; *Perek Chelek*, 204).

In various places, Maimonides distinguishes spirit (*nefesh* or *ruach*) from *neshamah*. The latter is a bodily-dependent soul, which ceases to exist when the body dies (Stern 2024: note 14; *Mishneh Torah*, Foundations of the Law 4:9; *Guide* I:41). It is the latter which defines our humanity. By intellect, Maimonides does not mean the act of cognizing but understanding, after which the person has no need of the senses (Stern 2024: 4).

Maimonides, following Aristotle as interpreted by Alexander of Aprhodisias, distinguished between (1) the material intellect, (2) the acquired intellect, and (3) the agent/active intellect. The agent/active intellect is often associated with God himself, although Maimonides treats it as one of God's creations (*Guide* II:11; Lebens 2023: 5).

Following Al-Farabi and Aristotelian conceptions, Maimonides grants immortality only to those who connect their intellect with the active intellect, which is the closest anyone can get to God. In Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed*, the active intellect is compared to the sun whose light makes sight possible, by bringing potentiality to actuality (*Guide* II:12). Like the sun, the active intellect is in constant action, and only impeded by the

matter it encounters. If matter is in a proper state to receive the light of the sun, it will be illuminated. The task of the individual therefore is to purify the intellect so that it can become illuminated by the active intellect, which is always shining (Leaman 2011: 166).

Josef Stern observes that the way to acquire such intellectual perfection is to achieve a love of God, which mirrors that between two lovers: ‘The love of God should possess the heart of His lovers [who] think about it constantly’ (*Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance 10:3; Stern 2024: 9). In his *Guide*, Maimonides describes the ‘passionate’ love of God as a kiss, linking it to the deaths of Aaron, Moses, and Miriam discussed above. In the same passage, he portrays aging as a positive development. As the body weakens, an individual can concentrate more on matters of the spirit (*Guide* III: 51).

Samuel Lebens observes that for Maimonides ‘the active intellect, along with all of its propositional content, some of which you once had the pleasure of grasping, is all that really survives’, and questions whether this is a form of afterlife at all because what survives is not personhood but the things that a person has learnt during the course of her lifetime (Lebens 2023: 5). Maimonides, therefore, appears to propose a highly intellectualist view of the soul and afterlife.

Lebens notes Aristotle’s influence on Maimonides and wonders what Maimonides would have thought if he were alive today. He suggests that, given Maimonides’ general approach of reconciling tradition with the contemporary scientific consensus, he would adopt a dualist approach, which might be summarized as follows:

> We are Cartesian souls, characterised by distinctive personalities, sensibilities, and emotional landscapes. While embodied, our brains provide us with an interface for accumulating and accessing experiences of the world, knowledge, and memories. When we die, we no longer have a body with which to accumulate new embodied experiences. Instead, the embodied experiences that we had when alive continue to shape the contours of our personality and inner lives in our afterlives. (Lebens 2023: 10)

Lebens notes that, once Maimonides’ position is updated, the accusation that Maimonides views the afterlife in purely intellectualist terms falls away. On the updated version of Maimonides, the self continues to be shaped by the personality and inner lives that we cultivated while alive. The updated version of the afterlife also does not depend on cognitive excellence but simply having been alive. And while an objection can be raised that some people have miserable lives through no fault of their own, the possibility of a fuller and happier life following resurrection may assist in mitigating such a situation. With Stern and Rabbinic attitudes encountered above, Lebens makes the further observation that, according to the updated view, to the extent that we live a good life, we experience something of infinity right now (Lebens 2023: 13), a theme we have seen in the Rabbinic tradition.

As indicated above, in addition to depicting an intellectualist concept of *Olam Habba*, Maimonides describes the messianic era. In *Perek Chelek*, he writes that the Days of the Messiah are a future historical era where natural and physical laws remain in place but the Davidic monarchy is restored, and people are free to pursue the knowledge of God in peace. Maimonides also briefly mentions resurrection and the future return of the soul to the physical body (Stern 2024: 3). The significance, then, of the messianic era is that it will provide the ideal circumstances to achieve perfection. It will not involve overt miracles. In his *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides cites the Talmud (b. *Sanh.* 91b) to claim that there is no difference between the present age and the messianic era, except that in this world Israel is subjugated to the Gentile nations (*Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance 8:7).

In the above account, Maimonides did not deal with resurrection in any detail, and for this he drew criticism. However, he had written elsewhere in the same work that anyone who does not believe in this principle forfeits his share in the world to come (*Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance 3:6).

In 1191, Maimonides penned his *Treatise on Resurrection* in response to a critique of his earlier views on resurrection, following the appearance of a false messiah in Yemen and reports of widespread doubt about belief in resurrection. Samuel ben Ali, head of the Baghdad Academy, had accused Maimonides of denying such a belief, based on his denial of bodily immortality. In this treatise, Maimonides reasserts his position that resurrection is ‘a cornerstone of the Torah’ and that there is no portion in the world to come for those who deny this. Maimonides further explained that he did not deal extensively with resurrection in earlier writings because it falls outside the laws of nature, whereas immortality is a natural phenomenon and amenable to philosophic inquiry (Raphael 2009: 185).

Maimonides’ overall position appears to be that there will be a resurrection, leading to a long messianic period after which people will die and obtain *olam haba* (Lebens 2023: 3–4). Yet some see within Maimonides a sharp distinction between his philosophical views which focus on a disembodied postmortem existence and a religious faith in the world to come comprising bodily resurrection following the arrival of the Messiah.

While it is tempting to consider his philosophical position as primary (the messianic period is, after all, followed by an intellectualist *olam haba*), Maimonides may have seen equal pedagogical purpose in the traditional view which instils a sense that one’s actions impact future generations (Leaman 2011: 171–173).

Gersonides (1288–1244), another medieval Jewish thinker, also wrote on the afterlife. He was influenced by Maimonides, Averroes, and Aristotle. In *Milchemet Hashem* (Wars of

the Lord), Gersonides follows Maimonides by viewing immortality in terms of intellectual perfection:

> Man is immortal in so far as he attains the intellectual perfection that is open to him. This means that man becomes immortal only if and to the extent that he acquires knowledge of what he can in principle know. (Raphael 2009: 189)

For Gersonides each person has an acquired intellect, which is a reflection of the active intellect, the source of all knowledge. After bodily death, all the knowledge one has accumulated during one's lifetime is known perpetually without the emotional or sensory baggage of the material intellect. This is largely a restatement of Maimonides, but Gersonides also deals with the issue left open by Maimonides of how survival of the intellect gives rise to personal immortality. Gersonides' answer is that the amount and character of the knowledge acquired by an individual is what gives each acquired intellect its character (Lebens 2023: 6). Lebens' Maimonidean update (above) reflects Gersonides' approach.

5 Kabbalah

Death and the afterlife receive extensive treatment within the Jewish mystical tradition.

Nachmanides (1194–1217), a legalist and mystic, starts his treatise on death, *Torat ha-Adam*, by criticizing philosophers for trying to overcome the fear of death. Nachmanides sees such fear, as well as the sadness we experience when someone dies, as appropriate reactions. Death is sad because death has not always been inevitable; 'man's constitution is for forever-lasting life'. It is only due to Adam's sin that death came into the world (*Torat ha-Adam*, Kitvei HaRamban 2:12). Nachmanides therefore shares with Ecclesiastes the belief that there is 'a time to cry' and 'a time to mourn' (Eccl 3:4).

Nachmanides is also concerned by philosophers' attempts to find equanimity by distancing themselves from their rootedness in existence: 'They let go of the past and deny tomorrow' (*Torat ha-Adam*, Kitvei HaRamban 2:14) and seek an escape from concrete existence (Halbertal 2020: 105). In contrast with the philosophers, Nachmanides insists that we resolutely must face the world and our personal circumstances, which includes sadness and death (Halbertal 2020: 106).

Given Nachmanides' focus on this world, it is unsurprising that he associates the world to come with the resurrection. At this time, souls will be restored to their bodies and exist in this unified state forever (*Torat ha-Adam*, Kitvei HaRamban 2:304; Halbertal 2020: 107). This era will be characterized by a lack of desire, and no law, politics, or history will apply. The Torah will also have no application to this end period because Torah has relevance only to a world of desire and individual will (Halbertal 2020: 120).

Nachmanides thus associates immortality with an absence of will or desire. The converse is also true. Death exists only because of individual will or desire. Adam's sin came about through such craving, which resulted in his ability to distinguish between good and bad. For Nachmanides, the path to salvation involves nullifying the will, but unlike for many mystics, the nullification does not involve clinging only to the spiritual but unifying both body and soul with the divine. The existence of the body in the world to come reflects the restoration of Adam in the Garden of Eden.

In his treatment of death and the afterlife, Nachmanides takes issue with Maimonides' highly intellectualized position (Halbertal 2020: 121). He also thought that Maimonides had failed to place sufficient emphasis on resurrection or the days of the messiah, seeing it simply as a stepping stone to intellectual bliss (Halbertal 2020: 122). In contrast to Maimonides, Nachmanides envisages resurrection as a reunification of the soul with the body, but a body which is luminous and of more subtle material than our current bodies (Halbertal 2020: 119).

The reason that the soul needs to be resurrected with the body is because the human form contains profound secrets. For Nachmanides, the body is representative of the *sefiriotic* system. Adam had such a luminescent body prior to the sin, but sin caused matter, including his own body, to become coarser (Halbertal 2020: 126). Unlike Maimonides, Nachmanides is insistent that although an individual's will is vanquished on death, the body and soul remain a recognizable unit, and that a sense of personhood remains.

Abraham Abulafia's (1240–1291) conception of the afterlife is also formed in the shadow of Maimonides' intellectualist conception. Abulafia wrote a mystical commentary on Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed*. Maimonides sought to elevate the mind over the body: 'In the measure that the faculties of the body are weakened […] the intellect is strengthened' (*Guide* III:51). Abulafia writes instead of a divine influx into the body, causing the body to tremble until the fear of death takes hold. Abulafia instructs the adherent on meditative practices involving the permutations of letters aimed at producing an ecstatic state through an 'influx of knowledge […] not derived from intellectual analysis' (Fishbane 1994: 40).

Many Kabbalists adopted the dualistic and tripartite division of the soul found in medieval Jewish philosophical literature, using the traditional terms *nefesh*, *ruach*, and *neshama*, but giving them mystical significance. In the *Zohar*, the foundational work of Kabbalistic literature (thirteenth century CE), *nefesh* is the vital soul. *ruach* is an intermediary power, and *neshamah* relates to the supernal realm (*Zohar* I, 205b). These aspects of the soul are said to form a unity (*Zohar* I, 142a).

After death, each aspect of the soul undergoes a different process. The *nefesh* stays with the body, and the *ruach* is purified in *gehenna* while the *neshama* returns to its source.

In psychological terms, the *nefesh* and *ruach* are associated with aliveness or emotional states, whereas the *neshama* is the higher cognitive faculties (Raphael 2009: 266).

The *Zohar* also speaks of two additional aspects of the soul: *chayah* (life force) and *yechidah* (uniqueness), viewed as further supernal levels in the reach of only a few individuals (Raphael 2009: 268).

As in Rabbinic literature, following death the individual undergoes a judgment process: 'When God desires to take back a man's spirit, all the days that he lived in this world pass before him in review' (*Zohar* I, 221b). The fear of judgment is used to encourage right living. The *Zohar* states in one place that when one has committed himself to Torah, the Torah itself proclaims his merit, and shields him from the emissaries of punishment (*Zohar* I, 175b). In another, it states that at death 'the only protection […] a man has is the virtuous deeds that he performs in the world' (*Zohar* I, 202a).

Notwithstanding the dualistic stance adopted by the *Zohar* and other Kabbalistic writings, as in the Rabbinic tradition there are statements which view the soul and body as being intimately intertwined, in a manner not dissimilar to Nachmanides. In one place, the *Zohar* suggests that an individual has two bodies: an earthly body and a mirror ethereal body, described as a 'celestial garment' (*Zohar* I, 66a). The quality of the celestial garment is dictated by how well one lived when alive. In one place, this celestial garment forms thirty days after death (*Zohar* II, 201a).

For Kabbalists, death is sometimes associated with obtaining greater insight (*Zohar* III, 88a). This might be imparted by angelic beings, visionary guides, deceased relatives, the Shekhinah, and even demons. In addition to *Gan Eden*, the *Zohar* describes a place called *Tzror Ha-Chayim* (the bundle of the living), a place closer to God than *Gan Eden*. There the righteous are privileged to see the glory of 'the supernal Holy King' (*Zohar* III, 182b).

Rabbi Isaac ben Solomon Luria (1534–1572), known as the Ari (the lion), is an important figure in the development of the Kabbalah of Safed. Many of his meditations and theurgic prayers, *kavanot* and *yichudim* , deal with the theme of death. *kavanot* are mystical utterances aimed at instilling proper intent prior to carrying out a ritual. In Luria's *kavanot* for the recitation of the Shema prayer to be said prior to sleep, the adept is encouraged to split his soul in order to hasten the process of rebirth.

Luria also has *kavanot* for the prayer *Nefilat Apayim* , said towards the end of the weekly morning service, during which the participant falls upon his arm while requesting forgiveness for sin. Luria's *kavanot* for this prayer similarly seek the dismemberment of the soul and encourage the adept to simulate death (Ish-Shalom 2021: 94).

The *Zohar* had already promoted such simulation. Luria develops the *Zohar*ic notion when presenting his *kavanot*. The Shema *kavanot* aim at a higher unification between

the qualities of wisdom and understanding, which are part of the higher *sefiriotic* structure – whereas the *Nefilat Apayim kavanot* aim at uniting the qualities of splendour and sovereignty, which are part of the lower *sefiriotic* structure (Ish-Shalom 2021: 97). Sovereignty (the lowest *sefira*) is associated with this world and death. Thus, the task of the practitioner is to 'give himself over to death' (Ish-Shalom 2021: 99). There is a sense here of descending into the lower realms of evil in order to release divine sparks trapped there (Ish-Shalom 2021: 110). This enactment involves a contemplative martyrdom similar to the literal martyrdom undergone by the ten martyrs mentioned above in the context of the *Eleh Ezkera* prayer (Ish-Shalom 2021: 134).

The Lurianic enactment of death, however, does not entail a dismissal of the body. Ish-Shalom explains that:

> […] through physical action the soul develops in two opposite directions: on the one hand, through one's physical deeds the soul is endowed with transcendental capacities of ascension; on the other, one's conduct weaves the fabric of the soul into a more solid and enduring union with the physical body. (Ish-Shalom 2021: 118)

Parts of a person's soul can split and transmigrate, but at the time of the resurrection the soul's various parts reintegrate with their primary physical body. The body is divinized, whereas the soul which is associated with the body is materialized in what Ish-Shalom sees as move towards a 'monistic mysticism that includes within it a functional dualism' (Ish-Shalom 2021: 119). In other words, the body and soul are treated as separate entities but ultimately form a combination, each with material-spiritual aspects. We have seen a similar blurring of boundaries between matter and spirit in the *Zohar* and Nachmanides, but with origins even in the Rabbinic and biblical traditions.

The eighteenth-century Hasidic movement derived many of its concepts from the Kabbalistic tradition, of which it forms apart. In 1752, the Ba'al Shem Tov (Hasidism's founder) wrote a letter to his brother-in-law, Rabbi Gershon of Kuty, in which he describes a mystical 'ascent of the soul', during which he enters a heavenly realm in which he encounters the faces of the dead. The Ba'al Shem Tov also happens upon the Messiah and asks him when he will come. The Messiah answers, 'When your teaching is […] revealed to the world, and your wellsprings gush outwards' (Loewenthal 2020: 53). On the same ascent, the Ba'al Shem Tov is also taught secret methods of unifying divine names.

The Bal Shem Tov's letter provides some insight into the mystical experience. There is no indication that the Bal Shem Tov believed he was in some type of dream state. It is likely that he believed that his soul did indeed ascend to heaven and have the experiences which he relates. These transformative mystical experiences were not uncommon among the mystics. The heavenly realms and earthly realms closely interrelate, and one often impinges on the other. In some respects, these experiences reflect the manner in which

God relates to humans within the biblical tradition, at one time standing outside events and at another breaking through into the world. The membrane between heaven and earth is permeable (see above). The Ba'al Shem Tov's experience as reported in the letter also had a direct impact on the earthly realm because the Messiah's prophecy encouraged Hasidim to popularize their particular brand of mysticism beyond Kabbalistic circles and to develop a movement of engaged mysticism (Loewenthal 2020: 53–78).

At the centre of the Hasidic tradition is the image of the Rebbe or Zaddik (righteous man). While certain Rabbinic traditions show sages fearing death, Hasidic stories often portray the Zaddik as facing death with calm and equanimity. In one story, Rabbi Simha Bunim (1765–1827) lay dying. In her grief, his wife burst into tears. He said to her: 'Why are you crying? My whole life was only that I might learn how to die.' And with this attitude, he died, peacefully. Reb Elimelech of Lizhensk (1717–1787), another Zaddik, was reported as being extraordinarily cheerful as his death was approaching. Stories of Hasidic rabbis during the Shoah (Holocaust) suggest they had similar dispositions. A major focus of Hasidism is the inner person, and its writings frequently have a therapeutic quality. The stories of the attitude of Zaddikim on their deathbeds would have been taken as important indicators on the effectiveness of that Zaddik's spiritual path (Raphael 2009: 242–243).

6 Reincarnation

As indicted above, Kabbalistic literature features a belief in reincarnation. Such belief is not present in the Bible or Talmud. Saadia Gaon thought the idea nonsensical and foreign to Judaism (Raphael 2009: 178). Gershom Scholem, a professor of Jewish mysticism, held that the idea owed much to the influence of Gnostics or Christian Cathars (Raphael 2009: 226). Those who held such beliefs lived close to Kabbalistic communities, for example in Southern France in the twelfth century. The *Sefer Bahir*, written there at this time, hints at the idea of reincarnation. Isaac the Blind (1160–1235), a French Kabbalist, was apparently able to tell from looking at a person's face whether a soul was new or old (Raphael 2009: 227).

Reincarnation is also found within the Kabbalah of Gerona, which influenced the *Zohar*. The *Zohar* sees reincarnation as a divine mystery (*Zohar* III, 99b). In one place, it is suggested that only sinners undergo reincarnation (*Zohar* II, 186b; III, 25a), but such an idea is not held consistently. According to the *Zohar*, the soul of Judah entered Boaz (Ruth's husband), while those of Nadab and Abihu (sons of Aaron) entered Phineas. Ideas such as these may explain in part the naming of children after deceased relatives (Raphael 2009: 230).

Terms associated with reincarnation include *ha-atakah* (transference), *hithallefut* (exchange), *ibbur* (impregnation), and *gilgul* (rolling). Menasseh ben Israel (1604–1667), in *Nishmat Chayim* (The Soul of Life), saw '[t]he belief or the doctrine of transmigration of

souls as a firm and infallible dogma', but few would agree with this statement (Raphael 2009: 227).

It was held that the purpose of reincarnation was to purify souls over recurring lifetimes. According to Chaim Vital's (1543–1620) *Shaar Ha-Gilgulim* (Gate of Reincarnations), each of the five levels of the soul require perfection, so if this is not achieved in one's lifetime, a further lifetime would be required. Chaim Vital was a student of the Ari. The *Sefer Ha-Temunah* (written before 1250) and *Taamei Ha-Mitzvot* (c. 1290–1300) introduced the idea that a soul might be reincarnated into an animal form, which was sometimes seen as an expiation for a particular sin (Raphael 2009: 228).

Reincarnation features in Hasidic literature and folklore. The Baal Shem Tov apparently claimed to be a reincarnation of Sadia Gaon. Dov Baer of Mezhrich was said to be the reincarnation of Rabbi Akiva, and Reb Israel of Stolin apparently had the soul of the famous tenth-century scholar Rashi (Raphael 2009: 255).

Reincarnation serves a useful theological purpose by providing God with a further tool to ensure justice. A sin unrepented for in one lifetime may become a focus of a challenge in another. The notion also avoids the need for speculation on the nature of heaven or hell, and might assist superficially in dealing with the problem of evil. The difficulty is that it is hard to envisage how a soul formed in relation to one body can exist within an entirely different body/soul complex. Justice can also rarely be seen to be done because, for the most part, a reincarnated soul has no sense of the process that she is undergoing. The idea of reincarnation is also difficult to square with the concept of resurrection. If souls go through many incarnations, in which body will it be resurrected? The Lurianic Kabbalah, as expressed by Rabbi Chaim Vital (1543–1620), deals with this by indicating that a soul has a primary body to which it is attached and will be returned (Ish-Shalom 2021: 118).

On a phenomenological level, reincarnation might explain déjà vu experiences, a deep sense of connection with someone who preceded us, or the sense that we have missed opportunities in life and need a second chance.

In Eastern-European Jewry, tales abounded of malevolent possession (*dybbuk*) (literally, cleaving). Such stories are recorded in books such as the *Maaseh Book* (Story Book) (Germany, 1602), and popularized even in our own time in books and films. Some Kabbalists and Hasidic rabbis were known for their skills at exorcism. These stories reflect the folklore of the times, and in the present day a fascination with horror and the macabre (Raphael 2009: 231).

7 Modern Jewish thought

In the late eighteenth century, European Jews began to take a greater part in the wider society, and a Jewish enlightenment movement formed around the figure of Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786). Paralleling the conservative German Enlightenment, Jewish enlighteners sought to reconcile tradition with reason and Enlightenment ideas of the self and society.

In this context, traditional beliefs in the immortality of the soul were defended philosophically. In 1767, Mendelssohn published *Phaedon; Or, The Death of Socrates*, dealing with the idea of the immortality of the soul by reference to Plato and Leibnitz. Mendelssohn's description in the preface reads:

> The following work is written in imitation of the 'Phaedon' of Plato; But the author has recourse solely to the lights of the moderns, and makes Socrates speak as a philosopher of the eighteenth century. (Mendelssohn 1767).

In the work, Mendelssohn argues for the immortality of the soul by appealing to the unifying experience of consciousness and our self-consciousness, which he maintained could not be derived from anything composite. Mendelssohn considered that God's goodness and providence guarantees the soul's survival after death. In particular, he claimed that full development of the soul's potential or capacities for happiness and virtue takes for as long as God allotted to achieve such perfection. This is what is meant by God's kindness.

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) adopts a similar argument to Mendelssohn, turning on the need for immortality to perfect happiness in his *Canon of Pure Reason* and in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which he developed in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (Guyer 2016: 157).

By the twentieth century, German continental philosophers were more interested in the meaning of death than immortality. In *Being and Time* (1927), Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) encourages humans to embrace the fact that they will die. Freedom is to be achieved in the affirmation of our own immortality. Jewish philosophers living in the same period took up similar themes, often relating ideas to notions within the Jewish tradition.

Martin Buber (1878–1965) provides a meditation on death in the last chapter of his book, *Daniel: Dialogues on Realization* (1913). The work is written as a dialogue between Daniel and his friend Lukas. Lukas tells Daniel that the classical theological and philosophical strategies of dealing with death fail to satisfy him. Lukas came to appreciate that death was not something beyond life. It suffuses life itself:

> There was not only in me a force that moved from the point of birth to the point of death or beyond; there was also a counterforce from death to birth, and each moment that I

> experienced as a living man had grown – out of the mixture of the two – they mixed with each other like man and wife and created by being. (Mendes-Flohr 2022: 2)

Daniel confesses to having had a similar experience and urges his friend not to seek to banish death but to live with the experience of life and death: 'You cannot know it otherwise than when you take upon yourself the tension of life and death and live through the life and death of the world as your life and death' (Mendes-Flohr 2022: 2).

Living in such tension is perhaps a form of enlightenment and might be read into the Bible's approach to death. As Mendes-Flohr explains: 'The "awakened being" bears within herself the dialectic tension of time and the timeless, being conditioned and unconditioned, life and death' (Mendes-Flohr 2022: 3).

Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929), who was to become Buber's colleague, similarly saw the entangled duality of life and death as foundational to Jewish spiritual life. In his *Star of Redemption* (1921), he writes (as Nachmanides had done) that philosophy seeks to 'rob death of its poisonous sting', but this leads a person away from the earthly: 'The terror of the earthly is to be taken from him only with the earthly itself' (Mendes-Flohr 2022: 3). To be immersed in the world, therefore, one has no choice but to live with death. Rosenzweig's engagement with death may have been spurred by the bloodshed he witnessed while serving in the Kaiser's army at the Balkan front, but it also reflects his theology, which recognizes that each person lives and dies uniquely, in our own singularity. No one can do these things for us. Philosophy is not well suited to assist us in dealing with the anxieties around death because it tends to deal with the abstract, rather than people as unique individuals.

For Rosenzweig, the antidote to death is love – human and divine. This is captured in the Song of Songs, the biblical book whose sensuous description of the two lovers is sometimes taken as an allegory of human and divine love. For Rosenzweig, the song is no mere allegory but a homology. Human love has the same underlying structure as divine love. As Mendes-Flohr puts it, 'human eros and divine eros are conterminous' (2022: 3). They inhabit the same reality. We encounter God in the world, in life and death, through love. Love challenges death by living solely in the present rather than the past or anticipated future. Hence why the Song of Songs states that 'love is as strong as death' (Song 8:6). Mendes-Flohr notes that Rosenzweig was having an affair with Margrit Rosenstock, a friend's wife, when he took up this subject (Mendes-Flohr 2022: 3).

Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903–1993) was a major Orthodox Jewish thinker who was educated in Berlin, and would have been familiar with some of the views of death of the above thinkers. In one place, Soloveitchik takes an approach similar to Heidegger, Buber, and Rosenzweig, but centres his views more firmly in the biblical tradition. He holds that humans must waive victory in the face of death, like Abraham ready to give up Jacob, his

son, or Aaron's silence when confronted with the death of his two sons. But this is not the end of the matter because, after submitting to death, one regains strength and returns to life. There is a dialectic. This attitude towards death comes in the midst of life, so that life can be lived more fully: 'It is obvious that after man has taken defeat at his own hands […] the pendulum begins to swing in the opposite direction, to the pole of greatness, vastness, conquest, victory and triumph […]' (*Out of the Whirlwind*, 110–111; Blidstein 2011: 9). The process starts again.

Soloveitchik is, in many respects, a pessimistic thinker, but even he does not let death have the last word. Beneath his thinking one hears the echo of the biblical call to 'choose life' and the belief that God will ultimately defeat death. This belief filters into Jewish folklore. The Passover seder meal ends with the song 'One Little Goat', which first appeared in a Haggadah printed in Prague in 1590. It tells the story of a goat that gets eaten by a cat, who is bitten by a dog, who is hit by a stick, which is burnt by a fire, which is doused with water, which is drunk by an ox, which is slaughtered by a butcher, who is killed by the angel of death. The angel of death is smitten by God, so God ultimately conquers death.

Soloveitchik also sees Jewish Law as providing an appropriate response to death. In the seventh chapter of his work *Halakhic Man* (1944), Soloveitchik distinguishes between 'halakhic man' and '*homo religiosus*': the *homo religiosus* longs for a transcendental world, and at the same time sanctifies death as the 'threshold to transcendence' (see Soloveitchik 1983). Not so the halakhic man, who, according to Soloveitchik, clings to the earthly as the arena of sanctity and denies death any value of sanctity:

> A corpse defiles; a grave defiles; a person who has been defiled by a corpse is defiled for seven days and is forbidden to eat any sacred offerings or enter the Temple […] the priests of God are forbidden to defile themselves with the dead. (Blidstein 2011: 10–11)

In the same work, he writes that Judaism 'abhors death, organic decay, and dissolution. It bids one to choose life and sanctify it' (Blidstein 2011: 11). It is for this reason, claims Soloveitchik, that revered rabbis rarely visited cemeteries or the graves of their ancestors. They also remained terrified of death. The halakhic man does not occupy himself with death but treats it as a legal topic (Blidstein 2011: 11). This is a fitting place to turn to the rituals of death.

8 The ritualization of death

The period from death to burial is known as *aninut* (literally, pressure). This period is not mentioned in the Hebrew Bible. During it, a person in mourning is exempt from performing positive commandments, such as blessings before and after food, praying, or donning phylacteries. The reason given for this exemption in the Talmud is that the mourner needs

space to make arrangements for the burial and to deal with the needs of the dead (m. *Ber.* 3:1; *Shulchan Aruch* YD 341:1). The idea turns the focus away from the mourner's personal loss.

Jewish burial is highly ritualized. Sally Berkovic, an anthropologist and member of a Jewish burial society in England (Chevra Kadisha), provides insight into current practices when she describes what will happen to her when she dies. She writes that she will lie on a cold metal table with a sheet covering her body. Four women will clean her, comb her hair, and ritually clean her with rainwater, after which a short prayer will be said ending with the words '*Taharah, Taharah, Taharah*' (Pure, Pure, Pure). Her body will then be covered with shrouds (*tachrichim*) and other garments, and some grains from the Holy Land will be sprinkled on her eyes. Her body will then be placed in a plain coffin (in some countries no coffin is used) and buried (Berkovic 2022: 13–14). The weeklong mourning period, Shiva (literally, seven) commences following the funeral.

There is an allusion to Shiva in the Bible. In Gen 50:10, Joseph 'observed a mourning period of seven days' for his father, Jacob. The Talmudic tractate of *Semachot* (c. third to eight century) details the practices associated with this period. These laws have been interpreted and expanded upon in other literature, particular the major codes of Jewish Law, including the *Shulchan Aruch* of Rabbi Josef Karo (1488–1575) and Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*.

Semachot describes how in the mourning period, mourners rend their garments, turn over their beds and sleep on the floor, and refrain from shaving, cutting their hair, trimming their nails, washing, wearing shoes, or engaging in sex. During the Shiva, friends and family visit the mourner, who does not leave the house (*Shulchan Aruch*, YD 394:4). She also sits on a low chair (*Shulchan Aruch*, YD 387:1). There are numerous other restrictions.

During the Shiva services, and for eleven months following burial in the case of a parent, mourners recite the Mourner's Kaddish (there are other types of Kaddish recited at different points in Jewish services). Kaddish is an Aramaic prayer dating from around the seventh century but was only recited by mourners after the Crusades in the twelfth century.

Kaddish has a rhythmic and meditative quality. Reciting it is considered by many Jews, even those who are usually unobservant, as a mark of respect, and for that reason many instinctively place the obligation to do so above other religious obligations.

The Kaddish lends itself to theological analysis. Rabbi Eli Kaunfer, a contemporary scholar and educator, expounds upon two of its phrases which he sees as key. The first phrase is the opening line: *Yitgadal Ve-Yitkadash Shemei Rabbah*, often translated as 'Magnified and sanctified be His great name'. Kaunfer notes that this line is in fact a request asking

for God to be magnified and to be sanctified. God is not yet great because the world is imperfect, and a mourner senses this most acutely (Kaunfer [n.d.]).

The second key phrase is the congregational response: *Y'hei sh'mei raba m'varach l'alam ul'almei almaya*, translated as 'May His great Name be blessed forever and for all eternity'. The point here is that although God's name is the focus, the name itself is not articulated in the prayer because we live in a world in which God's name is diminished, again as only a mourner can understand. Rabbi Kampfner finds support for his interpretation of this phrase in the Talmud, which portrays God as responding to the *y'hei sh'mei raba*: 'Woe to the father who had to banish his children, and woe to the children who had to be banished from the table of their father!' (b. *Ber.* 3a).

There is also a thirty-day period following death, referred to as *Shloshim* or 'thirty' (*Shulchan Aruch*, YD 395:1). In this period, certain restrictions continue after the Shiva period, such as the restriction on having a haircut or attending a meal with friends. When the month is over, the mourner may still not listen to music or take part in celebrations for a period of a year in the event of a death of a parent.

There is also a yearly commemoration for a close relative (*yahrzeit*), which in the Ashkenzai custom happens on the anniversary of a death (*Rama*, YD 402:9). On this day, the mourner recites the Mourner's Kaddish in the synagogue (*Rama*, YD 376:4) and lights a candle (*Magen Avraham*, OC 261:6). There is also a custom to fast on a *yahrzeit* (*Rama*, YD 402:12), although this is not widely practised. The rabbis in the twelfth century instituted memorial prayers (*yizkor*) for deceased relatives within synagogue services on certain religious holidays (Raphael 2009: 313).

The above rituals effect a process of letting go. The rituals recognize the immediate intensity of the trauma after the death occurs and impose restrictions to match that. As time continues, the ritual demands become less, which encourage an easing of the feelings of loss and a gradual reintegration into the life of the community.

The public nature of the Shiva also exposes others to the loss experienced by individuals in the community on an intimate level and reminds the mourner that they are never alone. Visitors to a Shiva will sit with the mourner and so need to sensitively consider what words of comfort are appropriate. The rabbis forbid various greetings, which can make things less awkward in terms of knowing what to say. As recognized by the Talmud, sometimes silence is the only appropriate response and simply being with another in their pain: 'the merit of attending a house of mourning lies in the silence observed' (b. *Ber.* 6b).

9 Modern scientific conceptions

Aryeh Kaplan (1934–1983) was a physicist, an American Orthodox rabbi, and a popularizer of Jewish mystical ideas. In an essay entitled ‘Immortality and the Soul’, he wrote: ‘The real you is not your body or brain, but the information contained in your brain – your memories, personality traits and thought patterns’ (Kaplan 1983).

Kaplan views this information as indestructible because it exists in the mind of God:

> We know that God is omniscient. He knows all and does not forget. God knows every thought and memory that exists within our brains. There is no bit of information that escapes His knowledge. (Kaplan 1983)

Kaplan adds that God’s memory is dynamic and allows human personality to maintain its self-identity and volition and remain in an active state, although he confesses that how this works is a mystery.

Kaplan’s notion of postmortem existence is similar to that of Maimonides, as interpreted by Gersonides and as brought up to date by Samuel Lebens (see section 4). Kaplan finds some support for his position in Aldous Huxley’s *The Doors of Perception* (1954), which relies on Professor Charlie Dunbar Broad, a Cambridge philosopher, to suggest that the brain is a filter, not creator of information.

Kaplan states that every person is capable of remembering everything that has ever happened to them, but

> if all this information poured into our minds at once, it would overwhelm us. So the function of the brain and nervous system is to protect us and prevent us from being overwhelmed and confused by the vast amount of information that impinges upon our sense organs. (Kaplan 1983)

The idea that the brain filters mind or limits consciousness, rather than generates it, continues to have modern adherents (McGilchrist 2021: 1085 [vol. 2]). Kaplan also believed that science shows resurrection to be possible because it explains how animals might be cloned from DNA. Kaplan therefore maintained that there is no scientific barrier to believing that the body can be restored, and that individual memory and thought (protected in the mind of God) can be inserted back into the body.

10 Transhumanism

Recent advances in artificial intelligence and medicine have raised the prospect of a transhumanist future. Jewish responses to such a prospect will be varied. A Jewish transhumanist might point to the biblical injunction mentioned above to ‘choose life’ over death (Deut 30:19). By advancing transhumanism, this is precisely what they are doing.

A transhumanist might also point to Isaiah's promise that death will be eradicated forever (Isa 25:8), which is taken by some rabbis to be a reference to immortality in this world (b. *Sanh.* 91b and b. *Pesachim* 68a). A transhumanist might also rely on the biblical statement 'you shall surely heal' (Exod 21:19), which is taken by some, such as Nachmanides, as a command to heal as opposed to a permission to allow healing (Tosafot on b. *B. Kama* 85a). The ultimate act of healing would be the eradication of death.

Nachmanides is also helpful to the Jewish transhumanist by insisting that humans were intended to be immortal but brought death upon themselves by eating from the tree of knowledge (commentary on Gen 2:17). In the future, claims Nachmanides, death will be overcome after humans re-enter the Garden of Eden and eat from the Tree of Life (Gen 2:9). The notion of re-entering the Garden of Eden, however, suggests that immortality is connected to moral perfection, and not something that can be achieved merely technologically.

Nachmanides contrasts his (and the rabbis') view with that of unnamed 'philosophers' who hold that humans were always destined to die and will always die. They held that the fruit of the tree of knowledge merely hastened death, and the fruit of the tree of life will simply extend it. Death is essential to being human. On this 'philosophical' reading, immortality is not something to which humankind should aspire towards (Friedman 2020: 32–48).

In support of the position of the 'philosophers', one might point to the moral use made of death by the rabbis. Death places a limitation on our self-belief: 'If one subdues his evil inclination, excellent; if not, he should remind himself of the day of death' (b. *Ber.* 5a). We also have a sense that we ought to behave well today because we do not know what tomorrow will bring. In the words of the rabbis, 'repent one day before your death: since a person does not know when he will die' (m. *Avot* 2:15). Immortality would destroy the meaning of death. One passage also recognizes that life can become weary, particularly for the elderly. There is a Midrash in which Rabbi Yose ben Halafta advises an old woman not to attend synagogue for three days, so that she will die (*Yalkut Shimoni*, Proverbs 943).

Aaron Segal, a Jewish philosopher, has considered whether immortality is even desirable from a philosophical standpoint. He refers to the philosopher Bernard Williams, who followed Lucretius to argue that an immortal human would exhaust all their desires and become bored, as well as to Martha Nussbaum and Samuel Scheffler, who also relied on Lucretius to highlight the fact that many of the things we actually value require the possibility of loss, illness, risk, harm, and danger, a point made above (Segal 2017: 186–187).

Segal makes a further metaphysical argument that there is nothing desirable about immortality – or rather that for every possible immortal life, there is a possible mortal life that is just as desirable on the very same grounds as the latter would be (Segal

2017: 188). His thought experiment shows that what makes immortality desirable is not immortality itself but what we would experience, do, and achieve with such immortality. His point is that as a matter of metaphysics, a life achieving all the things one wants to achieve within a shorter timeframe ought to be just as satisfying as a life that achieves the same things over an infinite time (Segal 2017: 202).

There are forms of immortality which do not rely on the continuation of individual consciousness. Anthropologist Sally Berkovic, for example, collects and writes for her digital archive that she will leave for her children after her death. She says that she writes 'for the fleeting rush of immortality, and while doing so, the adrenaline that gives me the feeling that I'll live forever' (Berkovic 2022: 67). There is now also the possibility of having dead friends and relatives 'resurrected' as an AI bot.

Another form of immortality results from the goodness we bring into the world through a life of faith and love. Irvin Yalom, the Jewish-born atheist and existential psychiatrist, suggests dealing with death by considering what he calls the 'rippling effect'. He writes:

> Rippling refers to the fact that each of us creates – often without our conscious intent or knowledge – concentric circles of influence that may affect others for years, even for generations. That is, the effect we have on other people is in turn passed on to others, much as the ripples in a pond go on and on until they're no longer visible but continuing at a nano level. (Yalom 2011: 83–92)

Yalom's idea of rippling might contribute to a Jewish theology in which virtue is taken as human participation in the divine, and rippling as a reflection of the Infinite.

Attributions

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