

Lesson

1

DEMYSTIFYING DEATH

PERSPECTIVE ON LIFE AND BEYOND

Why are humans so anxious about death and dying? For many, the abrupt finality of death makes life itself seem futile. By exploring how our life force—our immortal soul—never ends but merely shifts roles, we begin to view life and death as two harmonious steps on the same journey.



▲ **GATE IN THE ROCKS**

Karl Friedrich Schinkel, oil on canvas, Germany, 1818. (Alte Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Andres Kilger)

I. THANATOPHOBIA

Welcome to an exploration of, and journey into, the Jewish traditions and insights surrounding the topics of death and the afterlife.

Our planet is populated by plenty of peoples, with a plethora of perspectives. Some fear death. Some actively embrace it. And others try to ignore it altogether and focus on the here and now. What is the unique *Jewish* perspective?

Since we are seeking the Jewish perspective, we'll begin the Jewish way, and answer our inquiry by first offering a further question: Why bother? Granted, there is a universal fascination with death and all that is associated with it. But is the phenomenon of human expiration truly important enough to warrant indulging that fascination?



EXERCISE 1.1

What attracted you to this course? Which specific topic(s) are you most interested in clarifying?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____



QUESTION

Not everyone reacts the same way to discussions of death and mortality. Which feelings does this topic evoke in you?

MERRIAM-WEBSTER
DICTIONARY

THANATOPHOBIA [than-ət-ə-ˈfō-bē-ə]

noun:
fear of death



TEXT 1

A UNIVERSAL FEAR

IRVIN D. YALOM, *STARING AT THE SUN: OVERCOMING THE TERROR OF DEATH* (S. FRANCISCO: JOSSEY-BASS, 2008), PP. 1–2

IRVIN D. YALOM, M.D.
1931–

Psychiatrist. Dr. Yalom is an emeritus professor of psychiatry at Stanford University, as well as an author of both fiction and nonfiction. He was a pioneer in the area of existential psychotherapy, which emphasizes that mental health problems are frequently caused by struggles with existence. He defined four “givens” of the human condition—death, meaning, isolation, and freedom—that have become the basis for the field.

Mortality has haunted us from the beginning of history. Four thousand years ago, the Babylonian hero Gilgamesh reflected on the death of his friend Enkidu with the words . . . : “Thou hast become dark and cannot hear me. When I die shall I not be like Enkidu? Sorrow enters my heart. I am afraid of death.”

Gilgamesh speaks for all of us. As he feared death, so do we all—each and every man, woman, and child. For some of us the fear of death manifests only indirectly, either as generalized unrest or masqueraded as another psychological symptom; other individuals experience an explicit and conscious stream of anxiety about death; and for some of us the fear of death erupts into terror that negates all happiness and fulfillment.

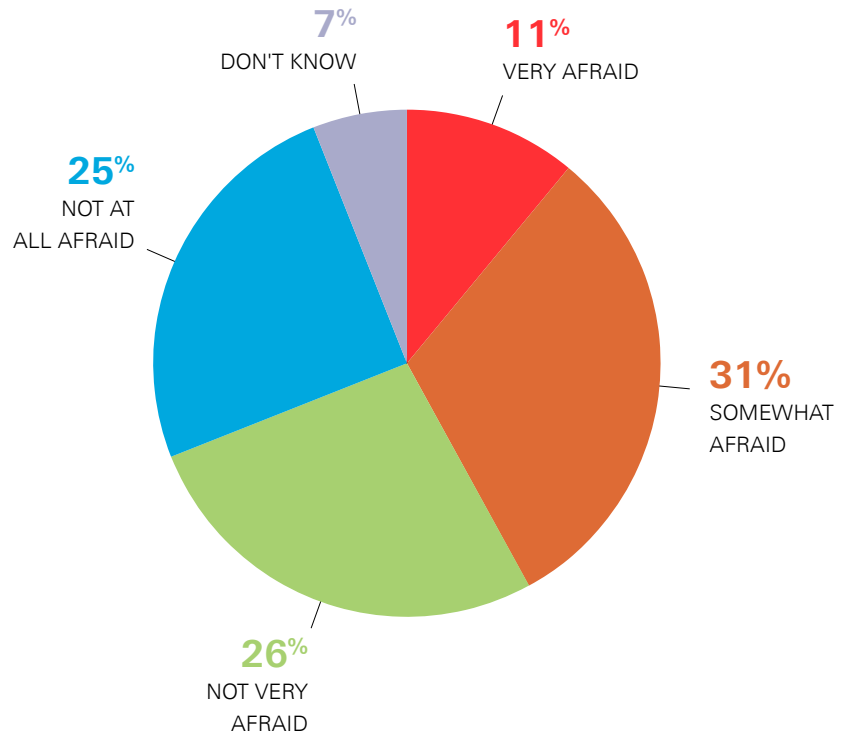


Want to learn more about Terror Management Theory? “How We Cope with Death,” by **Nathan A. Heflick, PhD**, is a good place to start: myJLI.com/soul



FIGURE 1.1
FEAR OF DEATH
STATISTICS

SURVEY OF U.S. ADULTS,
STATISTA, RESEARCH
DEPARTMENT, PUBLISHED
SEPTEMBER 16, 2020



II. SOUL SURVIVOR

Is death the end of who we are?

The answer to this sobering question depends entirely on how we identify ourselves.

So, the *first* question to ask ourselves is: Who are we?



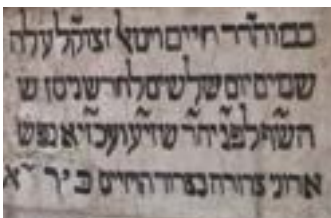
TEXT 2

BODY GARB

RABBI CHAIM VITAL, *SHAAREI
KEDUSHAH* 1:1

RABBI CHAIM VITAL
c. 1542–1620

Lurianic kabbalist. Rabbi Vital was born in Israel, lived in Safed and Jerusalem, and later lived in Damascus. He was authorized by his teacher, Rabbi Yitschak Luria, the Arizal, to record his teachings. Acting on this mandate, Vital began arranging his master's teachings in written form, and his many works constitute the foundation of the Lurianic school of Jewish mysticism. His most famous work is *Ets Chaim*.



נוֹדַע אֶל בְּעַלֵי מַדְעָה, כִּי גוּף הָאָדָם אֵינֶנּוּ הָאָדָם עֲצָמוֹ מֵצַד הַגּוּף . . . נִמְצָא
הָאָדָם הוּא הַפְּנִימִיּוּת, אֲבָל הַגּוּף הוּא עֲנֵן לְבוּשׁ אֶחָד הַנִּתְלַבֵּשׁ בּוֹ נֶפֶשׁ
הַשְּׂכֵלִית אֲשֶׁר הִיא הָאָדָם עֲצָמוֹ בְּעוֹדוֹ בְּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה.

The wise are aware that the human body
is not the human being. . . .

When we speak of the human being,
we are referring to the human's inner dimension.

The body is merely a garment
in which the soul is attired
during its sojourn in this world.



FIGURE 1.2
WHO AM I?



The real me is my soul, not my body.



QUESTION

Can you think of an analogy to depict the body-soul relationship?



TEXT 3A

HUMAN
FORMATION

GENESIS 2:7

וַיִּצְרֶה אֱלֹהִים אֶת הָאָדָם עָפָר מִן הָאֲדָמָה וַיִּפְחֵ
בְּאַפָּיו נְשָׁמַת חַיִּים. וַיְהִי הָאָדָם לְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה.

G-d formed the human of soil from the earth and breathed into his nostrils a *neshamah* (soul) of life. And the human being became a living being.



TEXT 3B

ANIMAL
FORMATION

IBID 1:24

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים: "תּוֹצֵא הָאָרֶץ נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה לְמִינָהּ
בְּהֵמָה וּרְמֵשׁ וְחַיִּתוֹ אֶרֶץ לְמִינָהּ", וַיְהִי כֵן.

G-d said, "Let the earth bring forth living beings of differing species:

cattle, creeping things, and beasts of the earth according to their species.” And it was so.



QUESTION

Can you identify the primary distinction between the creation of the human being and the creation of animal and other forms of life?



TEXT 3C

DEATH DEFYING

RABBI CHEZKIAH BEN MANO'ACH,
CHIZKUNI, GENESIS 2:7

RABBI CHEZKIAH BEN MANO'ACH
(CHIZKUNI) C. 1250–1310

French rabbi and exegete. His commentary on the Torah, *Chizkuni*, is based principally on the work of Rashi and, according to the author's testimony, also draws upon nearly 20 earlier sources that he collected during his travels. He focuses on elucidating the straightforward meaning of the text of the Torah.



וַיִּפַּח בְּאַפָּיו נְשִׁמַת חַיִּים: בְּנִפְיָהֶן שֶׁל הַקְּדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא
שֶׁהִיא רוּחַ הַקְּדוּשׁ, מֵה שֶׁלֹּא נִפְּחַ בְּשׁוּם אֶף בְּרִיָּה ...
נְשִׁמָּה שֶׁהִיא חַיָּה לְעוֹלָם וְאֵינָה מִתָּה בְּמוֹת הַגּוֹף.

G-d did what He had not done
with any other creature:
He blew [into Adam] with His holy spirit
a *neshamah* that is immortal
and does not perish when the body does.



FIGURE 1.3

WHO AM I?



1. The real me is my soul, not my body.



2. The real me, the soul, is eternal. So I am eternal.



TEXT 4

SOUL
RESISTANCE

MIDRASH, TANCHUMA, PEKUDEI 3

מִיַּד רוֹמֵז הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא לְמַלְאָךְ הַמְּמוֹנֶה עַל הָרוּחוֹת
וְאוֹמֵר לוֹ, "הֲבֵיא לִי רוּחַ פְּלוֹנִי שֶׁהֵיא בְּגֵן עֵדֶן, שֶׁשָּׁמוּ פְּלוֹנִי
וְתֵאָרוּ כֶּךָ וְכָךְ". לְפִי שֶׁכָּל הָרוּחוֹת שֶׁעֲתִידִין לְהִבְרָאוֹת כּוֹלֵן הֵן
נִבְרָאוֹת מִיּוֹם שֶׁבְּרָא הָעוֹלָם עַד שֶׁיִּכְלֶה כָּל הָעוֹלָם . . .

מִיַּד הוֹלֵךְ הַמַּלְאָךְ וּמְבִיא אֶת הָרוּחַ לְפָנָיו הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא, וְכִשְׁהֵיא בְּאֶה
מִיַּד כּוֹרֵעַת וּמְשַׁתַּחֲוֶה לְפָנָיו הַמְּלֶכֶת מַלְכֵי הַמַּלְכִּים הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא. אוֹתָהּ
שֶׁעָה אוֹמֵר הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא לְרוּחַ, "הַכְּנִסִי בְּטִיפָה זוֹ שֶׁבִיד פְּלוֹנִי".

פְּתַח הָרוּחַ פִּיו וְאוֹמֵר לְפָנָיו, "רְבוּנוּ שֶׁל עוֹלָם! דִּי לִי הָעוֹלָם
שֶׁהֵייתִי דָר מִיּוֹם שֶׁבְּרָאתָנִי, לְמָה רְצוֹנָךְ לְהַכְּנִסֵנִי בְּטִיפָה זוֹ
סְרוּחָה, שֶׁאֲנִי קְדוֹשָׁה וְטַהוֹרָה וְאֲנִי גְזוּרָה מִגְזַרְת כְּבוֹדְךָ?"

Forty days before the conception of a child, G-d summons the angel in charge of souls and tells him, "Bring before Me a certain soul that is now in Paradise. Its name is such-and-such and its appearance is such-and-such." This is [possible] because all the souls that are born in this world were created on the day the world was created and exist until the end of time. . . .

TANCHUMA

A Midrashic work bearing the name of Rabbi Tanchuma, a 4th-century Talmudic sage quoted often in this work. “Midrash” is the designation of a particular genre of rabbinic literature usually forming a running commentary on specific books of the Bible. *Tanchuma* provides textual exegeses, expounds upon the biblical narrative, and develops and illustrates moral principles. *Tanchuma* is unique in that many of its sections commence with a halachic discussion, which subsequently leads into nonhalachic teachings.



The angel goes and brings the soul before G-d. The soul bows and prostrates itself before the supreme King of kings. G-d instructs the soul, “Please enter the seminal drop that is currently in the hands of [the angel in charge of pregnancy].”

The soul protests, “Master of the Universe! I am quite satisfied with the world I inhabited since the day You created me. I am holy and pure, hewn from Your Throne of Glory—why do You wish to cause me to enter this putrid drop?”

▼ **SLEEPING CHILD**

Bernardo Strozzi (1581/2–1644), oil on canvas, first half 17th century. (Residenzgalerie Salzburg, Austria)



The Jewish view of the soul is not monolithic. In “The Anatomy of a Soul,” *Rabbi Avrohom Bergstein* elaborates: myJLI.com/soul



TEXT 5

PREPARING IN THE CORRIDOR

ETHICS OF THE FATHERS 4:16–17

ETHICS OF THE FATHERS
(PIRKEI AVOT)

A 6-chapter work on Jewish ethics that is studied widely by Jewish communities, especially during the summer. The first 5 chapters are from the Mishnah, tractate Avot. Avot differs from the rest of the Mishnah in that it does not focus on legal subjects; it is a collection of the sages' wisdom on topics related to character development, ethics, healthy living, piety, and the study of Torah.

הָעוֹלָם הַזֶּה דוֹמֶה לְפִרוּזְדוֹר בְּפָנֵי הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא. הַתְּקַן
עֲצָמְךָ בְּפִרוּזְדוֹר, כְּדִי שֶׁתִּכְנַס לְטֶרֶקְלִין . . .
וַיִּפֶּה שְׂעָה אַחַת שֶׁל קוֹרֵת רוּחַ בְּעוֹלָם הַבָּא, מְכַל חַיֵּי הָעוֹלָם הַזֶּה.

This world is like a corridor
before the World to Come.
Prepare yourself in the corridor,
so that you may enter the palace. . . .

A single moment of bliss
in the World to Come
is greater than all of this world.



FIGURE 1.4

WHO AM I?



1. The real me is my soul, not my body.



2. The real me, the soul, is eternal. So I am eternal.



"What Is Life?" *Rabbi Manis Friedman's* penetrating explanation:
myJLI.com/soul



3. The real eternal me is relatively unaffected by birth or death.

III. CULTURE OF LIFE

Does Judaism suggest a flippant or nonchalant approach to corporeal demise? After all, why should we be perturbed by the loss of the physical body if the soul—the real me—graduates to a far better and greater place?

No, Judaism certainly does *not* want us to consider the body and the material world insignificant nor to underrate the significance of entering or leaving this world.

However, in order to understand how the significance of corporeal life coexists with the priority of soul over body and the superiority of the afterlife, we will need to take our journey a little further. We need to understand why we come down here in the first place.



◀ **WOMAN AT A WINDOW**

Caspar David Friedrich, oil on canvas, Berlin, Germany, 1822. (Alte Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin)



TEXT 6

A TORAH TO LIVE BY

MAIMONIDES, *MISHNEH TORAH*,
LAWS OF THE FUNDAMENTALS
OF THE TORAH 5:1

RABBI MOSHE BEN MAIMON
(MAIMONIDES, RAMBAM) 1135–1204

Halachist, philosopher, author, and physician. Maimonides was born in Córdoba, Spain. After the conquest of Córdoba by the Almohads, he fled Spain and eventually settled in Cairo, Egypt. There, he became the leader of the Jewish community and served as court physician to the vizier of Egypt. He is most noted for authoring the *Mishneh Torah*, an encyclopedic arrangement of Jewish law; and for his philosophical work, *Guide for the Perplexed*. His rulings on Jewish law are integral to the formation of halachic consensus.



כְּשִׁיעֲמוּד גּוֹי וַיִּאָּנוּס אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל לְעִבּוֹר עַל אַחַת מִכָּל מִצְוֹת הָאֲמוּרוֹת
בְּתוֹרָה אוֹ יִהְיֶה נֹגֵף, יַעֲבֹר וְאֵל יִהְרֶג, שְׂנֵאָמֵר בְּמִצְוֹת (וַיִּקְרָא יח, ה),
”אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה אוֹתָם הָאָדָם וְחֵי בָהֶם.” ”וְחֵי” בָּהֶם, וְלֹא שְׂיָמוּת בָּהֶם.

If a non-Jew attempts to force a Jew to violate one of the Torah’s commandments at the pain of death, the Jew should violate the commandment rather than be killed because the Torah states concerning the *mitzvot*: “A person shall do them and live by them” (LEVITICUS 18:5). One should *live by them* and not die because of them.



SABBATH ►

Jankel Adler, mixed media: oil,
sand on canvas, Dusseldorf,
1925. (Jewish Museum Berlin)



TEXT 7
(CONCLUSION OF TEXT 4)

G-D'S ENCOURAGING WORDS

MIDRASH, TANCHUMA, PEKUDEI 3

מִיד אֹמֵר הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא לְנִשְׁמָה, "עוֹלָם שְׂאֲנִי מְכַנִּיסָךְ בּוֹ יִפָּה יִהְיֶה לְךָ
מִמָּה שְׁהֵיִיתָ דָּר בּוֹ, וּבִשְׂעָה שִׁיצְרִיתִיךָ לֹא יִצְרִיתִיךָ אֶלָּא לְטִיפָה זוֹ". מִיד מְכַנִּיסוֹ
הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא לְשֵׁם בְּעַל כָּרְחוּ.

G-d hurries to reassure the [descending] soul: "The world to which I am bringing you will prove more beneficial than the one you presently inhabit. Indeed, I formed you exclusively for the purpose of [creating mortal life from] this [particular] drop [of seed]." With that, G-d forcibly installs the soul.



TEXT 8 (IMMEDIATELY
PRECEDES TEXT 5)

GREATER THAN HEAVEN

ETHICS OF THE FATHERS 4:17

יִפָּה שְׂעָה אַחַת בְּתַשׁוּבָה וּמַעֲשִׂים טוֹבִים בְּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה, מִכֹּל חַיֵּי הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא.

A single moment of repentance and of good deeds in *this* world is greater than all of the World to Come.



QUESTION

How might we reconcile the value Judaism places on *bodily* life with its belief in the immortality of the *soul*?



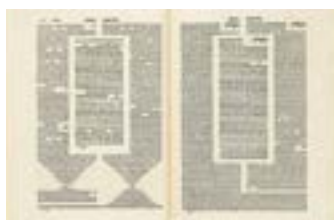
TEXT 9

THE PRIMORDIAL CONDITION

TALMUD, SHABBAT 88A

BABYLONIAN TALMUD

A literary work of monumental proportions that draws upon the legal, spiritual, intellectual, ethical, and historical traditions of Judaism. The 37 tractates of the Babylonian Talmud contain the teachings of the Jewish sages from the period after the destruction of the 2nd Temple through the 5th century CE. It has served as the primary vehicle for the transmission of the Oral Law and the education of Jews over the centuries; it is the entry point for all subsequent legal, ethical, and theological Jewish scholarship.



שְׁהִתְנָה הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא עִם מַעֲשֵׂה בְּרֵאשִׁית, וְאָמַר לָהֶם: "אִם יִשְׂרָאֵל
מְקַבְּלִים הַתּוֹרָה, אַתֶּם מִתְקַיְּמִין; וְאִם לֹא, אֲנִי מַחְזִיר אֶתְכֶם לְתוֹהוּ וּבוֹהוּ".

G-d created the universe on a condition:

"If the Jews accept the Torah,"

He told the universe,

"you will continue to exist.

If [they do] not,

I will return you to nothingness."



THE CREATION ►

James Jacques Joseph Tissot, gouache
on board, France, c. 1896–1902.
(The Jewish Museum, New York)



TEXT 10

A FORCED BEGINNING; A FORCED ENDING

ETHICS OF THE FATHERS 4:22

שְׁעַל כְּרַחֵךְ אֶתָּה נּוֹצֵר, וְעַל כְּרַחֵךְ אֶתָּה נוֹלָד,
וְעַל כְּרַחֵךְ אֶתָּה חַי, וְעַל כְּרַחֵךְ אֶתָּה מֵת.

Against your will you are formed,
and against your will you are born.

Against your will you live,
and against your will you die.



FIGURE 1.5

SUMMARY



1. Death is not the end.



2. Nevertheless, we value life more than anything.

IV. THANATOPHOBIA RESOLUTION

We very much want to live, but at the same time, death fails to frighten us.



TEXT 11

A TERROR TACTIC THAT BACKFIRED

ADAPTED FROM RABBI YOSEF YITSCHAK SCHNEERSOHN, *SEFER HASICHOT* 5680, P. 4

RABBI YOSEF YITSCHAK SCHNEERSOHN (RAYATS, FRIERDIKER REBBE, PREVIOUS REBBE) 1880–1950

Chasidic rebbe, prolific writer, and Jewish activist. Rabbi Yosef Yitschak, the 6th leader of the Chabad movement, actively promoted Jewish religious practice in Soviet Russia and was arrested for these activities. After his release from prison and exile, he settled in Warsaw, Poland, from where he fled Nazi occupation and arrived in New York in 1940. Settling in Brooklyn, Rabbi Schneersohn worked to revitalize American Jewish life. His son-in-law, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, succeeded him as the leader of the Chabad movement.



I arrived for interrogation at the offices of the Soviet GPU. However, in keeping with my principles, I was not very cooperative. One of the interrogators raised a revolver that sat on the desk before him. He looked me in the eye and mockingly said, “This small toy has incredible powers. It causes principles to melt away. It opens mouths. Under its spell, even mutes have become talkative.”

I responded: “You are quite mistaken. That toy only has an effect on fainthearted nonbelievers, those with one world and multiple gods. We, on the other hand, have one G-d and two worlds. As such, I don’t panic at the sight of your toy; it has no effect on me whatsoever.”



TEXT 12

A REASON TO WEEP

TALMUD, KETUBOT 103B

כְּשֶׁחָלָה רַבִּי, נָכַנס רַבִּי חִיָּיא אֶצְלוֹ וּמָצָאוּ שֶׁהוּא בּוֹכֶה.
אָמַר לוֹ, "רַבִּי, מִפְּנֵי מָה אַתָּה בּוֹכֶה? וְהִתְנַנֵּיא, 'מִתּ מֵתוּךְ.
הַשְּׁחֹק סִימָן יָפֶה לוֹ, מֵתוּךְ הַבְּכִי סִימָן רַע לוֹ"..."
אָמַר לֵיהּ, "אַנָּא אַתְּוֹרָה וּמִצְוֹת קָא בְּכִינָא."

When Rabbi [Judah the Prince] fell ill [and lay on his deathbed], Rabbi Chiya entered and found him weeping. "My Master!" exclaimed Rabbi Chiya, "Why do you weep? Was it not taught, 'If one dies smiling, it is a good sign for him; while weeping, it is a bad sign for him. . .?'"

Rabbi [Judah] replied, "I weep because of [my inability to study] the Torah and [observe] the commandments [after death]."



◀ "PRAISE THE L-RD, MY SOUL!" [PSALMS 104:1-2]

Ludwig Meidner, oil on board, Cologne, Germany, c. 1936–1937. (Jewish Museum der Stadt Frankfurt am Main)

V. LIFE BEYOND DEATH

In a way, our study of Judaism’s approach to death holds greater significance for living life than for digesting demise. For a start, the ideas we presented impact and enhance life—because they reduce or even eliminate the fear of death. But there’s a lot more to it than that. As we will demonstrate, these concepts are highly relevant to the choices that fill our daily existence.



TEXT 13

THE IMMORTALS

TALMUD, BERACHOT 18A

אלו צדיקים, שבמיתתן נקראו חיים.

After their demise, *tsadikim* [righteous people] are referred to as being alive.

THERE'S MORE...

For a related text, see Text 20 (in the Appendix section of this lesson), on p. 30.



QUESTION

What might be the Talmud’s definition of “alive” in the above statement?



TEXT 14

SPIRITUAL LIFE

RABBI SHNE'UR ZALMAN
OF LIADI, *TANYA*, *IGERET*
HAKODESH 27

RABBI SHNE'UR ZALMAN OF LIADI
(ALTER REBBE) 1745–1812

Chasidic rebbe, halachic authority, and founder of the Chabad movement. The Alter Rebbe was born in Liozna, Belarus, and was among the principal students of the Magid of Mezeritch. His numerous works include the *Tanya*, an early classic containing the fundamentals of Chabad Chasidism; and *Shulchan Aruch HaRav*, an expanded and reworked code of Jewish law.



שְׁחַיִי הַצַּדִּיק אֵינָם חַיִּים בְּשָׂרָיִים כִּי אִם חַיִּים
רוּחָנִיִּים, שֶׁהֵם אֲמוּנָה וְיִרְאָה וְאַהֲבָה.
כִּי בְּאֲמוּנָה פְּתִיב, "וְצַדִּיק בְּאֲמוּנָתוֹ יִחְיֶה" (חִבְקוּק ב, ד);
וּבְיִרְאָה פְּתִיב, "וְיִרְאַת ה' לַחַיִּים" (מִשְׁלֵי יט, כג);
וּבְאַהֲבָה פְּתִיב, "רוֹדֵף צְדָקָה וְחֶסֶד יִמְצָא חַיִּים"
(מִשְׁלֵי כא, כא), וְחֶסֶד הוּא אַהֲבָה.

The life of the *tsadik* [righteous person] is not corporeal but spiritual, consisting of faith, reverence, and love [of G-d. This reality is reflected in the following passages]:

Of faith it is stated (HABAKKUK 2:4):
“The *tsadik* lives by his faith.”

Of reverence it is stated (PROVERBS 19:23):
“Reverence of G-d produces life.”

Of love it is stated (IBID. 21:21): “He who pursues charity and kindness will find life”; and kindness is [rooted in] love.



How does death affect the way we live? *Rabbi Manis Friedman* has a 2-minute explanation: myJLI.com/soul



TEXT 15

THE LIFE OF THE MATTER

RABBI SHALOM DOVBER SCHNEERSOHN, *SEFER HAMAAMARIM* 5670, P. 19

RABBI SHALOM DOVBER SCHNEERSOHN (RASHAB) 1860–1920

Chasidic rebbe. Rabbi Shalom Dovber became the 5th leader of the Chabad movement upon the passing of his father, Rabbi Shmuel Schneersohn. He established the Lubavitch network of *yeshivot* called Tomchei Temimim. He authored many volumes of Chasidic discourses and is renowned for his lucid and thorough explanations of kabbalistic concepts.



Can we transcend death? *Rabbi Naftali Silberberg* explains how we do so in "Attaining Immortality": myJLI.com/soul

"רֵאָה נִתְּתִי לְפָנֶיךָ אֶת הַחַיִּים וְאֶת הַטּוֹב וְאֶת כּוֹ" (דְּבָרִים ל, טו וְאֵילָּה).

דְּפִירוּשׁ "חַיִּים" ו"מָוֶת" אֵין הַפְּוֹנָה בְּחַיִּים בְּעֵת שֶׁהַנְּבִרָא חֵי, וּמָוֶת הוּא לְאַחַר פִּירוּד הַחַיּוּת כּוֹ, דְּמִי זֶה פְּתִי לֹא יִבְחַר בְּחַיִּים כּוֹ?

רַק הַפְּוֹנָה שֶׁבְּכָל דְּבַר נְבִרָא, בְּעֵת שֶׁהוּא בְּחַיּוּתוֹ וְקִיּוּמוֹ, יֵשׁ בּוֹ חַיִּים וּמָוֶת. וְהוּא, שֶׁגְּשָׁמִיּוּת הַדְּבַר וְחִוּמְרִיּוּתוֹ הוּא מָוֶת בְּעֵצָם, דְּהֵינּוּ שֶׁהוּא כְּלָה וְנִפְסָד, וְכֹאֲשֶׁר רוּאָה הָאָדָם הַפְּסִיד כָּל דְּבַר גְּשָׁמִי, וְכֹאֲשֶׁר מְדַגֵּשׁ גַּם בְּעֵצָמוֹ כְּלִיּוֹן הַכַּחוּת הַגּוֹפְנִיּוּת שֶׁלּוֹ שְׁפָלִים וְנִפְסָדִים מִזְּמַן לְזְמַן כּוֹ, וְהַרְוִיחַ וְהַכְּחִי הָאֱלֹקִי הוּא הַחַיִּים שֶׁאֵין בָּזֶה כְּלִיּוֹן וְהַפְּסִיד חֵס וְשָׁלוֹם, כִּי אִם הוּא בְּבַחֲוֵינָת קִיּוּם נִצְחִי כּוֹ.

“Behold, I have set before you today life and goodness and [death and evil. . . . Choose life]!” (DEUTERONOMY 30:15, 19)

The term “life” in this verse does not refer to corporeal life, nor does “death” refer to the result of the soul’s departure. For which simpleton needs to be instructed to choose to live?

Rather, each creation, while alive and fully existent, contains both life and death. The physicality of the object is intrinsically lifeless; it is in a constant state of decline and deterioration. We observe this decline in every physical object, as well as in ourselves—our physical capabilities and powers weaken with time.

By contrast, the spiritual and divine within each thing is alive, eternal, and not subject to destruction or deterioration, G-d forbid.

THERE'S MORE...

For a related text, see Text 21 (in the Appendix section of this lesson) on p. 31.



EXERCISE 1.2

1. Record one point from today's lesson that resonates with you most personally.

2. Identify an adjustment that you can introduce to your life for the sake of living in a manner that is more "alive" and consistent with your immortal soul.



◀ **STILL LIFE WITH A BOTTLE OF BENEDICTINE**
Mark Gertler, oil on canvas, 1908.
(Ben Uri Gallery, London)

KEY POINTS

- 1** The awareness of our mortality and the resulting natural fear of death influence many elements of our psyche, behavior, and life choices. Our perspective on death influences multiple areas of our lives.
- 2** The *neshamah* (human soul), the true essence of the human being, is eternal; it precedes the body and continues to exist after the body is gone. While still in Heaven, it does not desire to descend into a body, and when the time of death arrives, it resumes its native spiritual state.
- 3** The fact that the briefest spiritual experience of the next world is more *pleasurable* than all of this world does not diminish the reality that even a brief stay in this world is more *important* than all of the next. Therefore, Jewish law gives precedence to preserving life over nearly every mitzvah.
- 4** This perspective allows us to appreciate and value life—without fear of death.
- 5** While our corporeal needs and endeavors die with the body, our soul-focused aspirations and actions live on eternally. Thus, when we live and identify with eternal values, our current life continues even after the body's demise.

APPENDIX A



TEXT 16

BALANCED
GRIEF

RABBI DAVID IBN ZIMRA,
METSUDAT DAVID, MITZVAH 70

RABBI DAVID IBN ZIMRA
(RADVAZ) 1479–1573

Noted halachist. Radvaz was born in Spain and immigrated to Safed, Israel, upon the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492. In 1513, he moved to Egypt and served as rabbi, judge, and head of the yeshiva in Cairo. He also ran many successful business ventures and was independently wealthy. In 1553, he returned to Safed where he would later be buried. He authored what would later become a classic commentary to Maimonides's code of law, and wrote many halachic responsa, of which more than 10,000 are still extant.



וְטַעַם הַשְּׂרִיטָה עַל הַמֵּת לְפִי הַפֶּשֶׁט, כִּי הָעוֹשֶׂה מַעֲשֵׂה בָזָה
מוֹרָה שְׂאִין לִמַּת הַשְּׂאֲרַת הַנֶּפֶשׁ.
וְעוֹד, כִּי אֵין רְאוּי לְבַעַל הַשְּׂכָל וְהַתּוֹרָה
לְהַצְטַעַר עַל מַעֲשֵׂה הָאֱ-ל וּמִשְׁפָּטָיו יוֹתֵר מִדָּאִי.
וְכֵן אָמְרוּ רַז"ל, שְׂאִין לְהִתְאַבֵּל יוֹתֵר מִדָּאִי,
וְזֶה דֶרֶךְ הַגּוֹיִם שְׂאִינָם מֵאֲמִינִים בְּהַשְּׂאֲרַת הַנֶּפֶשׁ.
וְרֵאִיתִי הִישְׁמַעְאֲלִים מִרְחִיקִים דְּבָר זֶה הִרְבֵּה,
וְאֶפִּילוּ הַקְרִיעָה עַל הַמֵּת אוֹסְרִים.
וְהַמָּדָה וְהַדֶּרֶךְ הַמְמוֹצָע לְעוֹלָם הוּא טוֹב כְּאֲשֶׁר כְּתוּבנוּ.
וְלִפְיִכָּךְ רְאוּי לְהִתְאַבֵּל אֲבִילוֹת מְמוֹצָע.

The most basic understanding of the Torah's prohibition against self-mutilation in response to a loved one's passing is that such a reaction demonstrates lack of belief in the soul's immortality. (Besides, it is improper for an intelligent person who has studied the Torah to be exceedingly pained over G-d's ways and decisions.) Therefore, our sages cautioned against excessive mourning, for such is the convention of the nations who do not believe in the eternal nature of the soul.

I have personally observed that the Ishmaelites disproportionately oppose [displays of mourning], to the extent of forbidding the rending of garments [in grief].

TEXT 16 CONTINUED

The proper approach, however, is always the middle path: it is proper to mourn—but not excessively.



◀ **JEWS MOURNING
IN A SYNAGOGUE**

Sir William Rothenstein,
oil on canvas, 1906.
(Tate Galleries, U.K.)

APPENDIX B

One element of the fear of death that we have not explored in today's lesson is the fear of *premature* passing. Some are afraid of leaving this world too early, or fear that someone they care for deeply will die prematurely. This apprehension is addressed by the following texts:



TEXT 17A

AT THE RIGHT TIME

ECCLESIASTES 3:1–2

לכל זמן וְעֵת לְכָל חֶפֶץ תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם.
עֵת לְלֵדָת וְעֵת לָמוּת.

Everything has an appointed season,
and everything under the Heaven has a time.

[There is] a time to be born and a time to die.



TEXT 17B

PREORDAINED LIFESPANS

MIDRASH, *KOHELET RABAH* 3:4

KOHELET RABAH

A Midrashic text on the Book of Ecclesiastes. Midrash is the designation of a particular genre of rabbinic literature. The term “Midrash” is derived from the root *d-r-sh*, which means “to search,” “to examine,” and “to investigate.” This particular Midrash provides textual exegeses and develops and illustrates moral principles. It was first published in Pesaro, Italy, in 1519, together with 4 other Midrashic works on the other 4 biblical *Megilot*.



”עַת לְלֵדוֹת”, מַעַת לְלֵדוֹת הִיא ”עַת לְמוֹת”. מִשְׁעָה שְׂאֵדָם נוֹלָד הוּא נִגְזָר עָלָיו כַּמָּה שָׁנִים יִחְיֶה.

A time to be born and a time to die: From the time of birth, there already is a time to die, meaning that from the moment of birth, it is already determined how many years a person is destined to live.



JEWISH FAMILY ▶
Mark Gertler, oil
on canvas, 1913.
(Tate Galleries, U.K.)



TEXT 18

SOLELY IN G-D'S HANDS

RABBI BACHYA IBN PAKUDAH,
*DUTIES OF THE HEART, SHAAAR
YICHUD HAMAASEH, CH. 2*

RABBI BACHYA IBN PAKUDAH
11TH CENTURY

Moral philosopher and author. Ibn Pakudah lived in Muslim Spain, but little else is known about his life. *Chovot Halevavot* (*Duties of the Heart*), his major work, was intended to be a guide for attaining spiritual perfection. Originally written in Judeo-Arabic and published in 1080, it was later translated into Hebrew and published in 1161 by Judah ibn Tibbon, a scion of the famous family of translators. Ibn Pakudah had a strong influence on Jewish pietistic literature.



שִׂיאָמִין, כִּי הַתּוֹעֵלֶת וְהַנֶּזֶק אֵינָם בְּיַד (בְּעֵצָת) גְּבוּרָא
וְלֹא בְּיַכְלֵתוֹ מִבְּלִתֵּי רְשׁוּת הַבּוֹרֵא.

We believe that no created being has the ability to benefit or harm us without the permission of the Creator.



TEXT 19

"WHO SHALL LIVE AND WHO SHALL DIE"

UNETANEH TOKEF, HIGH HOLIDAY
MUSAF LITURGY

בְּרֵאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה יִכְתָּבוּן וּבֵיּוֹם צוֹם כְּפוּר יִחְתַּמּוּן:

כַּמָּה יַעֲבִירוּן וְכַמָּה יִבְרָאוּן,

מִי יִחִיָּה וּמִי יָמוּת,

מִי בְּקִצּוֹ וּמִי לֹא בְּקִצּוֹ,

מִי בַּמַּיִם וּמִי בַּאֵשׁ,

מִי בַחֲרֹב וּמִי בַחֲזֵה,

מִי בַרְעָב וּמִי בַצָּמָא,

מִי בַרְעֵשׁ וּמִי בַמַּגָּפָה,

מִי בַחֲנִיקָה וּמִי בַסְּקִילָה.

מִי יָנוּחַ וּמִי יָנוּעַ, מִי יִשְׁקֹט וּמִי יִטְרַף, מִי יִשְׁלֹוּ וּמִי יִתְיַסֵּר, מִי יַעֲנִי וּמִי יַעֲשֶׂר,

מִי יִשְׁפֹּל וּמִי יָרוּם.

On Rosh Hashanah, it is inscribed [in Heaven], and on the fast of Yom Kippur, it is sealed:

How many shall depart and how many shall be born,

Who shall live and who shall die,

Who shall leave at his allotted time and who shall depart prematurely;

Who [shall perish] by water and who by fire,

Who by sword and who by wild beast,

Who by hunger and who by thirst,

Who by earthquake and who by disease,

Who by strangulation and who by lapidation.

Who shall be at rest and who shall wander;
Who shall be tranquil and who shall be harassed;
Who shall enjoy well-being and who shall suffer
tribulation;
Who shall be poor and who shall be rich;
Who shall be humbled and who shall be exalted.

▼ THE DAY OF ATONEMENT

Jacob Kramer, pencil, brush, and ink on paper, U.K., 1919. (Ben Uri Gallery, London)



APPENDIX C



TEXT 20

WHEN TIME RUNS OUT

MIDRASH HAGADOL,
GENESIS 47:29

MIDRASH HAGADOL

A Midrashic work on the 5 books of the Pentateuch. Midrash is the designation of a particular genre of rabbinic literature usually forming a running commentary on specific books of the Bible. *Midrash Hagadol* quotes widely from Talmud and other earlier Midrashic works, serving as a valuable resource to reconstruct lost sections of Midrash. A traveler, Yaakov Sapir, first discovered the anonymous Midrash in Yemen in the middle of the 19th century. Some ascribe it to Rabbi Avraham, son of Maimonides.

”וַיִּקְרְבוּ יְמֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל” (בְּרֵאשִׁית מִז, כט). רַבִּי שְׁמַעוֹן בֶּן לָקִישׁ אָמַר: יְמוֹתֶיךָ שָׁל צְדִיקִים מֵתִין וְהֵן אֵינָן מֵתִין. מֵאֵי טַעְמָא? ”וַיִּקְרַב יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמוֹת” אֵין כְּתִיב, אֲלָא ”וַיִּקְרְבוּ יְמֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמוֹת”. וְכֵן בְּדוּד: ”וַיִּקְרְבוּ יְמֵי דָוִד לְמוֹת” (מְלָכִים א, ב, א). וְכֵן בְּמִשְׁנָה: ”הֵן קָרְבוּ יְמֵיךָ לְמוֹת” (דְּבָרִים לא, יד).

“The days of Israel neared death” (GENESIS 47:29). Said Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish: The *days* of the righteous die, but they themselves do not die. This is indicated by this verse, which does not say that “Israel neared death,” but that Israel’s *days* neared death. A similar statement is made regarding David, “The days of David neared death” (I KINGS 2:1), and also regarding Moses, “[G-d told Moses,] ‘Behold, your days are nearing death’” (DEUTERONOMY 31:14).

APPENDIX D



TEXT 21

HEAVEN ON EARTH

THE REBBE, RABBI MENACHEM MENDEL SCHNEERSON, *TORAT MENACHEM* 5715:1 (13), PP. 67–68

RABBI MENACHEM MENDEL SCHNEERSON
1902–1994

The towering Jewish leader of the 20th century, known as “the Lubavitcher Rebbe,” or simply as “the Rebbe.” Born in southern Ukraine, the Rebbe escaped Nazi-occupied Europe, arriving in the U.S. in June 1941. The Rebbe inspired and guided the revival of traditional Judaism after the European devastation, impacting virtually every Jewish community the world over. The Rebbe often emphasized that the performance of just one additional good deed could usher in the era of Mashiach. The Rebbe’s scholarly talks and writings have been printed in more than 200 volumes.



כְּתִיב (בְּרֵאשִׁית לֵג, יז), “וּלְמִקְנֵהוּ עֲשֵׂה סוּכּוֹת.” “מִקְנֵהוּ” - הֵם דְּבָרִים הַנִּקְנִים (“אִיִּגְעָקוּיִפְטַע זֶאכֵן”), דְּהֵיִנוּ, כָּל הַדְּבָרִים הַגְּשָׁמִיִּים שֶׁהַנְּשָׁמָה מְצַד עֲצָמָה אֵין לָהּ שׁוּם שִׁיכוּת אֲלֵיהֶם, אֲלֵא שֶׁ“נִקְנֵנו” וְנִיתוּסְפוּ אֶצֶל הַנְּשָׁמָה (“אִ צוּגְעָקוּמְעֻנְעַ זֶאָה”) עַל יְדֵי יְרִידָתָהּ בְּגוּף. וְעַל זֶה נֶאֱמַר “וּלְמִקְנֵהוּ עֲשֵׂה סוּכּוֹת” - שֶׁכָּל הָעֲנֻנִים הַגְּשָׁמִיִּים צְרִיכִים לֵהִיּוֹת בְּאוֹפֵן דְּ“סוּכּוֹת”, בְּדֶרֶךְ עֲרָאֵי בְּלִבְד, וְכִמְאֹמֶר רַז”ל “הָעוֹלָם הַזֶּה דּוֹמֶה לְפְרוּזְדוֹר בְּפְנֵי הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא, הַתֵּקֵן עֲצָמָה בְּפְרוּזְדוֹר כְּדֵי שֶׁתִּכְנַס לְטְרַקְלִין”, דְּהֵיִנוּ שֶׁכָּל עוֹלָם הַזֶּה אֵינוּ אֲלֵא כְּ“פְרוּזְדוֹר”.

וַיִּמָּה שֶׁכְּתוּב “כְּדֵי שֶׁתִּכְנַס לְטְרַקְלִין” - אֵין הַכּוּוֹנָה לְאַחֲרֵי מֵאָה וְעֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה דְּוָקָא, אֲלֵא עַל דְּרָךְ מֵאֹמֶר רַז”ל “עוֹלָמָהּ תִּרְאֶה בְּחִיָּה”, דְּהֵיִנוּ שֶׁכְּאַשְׁרֵי הָאֲדָם נִמְצָא כְּאֵן לְמִטָּה צְרִיכִים הַדְּבָרִים הַגְּשָׁמִיִּים לֵהִיּוֹת אֶצְלוֹ בְּאוֹפֵן שֶׁל “אַרְעֵי”.

“Jacob constructed temporary huts for his cattle”

(GENESIS 33:17). The Hebrew term for cattle, *miknehu*, also translates as “acquisitions” and refers to all material things to which the soul has no innate connection but are considered “acquired” as a result of the soul entering a corporeal body. The verse teaches us that we must make “temporary huts” for all these acquisitions—we must treat all material matters as fleeting. This is in accordance with the teaching of our sages, “This world is like a corridor before the World to Come. Prepare yourself in the corridor, so that you may enter the palace.”

TEXT 21 CONTINUED

It should be noted, however, that the phrase “so that you may enter the palace” does not necessarily refer to “after 120 years.” Rather, as our sages tell us, it is possible for one to experience the hereafter while still alive. This is accomplished by considering all physical matters as “temporary” [and not of primary importance] even while living a mortal life.



◀ **UNTITLED [CAPTIVE/FIGURE OF THIS WORLD—NEXT WORLD]**

Paul Klee, oil and colored paste on primed burlap on burlap, Basel, Switzerland, c. 1940. (Fondation Beyeler, Basel)

ADDITIONAL READINGS



ESSENCE AND EXPRESSION

BY RABBI YANKI TAUBER

RABBI YANKI TAUBER

1965–

Chasidic scholar and author. A native of Brooklyn, N.Y., Rabbi Tauber is an internationally renowned author who specializes in adapting the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe. He is a member of the JLI curriculum development team and has written numerous articles and books, including *Once Upon a Chassid* and *Beyond the Letter of the Law*.

Rabbi Yaakov would say: This world is compared to an antechamber before the world to come. Prepare yourself in the antechamber, so that you may enter the banquet hall.

He would also say: A single moment of repentance and good deeds in this world is greater than all of the world to come. And a single moment of bliss in the world to come is greater than all of this world.

—*Ethics of the Fathers, 4:16–17*

The Talmud relates that Rabbi Yaakov once witnessed the tragic death of a young man who, at that very moment, was engaged in fulfilling the very two *mitzvot* for which the Torah promises “long life.”

“Honor your father and your mother,” reads the fifth of Ten Commandments, “that your days be lengthened, and that good befall you.”¹ The other *mitzvah* for which the Torah specifically promises reward is *shiluach hakan* (“dispatching the nest”): “If you happen upon a bird’s nest . . . and the mother bird is sitting upon the young or upon the eggs, do not take the mother bird along with the young. Send away the mother bird, and you may then take the young for yourself, that good may befall you and that your days be lengthened.”²

And yet, here was a man who was fulfilling both these commandments simultaneously. At his father’s request, he had climbed a ladder to chase away a mother bird from her nest and collect the chicks. But no sooner had he done so that he slipped from the ladder and fell to his death.

“Where are this person’s ‘long days?’” asked Rabbi Yaakov. “Where is the ‘good’ he was promised? But, when the Torah says ‘that your days be lengthened,’ it is referring to a world that is wholly long; when the Torah says ‘that good befall you,’ it is referring to a world that is wholly good.”³

“Rabbi Yaakov,” concludes the Talmud, “is of the opinion that there is no reward for *mitzvot* in this world”—a view expressed in the *Ethics* by Rabbi Tarfon (“Know, that the reward of the righteous is in the World to Come”⁴) and reiterated by Maimonides in his codification of Torah law, the *Mishneh Torah*.⁵

Another talmudic sage, Rabbi Joshua ben Levi, quotes the verse “You shall keep the *mitzvah*, the decrees, and the laws, which I command you today to do them”⁶—“today to do them,” Rabbi Joshua reads in the verse’s meaning, “and not to do them tomorrow; today to do them, and tomorrow to receive their reward.”⁷

In other words, the “present world” and “the world to come”

represent two entirely different modes of existence, which, for some reason, must each be confined to a world all its own. Our present existence is the environment for the deed and achievement, but lacks the possibility to enjoy the fruits of our labor. On the other hand, the “world to come” is a world of ultimate reward, bliss, and perfection, but one that precludes any further achievement on the part of man. The Talmud goes so far as to quote the verse, “There will come years of which you will say: I have no desire in them,”⁸ and declare: “This refers to the days of the Messianic Era, in which there is neither merit nor obligation.”⁹

Why this dichotomy? On the most basic level, this is a function of G-d’s granting freedom of choice to man, without which our deeds would be devoid of moral significance. A world in which the benefits of obeying the Almighty’s commandments are self-evident would obviously lack the challenge and the sacrifice which makes their observance worthy of reward. So in this world G-d created an environment in which neither He nor the divine nature of His commandments are openly manifest. A world in which surface appearances shroud and distort the divine truth—a world in which people engaged in life-lengthening *mitzvot* fall off ladders—challenging us to choose between good and evil, between faithfulness to our mission in life and its corruption. Only such a world can serve as the arena for meaningful accomplishment.

The Physics of Will

However, our material world’s concealment of the divine truth is much more than an orchestrated moral challenge. On a deeper level, this concealment is significant to the nature of the *mitzvot* themselves.

The *mitzvot* are primarily physical deeds performed with physical objects: animal hides are fashioned into *tefillin* and wrapped around one’s head and arm; flour and water become the instrument of a *mitzvah* in the form of the *matzah* eaten on Passover; a ram’s horn is sounded on Rosh Hashanah; a citron and palm frond are taken on Sukkot. For the physical world is ultimately the most appropriate environment for the function of the *mitzvah* to be realized.

“*Mitzvot* relate to the very essence of G-d”¹⁰ is a mainstay of chassidic teaching. But the very notion of something relating to another thing’s essence is a philosophical oxymoron. The “essence” of something is the thing itself, as opposed to the manner in which it affects and is perceived by that which is outside of it. Hence the axiom: “The essence of a thing does not express itself or extend itself”¹¹ In other words, if you see it, it is not the thing itself that you see, only the manner in which it reflects light and imprints an image on your retina; if you understand it, then it is not the thing itself that you comprehend, only a concept that your mind has pieced together by studying its effect on other things, and so on.

Nevertheless, G-d desired to project His essence into the created reality. This is the function of the *mitzvot*: through observing His commandments and fulfilling His will, we “bring” the very essence of G-d into our lives. And this is why He chose the physical object as the medium of the *mitzvah*’s implementation. Spiritual entities (e.g., ideas, feelings, etc.) intrinsically point to a source, a cause, a greater reality which they express and serve. Unlike the physical, whose deeper significance is buried deep beneath the surface of its corporeality, the spiritual readily serves as the expression of a higher truth. The spiritual is thus the natural medium for the various *expressions* of the divine reality that G-d chose to convey to us.

But when it comes to the projection of G-d’s *essence*, the very “virtues” of the spiritual disqualify it: its capacity to convey, to reveal, to manifest, runs contrary to the introverted nature of “essence.” Here, the physical object, the most non-transcendental element of G-d’s creation, is the most ideal vehicle for G-d’s *essence*—capturing *mitzvot*.

A physical object merely *is*: “I am,” it proclaims, “and my being is wholly defined by its own existence.” As such, the physical object constitutes the greatest concealment of the divine truth.¹² Precisely for this reason, it is G-d’s medium of choice for man’s implementation of His will.

In other words, the object of the *mitzvah* is not a “manifestation” of the Divine. Were it to reflect Him in any way, were it to reveal anything of the “nature” of His reality, it would, by definition, fail to capture

His essence. But capture His essence it does, simply because He willed it to. G-d, of course, could have willed anything (including a manifest expression of His reality) to convey His essence, but He chose a medium that is most appropriate according to logical laws he established in creating our reality—a reality in which “essence” and “expression” are antithetical to each other. He therefore chose the material world, with its virtual blackout on any revealed expression of G-dliness, to serve as the “tool” with which we perform the *mitzvot* and thereby relate to His essence.

Better for Whom

“The reward of a *mitzvah* is a *mitzvah*,”¹³ say our sages. For all pleasures and satisfactions (indeed, the very concepts of pleasure and satisfaction) were created by G-d. So what greater delight can there be than to experience the divine essence, the source of all pleasure? Were it possible for a human being to perceive what transpires each time he fulfills G-d’s will in his daily life, he would experience the very essence of bliss.

But the very nature of what is accomplished by the performance of a *mitzvah* precludes the possibility of such “reward”: as explained above, the concealment of the divine reality which categorizes our material-bound existence is what makes it the appropriate medium for the drawing down of G-d’s essence. Reward can only come in a future world, a world that reveals rather than obscures its Creator. And yet, the world to come, precisely because of its manifest G-dliness, can serve only as the environment for the reward of the *mitzvah* but not for its implementation.

Thus, Rabbi Yaakov states in our *mishnah*: “A single moment of repentance and good deeds in this world is greater than all of the world to come. And a single moment of bliss in the world to come is greater than all of the present world.”

Regarding the Almighty’s purpose in creation—the drawing down of His essence into the physical creation¹⁴—a single positive act on the part of man is more meaningful than all the bliss experienced in the world to come. Yet the performer of the *mitzvah* remains in the dark. Although he may be aware of the

value of what he is doing, he is unable to perceive it and experience it. On the experiential level, a single moment of bliss in the world to come is greater than all the joys of our present world.

The Banquet Hall

In light of this, one may ask: why bother with the reward at all? If G-d’s purpose in creation is realized in our present-day lives, of what significance is our personal satisfaction?

One possible answer is that the need for a world to come is a function of G-d’s commitment to justice and fairness. In the words of our sages, “G-d does not deprive any creature of its due.”¹⁵ If a man is instrumental in satisfying G-d’s desire in creation, he deserves the satisfaction of enjoying the fruits of his labor.¹⁶

But this certainly does not describe the ultimate significance of the world to come. Rabbi Yaakov prefaces his above-quoted saying by comparing our world to an antechamber leading to the banquet hall, which is the world to come. Clearly, then, the World to Come is not a footnote to our world, but its purpose and goal, a theme that is reiterated by many sayings by our sages.

How, then, do we reconcile this with the concept that “the essence of a thing does not express itself or extend itself”? And that it is, therefore, our present world, *because* of its spiritual darkness and inexpressiveness that facilitates the drawing down of G-d’s essence and thereby realizes His purpose in creation?

Truly Him and Truly Here

In applying terms such as “essence” and “expression” to the Almighty, we must bear in mind that it is He who created logic and its laws. Obviously, He is not governed or limited by any rational “axioms.”

Nevertheless, He wishes to relate to our world as it is. So He chooses to make His relationship with us consistent with the basic “truths” that define our reality.

Indeed, since the purpose of creation is that the divine essence be drawn down into the physical reality, the objective is to do so on its (the physical reality’s)

terms, not by overriding them. So if the logical laws that govern our reality dictate that “expression” is incompatible with “essence,” our bringing G-dliness into the world is to be achieved “blindly,” without any perceptible manifestations of the divine essence.

On the other hand, however, if G-d’s essence is truly to enter our reality, He must enter it as He is, without hindrance or inhibition. If *His* reality tolerates no limits or definitions, “revelation” must be no less conducive to His essence than “concealment.”

In other words, for Him to be here implies two (seemingly contradictory) truths: if He is to be truly *here*, then His presence must be consistent with our reality; yet if it is truly *He* who is here, He must be here on His terms.

This is why the created existence has two distinct components: the present world and the world to come—the process and its culmination. The process of drawing down the divine essence into the created reality is carried out under an obscuring veil of corporeality, in keeping with the created rule that “the essence of a thing does not express itself or extend itself.” At the same time, the product and end result of this process is a world in which G-d is uninhibitedly present, in which also the *expressions* of His reality fully convey the quintessence of His being.¹⁷

Beyond the Letter of the Law (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Vaad Hanochos Hatmimim, 1995), pp. 201–209.

Reprinted with permission of the publisher

Endnotes

¹ Deuteronomy 5:16.

² Deuteronomy 22:6–7.

³ Talmud, Kiddushin 39b.

⁴ *Ethics of the Fathers*, 2:16.

⁵ Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance 9:1.

⁶ Deuteronomy 7:11.

⁷ Talmud, *Eruvin* 22a.

⁸ Ecclesiastes 12:1.

⁹ Talmud, *Shabbat* 151b.

¹⁰ *Torat Shalom* pg. 190, see also *Tanya*, part IV, section 20.

¹¹ *Guide for the Perplexed*, quoted in *Ki Shemesh U’magen* 5692.

¹² Ultimately, however, this “I am, period” quality of the physical reflects on the wholly self-contained quintessence of its Creator. So while the most immediate function of the physical is to obscure the divine truth, a deeper contemplation of its qualities will yield insight into the very beingness of G-d, something that no spiritual expression of Him can convey. (It is told that following the Rosh Hashanah prayers one year, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi asked his son, Rabbi DovBer: “What did you think of during your prayers?” Rabbi DovBer replied that he had contemplated the meaning of the passage, “and every stature shall bow before You”—how the most lofty supernal worlds and spiritual creations negate themselves before the infinite majesty of G-d. “And you, father,” Rabbi DovBer then asked, “with what thought did you pray?” Replied Rabbi Schneur Zalman: “I contemplated the table at which I stood.”)

¹³ *Ethics of the Fathers* 4:2.

¹⁴ See *Wood Submerged in Stone*, pgs. 92–94; *Debating Truths*, pgs. 275–284.

¹⁵ *Midrash Mechilta*, Exodus 20:30.

¹⁶ See *The Resurrection of the Dead* on pg. 212.

¹⁷ Based on an address by the Rebbe, Tammuz 12, 5719 (July 18, 1959).



ETHICS FROM SINAI

BY RABBI IRVING M. BUNIM

RABBI IRVING M. BUNIM

1901–1980

Scholar and philanthropist.

Rabbi Bunim was a prominent lay leader in the American Orthodox Jewish community. In the 1930s, he worked to establish the Young Israel movement, and over his lifetime, he was a major figure in many Jewish educational institutions.

He used to say: Better, finer is one hour [spent] in repentance and good deeds in this world than all of life in the world-to-come; and better, finer is one hour of spiritual pleasure in the world-to-come than all of life in this world.

R. Jacob goes on with his contemplation of the known world here on earth and the spiritual world-to-come, to consider how they compare and how they interrelate. This *mishnah* is thus a direct continuation of the previous one.

If this world is merely a foyer or waiting-room, a place to prepare and make ready, and the Hereafter is the great banquet hall, we might well assume that life on earth is of far lesser importance, not to be regarded or valued too highly. If R. Jacob has created any such impression through his first teaching, he corrects it now. True enough, for sheer spiritual bliss and thoroughgoing reward, the world-to-come is incomparably superior. But this world of ours has one overriding importance of its own: Only here is man able to will and act, to achieve, to repent and change for the better; in short, to develop and grow in spiritual maturity. “Whatever your hand finds to do by your strength,” says Solomon the wise, “do it; for there is no work or thought, knowledge or wisdom in the nether-world, to which you are going.”¹

It is told that in his last moments, as he knew death to be approaching shortly, the Gaon of Vilna began to weep. His disciples, gathered by his bedside, could not understand. “O Master,” they asked, “you have spent a lifetime preparing for the Hereafter. Now that you are about to enter it, why do you weep?” In reply he pointed to the *tzitzith*, the fringes at the four corners of a special white garment (*arba canfoth*) that he constantly wore. “This garment,” he said, “I bought for such a little bit of money. Yet by wearing it each day, I was able to fulfill such precious *mitzvot*. In the world-to-come, even so simple a deed will not be possible. I weep, for I will be deprived of any further chance for *mitzvot*.”

The Hereafter provides indescribable bliss, but it is a passive realm. There is no further chance for initiative, for conscious arousal to strive and achieve. The Midrash tells that ultimately, when the wicked stand in judgment before the Holy, Blessed One, they will plead, “Permit us, and we will repent.” And the Holy One will reply, “You utter fools, the world in which you lived is like a Friday, and this realm is like a Sabbath. If a man does not prepare [food] on Friday, what will he eat on the Sabbath? Shall he then make his preparations on the Sabbath and thus desecrate it? Only one who has made his preparations beforehand can now eat. And do you not know that the world in which you lived is

like the shore, while this realm is like the sea? If a man does not prepare for his meals while on shore, what will he eat at sea? Do you not know that this realm is like a wilderness, while the world from which you came is like a settlement? If a man does not prepare [food to take along] from the settlement, what will he eat in the wilderness? Again, the world in which you lived is like a sunny season, while this realm is like the rainy season. If a man does not plow in the sunny months, what will he eat when the rains descend?”²

The world-to-come is the realm of incomparable bliss, but this world of ours is the domain of incomparable achievement. Whatever ethereal joy the Hereafter may bring a person, there is one deep satisfaction it cannot give: the satisfaction of overcoming difficulties and making solid achievements. To see oneself grow spiritually, in faith, in religious observance, in Torah study, in deeds of kindness—this brings its own basic joy and contentment. In the Hereafter we can be wafted along on a cloud; in this world we can ourselves scale heights, knowing that our attainments will bring lasting compensation in the after-life.

On one point our Sages are firm and clear: that “there is no reward for a *mitzvah* in this world.”³ Scripture states, “Then you shall keep the commandment and the statutes and the ordinances which I command you this day to do them.”⁴ And the Talmud tersely comments, “*This day* [you are] *to do them*, but not this day [are you] to receive reward”;⁵ “you are to do them this day, but receive their reward tomorrow.”⁶ Again and again is this theme expressed: “The entire recompense of the righteous is held in readiness for them for the world-to-come.⁷ The Holy, Blessed One has postponed the reward that the performers of *mitzvot* receive, so that they should fulfill them in faith and trust.”⁸ In *Pirke Avot* itself we learned, “Know that the reward of the righteous is granted them in the world-to-come.”⁹

Yet this is in startling contradiction to the countless passages in our Written Torah that distinctly promise a reward of material goods and material well-being for observing the *mitzvot*. In the *Sh'ma* that the devout Jew recites morning and evening, we read, “If you will carefully heed My commandments which I command

you this day, to love the Lord your G-d and to serve Him with all your heart and all your soul, then will I give the rain for your land in its [proper] season, the autumn rains and the spring rains, that you may gather in your grain, your wine and your oil. And I will make grass grow in your fields for your cattle, and you shall eat and be satisfied.”¹⁰ Interpret as we will, neither Heaven nor the Hereafter is mentioned directly here. In its literal meaning, the verse promises the Almighty’s recompense in man’s everyday life on earth.

First we might note the point that the *Rambam* makes. He concludes that where Scripture promises material rewards, it predicts them not as full and true compensation, but merely as means toward further goals and ends. If the Torah and its precepts are faithfully observed, there will be the kind of material rewards that will promote Torah living further. The rewards will tend to create economic, political, and social conditions in which it will be easier, more convenient to do *mitzvot* and flourish in religious growth. The *intrinsic*, essential reward for *mitzvot*, however, remains spiritual bliss in the world-to-come.¹¹ As the Talmud states specifically about certain *mitzvot*, “a man enjoys the ‘fruits’ in this world [in modern terminology, we might say the dividends] while the principle remains for him [to enjoy] in the Hereafter.”¹²

Why does the “principle,” the core of true reward, remain for the world-to-come? Why is there “no reward for a *mitzvah* in this world”? As we have mentioned elsewhere, there is not enough true pleasure or treasure in this whole wide world for the reward that a *mitzvah* deserves. It is as though a person earns a check, a bank draft for his Divine merit, but there is no bank here on earth with funds enough to honor it. The reward for *mitzvot* is so great and sublime that it can be given only in the “currency” or “wealth” of the world-to-come.

What is it like, then—we may ask in curiosity—to receive such recompense in the Hereafter? Try as we will, we cannot imagine or comprehend this kind of experience. Just as earthly goods cannot provide this blissful reward, human words and thoughts cannot describe it. When we sleep and perhaps dream, we

are totally unaware of the passage of time; when we are awake and conscious, it is impossible for us to *break out* of the dimensions of time and space and become unaware of them. Then how can we perceive anything clear about eternity, a realm in which the laws of time and space do not exist? The *Rambam* gives analogies: A person blind [from birth] can have no concept whatever of color; the deaf can have not the slightest understanding of sound; live fish can never experience fire for they exist in water. Even so can we, living our normal lives here on earth, know nothing of the sublime joy of the Hereafter through the cognition of direct experience.¹³ The best we can do is to use simile and metaphor, describing the joys of the Hereafter as “pleasure” or “bliss,” concepts that are familiar within our range of experience, although such terms are certainly inaccurate and misleading. Perhaps for this reason our *mishnah* uses the term *korath ruah* to denote the happiness in eternity, rather than the more usual *oneg*: The word *korath* seems to be associated with the root *kar*, “cold”; thus it would suggest a cooling or soothing calmness of spirit, in direct contrast to the excitation of the senses associated with intense pleasure here on earth.

In a similar vein, *Mahzor Vitry* explains: Anger and grief (or deep mourning) are passions designated as “heat”; hence pleasure, satisfaction of spirit is called *korath*, “cooling”; the mind is soothed and calmed by great happiness and joy.

A Talmudic passage comes to mind: “There was a habitual saying always on the lips of Rav: Unlike this world is the world-to-come. In the world-to-come there is neither eating nor drinking, neither conjugal intercourse nor business activity, nor envy, hatred, or heated rivalry. Rather do the righteous sit crowned in glory, enjoying the lustre of the *sh’chinah*, the Divine Presence.”¹⁴ Without the needs and appetites that the earthbound human being shares with the animal; without the drive to compete, excel, outdo others; without the destructive emotions of envy and hate—the Hereafter indeed offers a glimpse of unparalleled, unimaginable serenity and soothing tranquility, a vista of a new dimension of bliss.

Better, finer is one hour of repentance and good deeds . . .

Once more we can note that the language of our Sages is not random or haphazard. R. Jacob specifies one hour, one brief span of time: for our tradition teaches that some may achieve immortality, a share of life in the Hereafter, in one hour, while others may have to toil a lifetime.¹⁵ One heroic deed for G-d or man, one impassioned response to a crisis, one act of sincerity and sacrifice that brings blessed consequences, may effect a revolution within; to transform a person’s entire character and faith. For ever after his vision may be lifted from this world, from hopes and ambitions centered on material gains, to value morality and spiritual growth. When he wins the key to immortal life, that can well be a man’s finest hour.

But let us bear in mind that the reverse is also true. Our Rabbinic tradition records that it was R. Judah haNasi who stated that some may win life in the Hereafter in a brief hour, while others toil for years. And he wept as he said this. In one source we read that he added, “some can toil all their living days and lose their entire reward in one brief hour.”¹⁶ This indeed is cause for weeping. How tragic for a person to lose so swiftly, through one heinous act, what he may have toiled a lifetime to achieve.

A further nuance lies in these words of R. Jacob: “Better is one hour of repentance and good deeds *miccol* (than all) life in the world-to-come.” The prefix *mi* also has the sense of “deriving from, stemming from.”¹⁷ Hence R. Jacob’s teaching could connote that an hour of turning to religion and good deeds in this world is superior, when it derives from a realization, an awareness of the reality of life in the Hereafter. The way a man chooses to spend a free hour should reflect an entire way of thought about the value and purpose of his being in the world. It will be truly a fine hour if he makes it a stepping-stone on a clear-cut path through life, determined by an awareness of the Hereafter.

The Midrash gives an apt parable: An old man sat at a fork in the road, where two pathways spread out before him. One began smooth and fine, but eventually became a mass of thorns, cedars, and reeds.

The other was at first nothing but reeds, cedars, and thorns, but eventually it became a smooth path. And so he would warn the passers-by how each pathway ultimately was. Now surely (the Midrash concludes) the passers-by should be grateful to him, that he warned them for their own good, so that they could avoid exhausting [waste of time and energy]. So should mankind be grateful to Solomon, for he sits at the gateways of wisdom and warns . . . “I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind”¹⁸—everything except repentance and good deeds.¹⁹

At every free hour that we can spend in leisure, two roads open before us: one, the way of earthly pleasure, immediate gratification, certainly seems smooth and easy; the other is the path of virtue, to serve Heaven and benefit people, and it may seem beset by difficulties like twisted brambles and thorns; to travel such a road may mean much discomfort and sacrifice. But the wise Solomon sums up the value of earthly goals and gains, like the mathematician who writes a long equation on the blackboard, full of complex terms, and then writes at the end: equals zero. Hence R. Jacob advises: It is fine to devote a free hour to religious return and good deeds, knowing that this thorny way leads to the most blessed path of all.

At any rate, here we have evidence, if evidence is needed, that our Sages did not blindly follow popular concepts or ways of thinking. Through the ages the hedonist approach has never lacked a large enthusiastic following. In the words of Scripture, their cry is, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.”²⁰ The quatrains of Omar Khayyam echo and re-echo the yearning for the pleasures of wine and love as long as life allows. And in our own day a popular song dinned into our ears the wise counsel: “Enjoy yourself; it’s later than you think.” Life on this earth, says the hedonist, should be devoted to pleasure (even if it kills you).

As for religious worship and good deeds, the popular idea would be that this is a matter for angels, winged creatures who fly about heaven. If someone wants to explain that he is not really a good person, he says, “I’m no angel.” If someone is being coaxed to

do something good or kind, he may be urged, “Be an angel.” At best, religious devotion and selfless compassionate kindness are expected of someone who lives an “other-worldly” life as a mystic or saint, without mingling in the ordinary activities of ordinary people, feet on the ground.

R. Jacob teaches the very opposite: The place for pleasure is in the Hereafter. Enjoyments on this earth do not begin to compare to the bliss of eternity. And the place for religiosity and deeds of kindness is here on earth. In the Hereafter no one can take the initiative to do *mitzvot*. You can only obey and reflect the Divine will. The finest way to spend an hour on this earth is to “be an angel,” and fulfill His commandments. The best way to spend an hour in the world-to-come is to enjoy yourself, although there it is never later than you think.

Ethics from Sinai (New York: Feldheim Publishers, 1966), pp. 151–156.

Reprinted with permission of the publisher

Endnotes

- 1 Ecclesiastes 9:10.
- 2 Midrash Mishle, vi; Rabbah, Eccl. i 15; Yalkut Shim’oni II, Mishle § 938.
- 3 T.B. Kiddushin 39b, Hullin 142a.
- 4 Deuteronomy 7: II.
- 5 T.B. Abodah Zarah 3a.
- 6 T.B. Erubin 22a.
- 7 Midrash Rabbah ii 3.
- 8 T.J. Pe’ah i 1.
- 9 Avoth ii 21.
- 10 Deuteronomy 11: 13–15.
- 11 Rambam, *Commentary to the Mishnah*, Sanhedrin x, introduction.
- 12 T.B. Shabbath 127a.
- 13 Rambam, *Commentary to the Mishnah*, Sanhedrin x, introduction.
- 14 T.B. Berakoth 17a.
- 15 T.B. Abodah Zarah 10b, 17a, 18a.
- 16 Midrash Eleh Ezc’rah, on R. Hanina b. T’radyon (Beth haMidrash II p. 68).
- 17 R. Abraham Azulai similarly interprets the prefix here as “because of”: An hour of repentance, etc. is fine *because of* all the life in the Hereafter that it will earn.
- 18 Ecclesiastes 1: 14.
- 19 Midrash Rabbah to *ibid*.
- 20 Isaiah 22:13.