

טוב ללקח אָל-בֵּית-אֶבֶל: Daf Ditty Moed Katan 28



Saskia Serle

The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning

לֵב חֲכָמִים בְּבַיִת אֶבֶל, וְלֵב כְּסִילִים בְּבַיִת שְׂמֵחָה

Ecc 7:4

Forgetting someone is like
Forgetting to put out the light in the back yard
And leaving it on all day:
But it's the light
That makes you remember.

Yehudah Amichai, The Great Tranquility; Questions and Answers

מִתְנִי נָשִׁים בְּמוֹעֵד מַעֲנֹת אֲבָל לֹא
 מִטְפָּחוֹת ר' יִשְׁמַעְאֵל אוֹמֵר הֵם מְזוּכָּוִים לְמִטָּה
 מִטְפָּחוֹת בְּרֵאשֵׁי חֲדָשִׁים בְּחֻנוּכָּה וּבְפוּרִים
 מַעֲנֹת וּמִטְפָּחוֹת בּוֹה וְזוֹה לֹא מִקְיָנוֹת נִקְבֵּר
 הַמֵּת לֹא מַעֲנֹת וְלֹא מִטְפָּחוֹת אִיזְהוּ עֵינָיו
 שְׂכוּלֵן עוֹנֹת כְּאַחַת קִינָה שְׂאֵחַת מְדַבֵּרֶת
 וְכוּלֵן עוֹנֹת אַחֲרֶיהָ שֵׁנָא^י וְלִמְדָנָה בְּנוֹתֵיכֶם
 נְהִי וְאַשֶׁה רְעוּתָהּ קִינָה אֲבָל לְעֵתִיד לְבֹא
 הוּא אוֹמֵר^י כְּלַע הַמּוֹת לְנִצַּח וּמַחָה ה' אֱלֹהִים
 דְּמַעָה מֵעַל כָּל פָּנִים וְגו': גַּמ' מַאי אִמְרֵן^י

מִתְנִי נָשִׁים בְּמוֹעֵד מַעֲנֹת, אֲבָל לֹא מִטְפָּחוֹת. רַבִּי יִשְׁמַעְאֵל אוֹמֵר:
 הֵם מְזוּכָּוִים לְמִטָּה מִטְפָּחוֹת.

MISHNA: On the intermediate days of a Festival women may wail in grief over the deceased, **but they may not clap** [*metapehot*] their hands in mourning. **Rabbi Yishmael says: Those who are close to the bier may clap.**

בְּרֵאשֵׁי חֲדָשִׁים, בְּחֻנוּכָּה וּבְפוּרִים — מַעֲנֹת וּמִטְפָּחוֹת, בְּזוֹה וְזוֹה —
 לֹא מִקְיָנוֹת. נִקְבֵּר הַמֵּת — לֹא מַעֲנֹת וְלֹא מִטְפָּחוֹת.

On New Moons, Hanukkah and Purim, which are not Festivals by Torah law, the women may both wail and clap their hands in mourning. **On both** the intermediate days of a Festival **and on** New Moons, Hanukkah and Purim **they may not lament.** After **the deceased has been buried they may neither wail nor clap.**

אִיזְהוּ עֵינָיו — שְׂכוּלֵן עוֹנֹת כְּאַחַת, קִינָה — שְׂאֵחַת מְדַבֵּרֶת וְכוּלֵן
 עוֹנֹת אַחֲרֶיהָ, שֵׁנָא מֵר: "וְלִמְדָנָה בְּנוֹתֵיכֶם נְהִי וְאַשֶׁה רְעוּתָהּ קִינָה".

The mishna explains: **What is considered wailing?** This is **when they all wail together** simultaneously. And what is considered **a lament?** This is **when one speaks and they all answer after her** with a repeated refrain, **as it is stated:**

19 Yea, hear the word of the LORD, O ye women, and let your ear receive the word of His mouth, and teach your daughters wailing, and everyone her neighbour lamentation:

Jer 9:19

“And teach your daughters wailing and everyone her neighbor lamentation”

אַבְל לְעֵתִיד לְבֹא הוּא אוֹמֵר “בְּלַע הַמָּוֹת לְנֹצֵחַ וּמָחָה ה' אֱלֹהִים
דְּמָעָה מֵעַל כָּל פָּנִים וְגו'”.

In order to conclude on a positive note, the mishna says: **But with regard to the future**, the verse states:

8 He will swallow up death for ever; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from off all faces; and the reproach of His people will He take away from off all the earth; for the LORD hath spoken it. {P}

Isa 25:8

“He will destroy death forever; and the Lord, God, will wipe away tears from off all faces and the reproach of His people He will take away from off all the earth”

תַּנְיָא, הָיָה רַבִּי מֵאִיר אוֹמֵר: “טוֹב לְלַכֵּת אֶל בֵּית אַבְל וְגו'” עַד
“וְהָיָה יָתֵן אֶל לִבּוֹ” — דְּבָרִים שֶׁל מִיתָה: דִּסְפָד — יִסְפְּדוּנִיָּה,
דִּקְבָר — יִקְבְּרוּנִיָּה, דִּיטְעֵן — יִטְעַנּוּנִיָּה, דִּידֵל — יִדְלוּנִיָּה.

It is taught in a *baraita* that **Rabbi Meir would say** with regard to the verse

2 **It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting**; for that is the end of all men, and the living will lay it to his heart.

Ecc 7:2

“It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for that is the end of all men; and the living will lay it to his heart”

What should the living lay to his heart? **Matters relating to death.** And these matters are as follows: He **that eulogizes will be eulogized** by others. He **that buries** others **will be buried** by others. He **that loads** many words of praise and tribute into the eulogies that he delivers for others **will be** similarly **treated** by others. He **that raises** his voice in weeping over others **will** have others **raise** their voices **over him.**

וְאִיכָּא דְאָמְרִי: דְּלֹא יֵדֵל — יְדֻלּוּנִיָּהּ, דְּכַתִּיב: “כִּי טוֹב אָמַר לָךְ עַל־הָ
הַנָּה וְגו’.”

And some say: One who does not raise himself with pride, but chooses his place among the lowly, **will be raised** by others, as it is written:

ו אַל-תִּתְהַדָּר לְפָנֵי-מֶלֶךְ; וּבְמָקוֹם
גְּדֹלִים, אַל-תִּעֲמֹד. 6 Glorify not thyself in the presence of the king, and stand not in the place of great men;

ז כִּי טוֹב אָמַר-לָךְ, עַל־הָ-
הַנָּה: מִהַשְׁפִּילָךְ, לְפָנֵי נָדִיב--אֲשֶׁר
רָאוּ עֵינֶיךָ. 7 For better is it that it be said unto thee: 'Come up hither', than that thou shouldst be put lower in the presence of the prince, whom thine eyes have seen.

Prov 25:6-7

“Do not exalt yourself in the king’s presence, and stand not in the place of great men. For it is better to be told, step up here, than to be degraded in the presence of the great”

Summary

On Rosh Hodesh, on Hannukah and on Purim they may wail and clap [their hands in grief]. Neither on the former nor on the latter occasions may they offer a lamentation. After the dead has been buried they neither wail nor clap [their hands in grief].¹

What is meant by wailing? When all wail in unison.

What is meant by a lament? When one speaks and all respond after her, as it is said: “And teach your daughters wailing and one another [each] lamentation” (Jeremiah 9:19).

But as to the future, it says: “He will destroy death forever, and the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces” (Isaiah 25:9).

¹https://www.sefaria.org/Moed_Katan.28b.1?lang=bi&p2=Mishnah_Moed_Katan.3.9&lang2=bi&w2=English%20Explanation%20of%20Mishnah&lang3=en

The last mishnah in Moed Katan continues to discuss womens' mourning practices during the festival. It concludes with a note of hope for the future, for a messianic age when God will conquer death.

Section one: Rosh Hodesh, Hannukah and Purim are semi-holidays. There are special prayers and Torah readings for all three of them, but work is not prohibited. Two of them (Hannukah and Purim) are not mentioned in the Torah and hence, their importance is less than that of the other holidays. Due to their diminished status, the women may even clap their hands in grief at a funeral. This was prohibited during the festival.

Section two: Lamenting (explained below) is forbidden on all holidays, both those mentioned in section one of this mishnah and the festivals discussed in yesterday's mishnah.

Section three: The women are permitted to wail or clap only as long as the dead body has not been buried. Once the body is buried, both practices become forbidden.

Section four: The mishnah now defines, at least partially, wailing and lamenting. Wailing is done by all of the women simultaneously. Lamenting is done responsively, one woman speaking and the others answering after her. This is hinted at in Jeremiah who says that one woman teaches another lamentation, interpreted to mean that one woman recites the lamentation and the others repeat after her.

Section five: All of this talk about death can be depressing and scary. Indeed, it was often considered forbidden for young men to learn the third chapter of Moed Katan because all of this talk about death could bring on bad luck (the evil eye). To alleviate this distress, the tractate ends on a positive note. The current stage of humanity, where we must face the distressing possibility of mourning in the middle of the joy of a festival, will be alleviated in the messianic period, when God will conquer death.

[You probably already know what I'm going to say but I'll say it anyway]. It is a tradition at this point to thank God for helping us finish learning the tractate and to commit ourselves to going back and relearning it, so that we may not forget it and so that its lessons will stay with us for all of our lives.

Most of Moed Katan was about the laws of the festival. These laws are fascinating (at least to me) because they are grayer, more ambiguous, than the prohibitions in effect on Shabbat and Yom Tov. Some activities are generally prohibited but are allowed under extenuating circumstances, unlike Shabbat where any given labor is basically always prohibited.

When I think of the laws of the Moed (the festival), I think of a sort of mathematical equation which we would need to perform before determining whether a labor is permitted or forbidden. There are several factors that might lead to something being permitted/forbidden. For instance, will not doing the work cause a significant financial loss?

Could the work have been done before the festival? Is it strenuous? Did the person plan on working on the festival? Is it being done in the normal fashion? Only when we know the answers to these questions can we decide whether the work is permitted.

Today, many of these laws are neglected. In our busy modern economies it is hard enough to take off of work for Yom Tov (the first and last days of the festival), let alone for the rest of the festival. Many of these halakhot are basically no longer observed because any cessation of work causes a “grave financial loss.” While this may be to a certain extent true, I think we should keep in mind that the rabbis wanted to preserve the character of the festival by turning it into a celebratory vacation. Rejoicing is one of the main obligations on the festival and it’s much easier to party when you’re not working.

When We Die²

We are diving deep today, digging into the topic of death. Beginning with women's deaths in childbirth and their appropriate burials, we are told that Miriam, like Moses, was killed with a Divine kiss. A note explains that this image would be inappropriate, and thus we have to find proof texts to understand that Miriam died either like Moses or like Aaron. Once discussing the death of our ancestors, the rabbis immerse themselves in this topic.

First, they look at the meanings of deaths at different ages. A ripe age is 60, as that was the age described in a proof text. Seventy is old age, and 80 requires strength. The rabbis try to understand when we can attribute death to the punishment called karet, or death at the hand of Heaven. Karet is one of the most severe consequences that a Jew can suffer.

Some of our Sages believe that the age of death is due to fate - nothing more and nothing less. The deaths of Rabbi Chisda and Rabba are used as an example. Both were great scholars. When each of them prayed for rain, we are told, it rained. And yet Rabbi Chisda saw sixty marriages in his family, lived with sustenance even for the animals and with great wealth until the age of 82. Rabba, on the other hand, saw sixty calamities over the course of his life. All of his children died, and his family did not have enough of the simple food that they ate. How could this be G-d's will? Instead, fate controls the lifespan of our Sages.

This opinion is very much in line with modern philosophies regarding G-d's involvement in our lives. These rabbis would have understood the Holocaust as acts of human depravity rather than acts of G-d's will. And though we think of the Holocaust as a major defining moment in Jewish

² <http://dafyomibeginner.blogspot.com/2014/09/>

understandings of G-d, certainly the Jewish people were subject to similar tragedies (perhaps without the means of the 20th century) by the time that this Gemara was spoken.

The Angel of Death is the next topic that intrigues our rabbis. They discuss the stories of different rabbis and their interactions with the Angel of Death. It seems that the Angel of Death can be delayed but not cancelled. One story tells of Rabbi Chisda, who lived so long because his mouth never ceased speaking words of Torah; the Angel of Death was unable to interrupt him. Finally, the Angel of Death sat on the ceiling of the study hall, causing the wood to creak. At that moment, Rabbi Chisda looked up and stopped speaking. This was enough of a pause for the Angel of Death to take Rabbi Chisda.

A new Mishna, the last of Masechet Moed Katan, tells us how and when women should wail, lament, and clap their hands in mourning. We learn that on Chanukah, Purim and Rosh Chodesh, women can wail and clap their hands. On intermediate days, Rosh Chodesh, Chanukah and Purim, they may clap their hands and wail but not lament. Wailing is when all women cry out together. Lamenting is when one person speaks and the others answer together. Jeremiah (9:10) tells us that Jews were told to teach our daughters to wail and lament. Finally, the Mishna teaches that G-d will destroy death forever, wiping away tears from all faces (Isaiah 25:8).

Women from different communities would cry out different things. The women of Shekhantziv are said to be very wise; they often spoke in riddles. The rabbis tell us that they would say the following things:

- woe over him who is departing
- woe over the pledge
- woe over him who is departing, woe over the pledge
- the bone has been removed from the jaw and the water returns to the kettle
- wrap and cover the mountains as the son of the high and distinguished
- lend a cloak fine wool for a free man whose sustenance has been depleted
- runs and tumbles at the ford and he borrows
- our brothers, the merchants, will be examined at their places
- death is like death, and suffering is like interest

The rabbis tell us many different ways that we "do unto others as we would have done to us" with regard to eulogizing, burying, praising, wailing, and being humble.

A baraita is shared about eulogies for the sons of Rabbi Yishmael. Four great Sages came to

comfort him. Each one spoke without interrupting the other, speaking of proofs that Rabbi Yishmael's sons will be honored and that they were important and special people. Although this seems comforting, it also has an air of competition about it. Hopefully Rabbi Yishmael was comforted by their words.

At the end of *our daf*, we learn that the proof-text for waiting until a mourner to speak until one responds is in Job. Job spoke first; only then was he spoken to. This custom continues today. The rabbis continue in this vein and speak about who sits at the head of the table in different circumstances. They also speak of who has the honour of reciting Grace over Meals following the supper.

Rav Avrohom Adler writes:³

The Mishna had stated: They never set down the biers of women in the street out of respect (blood might flow from them and it would be embarrassing). They said in Nehardea: This halachah applies only to a woman who dies in childbirth, but other women who die may be set down. Rabbi Elozar says: It applies to all women since it is written: And Miriam died there and was buried there.

[It is derived from Scripture that women should be buried immediately after they die, even though she did not die at childbirth.]

Rabbi Elozar said: Moshe, Aharon and Miriam earned the merit to die by “a kiss of G-d.” When Miriam died, the Torah does not use that expression, since it is not respectful to Hashem to write such a thing. Nevertheless, Chazal derive from a *gezeirah shavah* (one of the thirteen principles of Biblical hermeneutics - *Gezeirah shavah* links two similar words from dissimilar verses in the Torah) that Miriam died in the same way as her brother Moshe.

Rabbi Ami said: The Torah informs us of Miriam's death immediately after enumerating the laws of the "Parah Adumah", the red heifer whose ashes were used for purification. Why is the death of Miriam juxtaposed to the laws of the Parah Adumah? This teaches that just as the Parah Adumah brings atonement, so too, the death of the righteous brings atonement. Rabbi Elozar said: Why is the death of Aaron juxtaposed to the mentioning of the priestly clothes? This teaches that just as the priestly clothes bring atonement, so too, the death of the righteous brings atonement. (28a) The Gemora cites a braisa: One who dies suddenly, he is said to have died an abrupt death; if the death was preceded by one day's sickness, it is a hastened death.

Rabbi Chanania ben Gamliel said: The latter case is termed death by a plague, as it is written [Yechezkel 24:16]: Son of man, behold, I will take away from you the darling of your eyes in a plague; and it is stated again [ibid: 18]: I told this to the people in the morning, and my wife died at evening. The Tanna Kamma continues: If it was preceded by a two days' sickness, it is a hurried death; if by a three days', it is a rebuke; if by a four days', a scorn; but if preceded by a five days' sickness, it is an ordinary death. Rabbi Chanin said: What is the Scriptural source for this? It is written: Behold your days are approaching that you must die. ‘Behold’ accounts for one;

³ http://dafnotes.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Moed_Katan_28.pdf

‘approaching’ accounts for two (more); ‘your days’ gives us two (more), which makes five. The Gemora notes: ‘Behold’ makes one because the word for ‘one’ in Greek is ‘hein.’

The braisa continues: Death at the age of fifty is kares (cut off); at fifty-two, the age at which Shmuel the Ramathite died; at sixty, a death by the hands of Heaven. Mar Zutra said: What is the Scriptural source for this? It is written: You will go to the grave (vechelach) at a mature age. The numerical value of vechelach is sixty.

The braisa continues: Death at the age of seventy (or older) is (regarded as death in) old age; eighty (or older) is strength, as it is written: The days of our years among them are seventy years, and if with strength, eighty years. Rabbah said: If one dies from fifty to sixty, it is also regarded as kares; the reason why this is not stated in the braisa is because of the honor of Shmuel the Ramathite (who died at fifty-two).

The Gemora relates: When Rav Yosef reached the age of sixty, he made a celebration for the students. He said: I have passed the age of kares. Abaye said to him: It is true that the Master has passed the age of kares, but has the Master already passed the day of kares (referring to one who dies without being sick for five days)?

Rav Yosef replied: Be content with at least half. The Gemora records another incident: Rav Huna died suddenly, which caused the students great worry. A pair of scholars from Hadayab taught them the following braisa: Sudden death can be regarded as kares only when the deceased has not reached the age of eighty; but if he has, it is, on the contrary, considered a death by a kiss.

Rava said: The length of one’s life, the amount of his children, and his sustenance are not dependent on merit, but rather on mazal (fate). He cites proof to this from Rabbah and Rav Chisda who were both righteous rabbis as can be proven from the fact that one prayed and it began to rain and the other prayed and it began to rain.

Rav Chisda lived ninety-two years, and yet, Rabbah lived only forty. Rav Chisda’s house had sixty weddings, and yet, Rabbah’s house had sixty deaths. Rav Chisda’s house gave fine-flour bread to their dogs because they had so much; whereas Rabbah’s house gave barley flour to people and there wasn’t enough. Rava said: Three things I prayed that Heaven should grant me. Two were granted, the third one not. I asked for the wisdom of Rav Huna and the wealth of Rav Chisda and both were granted to me, but I asked also for the humility of Rabbah bar Rav Huna and that was not given to me.

Rav Seorim, the brother of Rava, was sitting at the bedside of Rava when Rava was deathly ill. As Rava was about to die, he said: Let the Master tell him (the Angel of Death) not to pain me. He answered him: Is, then, the Master himself not a friend of him? Rava replied: As my fate was already delivered to him, he will not listen to me anymore.

Rav Seorim said to Rava: I would like that the Master should appear before me after he dies. After Rava died, he came to Rav Seorim and Rav Seorim asked him: Did the Master feel any pain? He answered: It resembled a puncture from a bloodletter’s lancet (there was very little pain). Rava was sitting at the bedside of Rav Nachman when Rav Nachman was deathly ill. As Rav Nachman

was about to die, he said: Let the Master tell him (the Angel of Death) not to pain me. Rava answered him: Isn't the Master a prominent person? Rav Nachman replied: Who is esteemed, or awesome, or exalted? Rava said to Rav Nachman: I would like that the Master should appear before me after he dies.

After Rav Nachman died, he came to Rava and Rava asked him: Did the Master feel any pain? He answered: It resembled the removal of hair from milk (it didn't cause any pain); and yet, if the Holy One, blessed be He, would command me to return to the world, I would not be interested, for the fear of the Angel of Death is too great.

Rabbi Elozar was eating terumah when the Angel of Death appeared before him. Rabbi Elozar said to him: I am now eating terumah, is it not sacred? The moment passed and he was spared. The Angel of Death presented himself to Rav Sheishes in the marketplace. Rav Sheishes said to him: Do you wish to take me when I am in the market, as if I were an animal? Come to my house. The Angel of Death presented himself to Rav Ashi in the marketplace.

Rav Ashi said to him: Wait thirty days in order that I will be able to review my studies, as it is said: Fortunate is the person who comes here with his studies in his hand. On the thirtieth day he appeared again, and Rav Ashi said to him: What is the rush? He answered him: You are interfering with (Rav Huna) Bar Nassan (as his time has come to take over your position), and the reign of one ruler may not impinge upon another, even as much as a hair.

Rav Chisda could not be overpowered (by the Angel of Death) since his mouth never ceased from studying Torah. The Angel of Death climbed up and sat on a cedar in front of Rav Chisda's house of study. When the cedar broke down, Rav Chisda interrupted his study for a moment and the Angel of Death overpowered him at that moment. Rabbi Chiya could not be overpowered (by the Angel of Death).

One day he disguised himself as a pauper, and went and knocked on the door of Rabbi Chiya, and asked for a slice of bread. The household members gave him some bread. The Angel of Death said to him: Doesn't the Master have mercy with a poor man? Why doesn't the Master have mercy with me (and let me fulfill my mission)? He revealed himself to Rabbi Chiya, showing him a rod of fire and Rabbi Chiya surrendered his soul to him.

The Mishna states: Women may chant a funeral song during Chol Hamoed but they may not clap (hitting one hand against the other, demonstrating grief). Rabbi Yishmael says: Those that are near the coffin, they are permitted. On Rosh Chodesh, Chanukah and Purim, they are permitted to chant a funeral song and clap. During Chol Hamoed, Rosh Chodesh, Chanukah and Purim, they are forbidden to respond in lamentation.

Once the deceased has been buried, it is forbidden to chant a funeral song or to clap. The Mishna asks: What is innuy? When they all chant together. What is kinah (lamentation)? When one speaks and the others respond after her. The Mishna concludes: But regarding the future to come it is written in Yeshaye [25:8]: He will eliminate death forever, and Hashem the Lord will erase tears from all faces. (28b) Rav said: They (the eulogizers) said: Woe over the journey, woe over the security.

Rava cites seven funeral songs that were sung by the women of Shechantziv. They said: Woe over the journey, woe over the security. They said: Cut bone from tooth; bring water to the kettle. They said: Wrap and cover yourselves, o mountains, for he was a man of distinction and greatness. They said: The coffin is a robe of fine silk to a free man whose provisions are depleted. They said: He runs and falls; he borrows at the crossing. They said: Our brothers are merchants, whose nests will be searched. They said: This death or that death; suffering is the interest payment.

The Gemora cites a braisa: Rabbi Meir used to say: It is written [Koheles 7:2]: It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for that is the end of all man, and the living should take it to heart. The living should take to heart matters connected with death.

The Gemora explains the reward for those who eulogize the dead:

One who eulogizes over the dead, others will eulogize over him.

One who buries the dead, others will bury him.

One who carries the dead, others will carry him.

One who raises himself for the dead, others will raise themselves for him.

Others say: One who is modest, and troubles himself with burying the dead quietly, he will be elevated by Heaven.

The Gemora cites a braisa: When the sons of Rabbi Yishmael died, four elder sages came to comfort him: Rabbi Tarfon, Rabbi Yosi Hagelili, Rabbi Elozar ben Azaryah and Rabbi Akiva. Rabbi Tarfon said to the other three: You must know that he (Rabbi Yishmael) is extremely wise and he is well versed in Agados, and therefore none of you should repeat what the other has said.

Rabbi Akiva said: I will be the last speaker. Rabbi Yishmael began: His sins are many (referring to himself), his mournings have succeeded one another (one son died soon after the other), and he has inconvenienced his teachers once and twice. Rabbi Tarfon said: It is written [Vayikra 10:6]: And your brethren, the whole house of Israel, may bewail the burning (of Nadav and Avihu, the two sons of Aharon HaKohen). If Nadav and Avihu, who observed only one commandment, nevertheless were accorded the honor that the entire congregation mourned over them; then the sons of Rabbi Yishmael who observed many mitzvos, are certainly deserving of a similar honor.

Rabbi Yosi Hagelili said: "It is written [Melachim I 14:13]: And all Israel shall mourn for him, and bury him. If this was done for Aviyah the son of Yerovam, who performed only one good deed, then the sons of Rabbi Yishmael who performed many good deeds, are certainly deserving of a similar honor.

The Gemora asks: What was the good thing? Rabbi Zeira and Rabbi Chinana bar Papa offer opinions: One says that he deserted his position (his father appointed him to prevent the people from traveling to the Beis Hamikdosh during the festival) and made a pilgrimage to Yerushalayim on the festival. The other says: He had abolished the guards which were established by his father to prevent the pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

Rabbi Elozar ben Azaryah began: It is written [Yirmiya 34:5]: In peace you shall die; and with the burnings performed for your forefathers, the former kings that were before you, so shall they make a burning for you; and they shall lament for you: “Woe, master!” If this was done for Tzidkiyahu the king of Yehudah, who performed only one mitzva (near the end of his life, thus meriting honorable treatment by his death), namely, that he instructed to raise Jeremiah from the pit filled with mud, then the sons of Rabbi Yishmael who observed many mitzvos, are certainly deserving of a similar honor.

Rabbi Akiva began: It is written: On that day shall there be a great mourning in Jerusalem, as the mourning of Hadadrimmon in the valley of Megiddon, and Rav Yosef (commenting on this) said: Were it not for the Targum of this verse, we would not know what it means (for such an incident is not recorded anywhere). The Targum explains: ‘On that day shall there be great mourning in Jerusalem - like the mourning of Ahab son of Omri who was killed by Hadadrimmon son of Tavrinnon in Ramos Gilad, and like the mourning of Yoshiyah son of Ammon who was killed by Pharaoh the Lame in the valley of Megiddo.’

Rabbi Akiva continued: If there was a great mourning over the death of Achab the king of Israel, who has done only one good thing, then the sons of Rabbi Yishmael who observed many mitzvos, are certainly deserving of a similar honor. Rava asked Rabbah bar Mari: Tzidkiyahu was promised that he will die in peace and yet we have learned that Nevuchadnezzar blinded his eyes? Rabbah bar Mari answered: Rabbi Yochanan answered that the promise that he will die in peace was referring to the fact that Nevuchadnezzar will die in Tzidkiyahu’s lifetime.

Rava asked Rabbah bar Mari: Yoshiyahu was promised that he will be buried in peace and yet we have learned that Yoshiyahu was shot by archers and so many arrows pierced his body that it resembled a sieve? Rabbah bar Mari answered: Rabbi Yochanan answered that the promise of being buried in peace was referring to the fact that the Beis Hamikdash was not destroyed during his lifetime.

MAZAL

The Gemara says that children, length of life, and livelihood are dependent on the Mazal. Tosfos asks that the Gemara says elsewhere that Klal Yisrael is not dependent on the Mazal. Tosfos answers that although Mazal does apply to Klal Yisrael, a person with great merit can circumvent the Mazal with it.

The Maharsha says that a person can circumvent the Mazal with prayer and that is why Rava prayed for wisdom and wealth even though these attributes are dependent on the Mazal. The Rashba says that Klal Yisrael as a nation is not dependent on the Mazal but each individual is.⁴

⁴ By: Revach

A NORMAL DEATH

Rav Mordechai Kornfeld writes:⁵

The Beraisa discusses different levels of suddenness of death. It says that one who dies after being ill for five days is considered to have died a normal death. This is derived from the death of Moshe Rabeinu, who Hash-m informed five days before he died that his death was imminent (Devarim 31:14).

How does the Gemara learn from the death of Moshe Rabeinu that when a person dies after being ill for five days, his death is considered a normal death? The Torah explicitly states that Moshe Rabeinu died when he was in full health (Devarim 34:7)! (**TOSFOS DH** Hen)

(a) The **TOSFOS HA'ROSH** answers that Hash-m told Moshe that had he not merited to die "b'Neshikah" (through the "kiss" of Hash-m), he would have become sick at that time and died five days later, since his allotted lifespan was finished. (The **MAHARSHA** gives a similar answer.)

(b) The **RITVA** adds that the reason why Hash-m created man such that he should become ill five days before he dies is so that the person will have an opportunity to conclude his worldly affairs before he leaves this world. The Gemara proves from Moshe Rabeinu that five days is an appropriate amount of time to conclude one's affairs, for Hash-m warned Moshe Rabeinu five days before his death to take leave of the Jewish people.

THE CELEBRATION OF A BIRTHDAY

The Gemara quotes Rabah who says that death between the ages of fifty and sixty is the death of Kares. The Gemara relates that when Rav Yosef reached his sixtieth birthday, he celebrated that he had passed the period of Kares.

Should a person follow the conduct of Rav Yosef and make a celebration when he reaches his sixtieth birthday? Is it appropriate to celebrate *any* birthday?

(a) A number of authorities (as cited in **MINHAG YISRAEL TORAH** by Rav Yosef Lewy, OC 225) write that there is reason to make some sort of celebration upon reaching a certain age, as Rav Yosef did when he reached the age of sixty.

The **CHAVOS YA'IR** (#70), cited by the **CHASAM SOFER** (to Shulchan Aruch OC 225:10), writes that when one reaches his *seventieth* birthday, he should make a Se'udah and recite the blessing of "Shehecheyanu," since he has reached a full lifespan. The Chasam Sofer adds that he should recite the blessing without the name of Hash-m.

⁵ <https://www.dafyomi.co.il/mkatan/insites/mo-dt-028.htm>

The **KAF HA'CHAYIM** (223:29) writes that upon reaching one's *sixtieth* birthday, he should recite the blessing of "Shehecheyanu" upon a new fruit and have in mind to thank Hash-m that he was saved from the punishment of Kares. The **LEKET YOSHER** relates that whenever the **TERUMAS HA'DESHEN** would make a Siyum on a Maseches, he would invite men who had reached their sixtieth birthday and have them participate in his Se'udah in order to enable them to fulfill their obligation to give thanks for reaching the age of sixty.

The **BEIS YISRAEL** (#32) writes that it is proper to make a Se'udah on one's *eightieth* birthday, since that is the age at which one has not only passed the age of Kares as it relates to the years of one's life, but he has also passed the age of Kares as it relates to shortening one's lifespan (as Abaye asked Rav Yosef in the Gemara here). He says that the reason people do not make such celebrations is probably because they are afraid of an "Ayin ha'Ra" and therefore they do not reveal their age. Some authorities encourage celebrating one's birthday every year.

The **BEN ISH CHAI** (Re'eh #17) writes that it is a commendable practice to celebrate one's birthday, "and so is the practice in our homes." Similarly, **RAV YOSEF HA'KOHEN SCHWARTZ** in **GINZEI YOSEF** (#4) writes that men of piety recite the blessing of "Shehecheyanu" on a new fruit or a new garment each year on their birthday. The **KESAV SOFER** (YD 148) writes that it was his practice to make a Siyum on a Maseches on his birthday.

(It is said that the **CHAFETZ CHAIM** celebrated his birthday every year during his later years, to demonstrate publicly that those who guard their tongue are rewarded with long life.)

(b) There are those, however, who discourage such celebrations.

The **ARUGAS HA'BOSEM** (#215) writes that it is improper to make a celebration upon reaching a certain age, such as seventy, because that is the "practice of boors who walk in the ways of the other nations." The reason, he says, is because the Mishnah in Avos (3:1) states that one should realize where his eventual end will be and that he will have to give a reckoning of all of his deeds before Hash-m. When one reaches the age of seventy and approaches that frightful moment of truth, it is not an occasion to rejoice but to tremble in fear.

It is cited in the name of the **MUNKATCHER REBBE** (**DIVREI TORAH** 5:88) that it is not the practice of Jews to make birthday celebrations. The reason he gives is that the Gemara in Eruvin (13b) concludes that it would have been better had man not been created. There are so many Mitzvos for him to do and so many Aveiros to avoid that it is very difficult to successfully return his soul to his Maker in a pure and unstained state. Therefore, it is inappropriate to celebrate the day on which one was born. This applies, however, only to Jews, who have the responsibility to observe all of the Mitzvos. Non-Jews certainly may celebrate their birthdays, since they were entrusted with only the Seven Mitzvos of Bnei Noach, and thus their creation in this world is not such a liability for them.

Indeed, the Torah relates that Pharaoh celebrated his birthday (Bereishis 40:20), while Avraham Avinu celebrated only the day on which he performed the Mitzvah of Milah for his son Yitzchak (**CHASAM SOFER** to Bereishis 21:9).

It is important to note that even these opinions (which maintain that there is no basis for making a special celebration on one's birthday) agree that there is something special about that day, and, therefore, one should increase his Torah learning and enhance his Tefilah on that day, as well as increase his acts of charity (**RAV CHAIM PALAGI** in **TZEDAKAH L'CHAIM**). One's Mazal is empowered on his birthday (as the **CHIDA** in Chomas Anach (to Iyov 3) and **KORBAN HA'EDAH** on the Yerushalmi (Rosh Hashanah 3:8) write).

Conversely, the opinions which permit celebrating one's birthday agree that it should not be celebrated in a frivolous, light-hearted manner, but that one should concentrate on expressing gratitude to Hash-m for keeping him alive.

LIFE, CHILDREN, AND LIVELIHOOD

The Gemara quotes Rava who says that one's lifespan, children, and livelihood do not depend on his merit (Zechus) but on Mazal.

(a) Why does Rava say that these things depend on Mazal? The Gemara in Shabbos (156a) clearly states, "Ein Mazal l'Yisrael" -- Mazal has no influence over the destiny of the Jewish people.

(b) The Torah states explicitly that when the Jewish people follow the will of Hash-m, He will grant them life, children, and a livelihood (see, for example, Vayikra 26:4, Devarim 11:13, and Devarim 30:16). Why does Rava say that these things do not depend on merit but on Mazal, when the Torah clearly states that they depend on merit?

(a) The Rishonim address the first question in several different ways.

TOSFOS in Shabbos (156a, DH Ein) and the **RITVA** here explain that when the Gemara in Shabbos says that "Ein Mazal l'Yisrael," it means that although some things *do* depend on Mazal (as Rava says), those things nevertheless can be influenced by a person's merit if it is great enough. "Ein Mazal l'Yisrael" means that merit can override Mazal. (The other nations, in contrast, have no way to change their Mazal.)

The Gemara in Ta'anis (25a) says that even the great merit of the holy Tana, Rabbi Elazar ben Pedas, did not suffice to override his Mazal.

The **RASHBA** (Teshuvos 1:409) adds that one person's merit is able to change another person's Mazal, but one's merit cannot change his own Mazal. (See Berachos 5b: "a captive cannot free himself from jail.")

In another Teshuvah (5:48), the Rashba proposes a different answer to this question, but one which is also based on the premise that the Jewish people are not subject to the "forces of Mazal" like other nations. Although he speaks in vague terms, he apparently means that even when a Tzadik (who is not perfect in all ways) does not have an easy life, it is not due purely to his "Mazal." Rather, other considerations may necessitate that he suffer.

The Rashba may mean what the Zohar and Vilna Ga'on teach, as cited by the **HAGAHOS BEN ARYEH** here: it is the Thirteen Attributes of Hash-m which determine whether or not a Tzadik's merits make him worthy of having an easy life. Even if he has many merits, the Thirteen Attributes may determine that he must suffer in order to rectify the harmful effects of sin (his own sins or those of others).

(b) With regard to the promises mentioned in the Torah, it is clear that an exceptional merit is not required to cause them to materialize. The Torah simply says that "if you keep My commands, you will be rewarded..." The **RASHBA** (Teshuvos 1:148, 409; see also **RAMBAN** to Vayikra 26:11) explains that those verses refer to the Jewish nation as a whole. When all of the Jewish people do the will of Hash-m, Hash-m grants them life, children, and sustenance in reward for their deeds, despite their Mazal. An individual, however, is subject to his Mazal in these areas (unless he has exceptional merits).

THE GREAT FUNERAL IN TIMES TO COME

Rebbi Akiva comforted Rebbi Yishmael upon the death of his sons. He said that if the evil king, Achav, who did only one good thing in his life, merited to have such a great funeral as depicted in Zecharyah (12:1), then certainly the sons of Rebbi Yishmael are worthy of great praise and eulogies.

The Gemara describes Achav's great funeral by citing the verse, "On that day, the mourning will be great in Yerushalayim, like the mourning of Hadadrimon at the valley of Megidon" (Zecharyah 12:1).

Although the verse makes no mention of Achav, the Targum Yonasan explains that the verse means, "On that day, the mourning will be great in Yerushalayim, like [the two great funerals combined,] the mourning of [Achav bar Omri, who was killed by] Hadadrimon [ben Tavrimon in Ramos Gil'ad, and like the mourning of Yoshiyah bar Amon, who was killed by Pharaoh Chagira] in the valley of Megido."

Why does the verse compare the great mourning in times to come specifically to the mourning at these two funerals? (See also Insights to Megilah 3:1.)

To answer this question, it is necessary to first examine for whom this great funeral will be held in the times of Mashi'ach.

The Gemara in Sukah (52a) records an argument about this funeral. One opinion says that the funeral will be for Mashi'ach ben Yosef, while another opinion says that it will be for the Yetzer ha'Ra which will be killed at that time. The Gemara there explains that in the future Hash-m will slaughter the Yetzer ha'Ra, and the Tzadikim and the Resha'im will cry. The Tzadikim will cry because they will see the huge mountain that stood before them in their service of Hash-m. The Resha'im will cry because they will see that they failed to conquer such a small thread which stood in their way.

The **VILNA GA'ON** (in **KOL ELIYAHU**) explains that this is what the Targum Yonasan means. The Targum follows the opinion that says that the great funeral in the future will be for the Yetzer ha'Ra. Normally, if the deceased was a Tzadik, only the Tzadikim cry at the funeral. If the deceased was a Rasha, only the Resha'im cry. At the funeral of the Yetzer ha'Ra, however, *both* groups will cry, as the Gemara in Sukah says. Thus, it will be like the funeral of Achav, the great Rasha, at which all of the Resha'im cried, and like the funeral of Yoshiyah, the great Tzadik, at which all of the Tzadikim cried.

The Age of Karet

Steinzaltz (OBM) writes:⁶

One of the more severe punishments meted out by the Torah for certain misdeeds is the punishment of *karet*. A person who eats on *Yom Kippur*, for example, would be liable for that punishment. It is interesting that the Torah never chooses to define what exactly *karet* entails, and the *baraita* in our Gemara distinguishes between *karet* and *mita be-yedei shamayim* (a death penalty as carried out by the heavenly court) by saying that someone who dies at age 50 has received *karet*, while *mita be-yedei shamayim* is when someone dies at age 60. Rabba argues that *karet* actually is defined by death between the ages of 50 and 60, but the *baraita* does not emphasize that because it wants to honor the prophet Shmu'el who passed away when he was 52.

To emphasize this point, the Gemara relates that Rav Yosef threw a party for the Sages when he turned 60, celebrating the fact that he has succeeded in living beyond the stage in life that would have indicated the punishment of *karet*.

The *Talmud Yerushalmi* brings a proof-text for the idea that *karet* is indicated by death at the age of 50 from the passage (Bamidbar 4:18) where the Torah expresses concern for the lives of the *levi'im*, who work in close proximity with the *mishkan* and its utensils – a closeness that can potentially bring death to the person who comes into contact with those things inappropriately. In expressing this concern, the Torah uses the expression *al takhritu* – do not allow them to suffer *karet*. Given that the work of the *levi'im* in the *mishkan* ends at age 50, the implication is that anyone who dies before that age may have succumbed to the punishment of *karet*.

The Ran suggests that the underlying reason for this is that we assume that a normal life-span is 80 years (see, for example, Tehillim 90:10). For the first 20 years, heaven does not hold an individual liable for his actions. A person who does not live past 50 has not succeeded in living even half of the remaining 60 years, which indicates that he is in the category of those evil people described in Tehillim 55:24.

⁶ <https://steinsaltz.org/daf/moed28/>

Mourning the loss of a Torah scholar

ואחייכם כל בית ישראל יבכו את השריפה...בניו של ר' ישמעאל על
אחת כמה וכמה

The Torah teaches us that the loss of Nadav and Avihu caused grief and mourning for the entire nation. “The entire House of Israel shall bewail the conflagration that Hashem ignited.” (Vayikra 10:6)⁷

Rashi, based upon our Gemara, explains that the entire community must share in the distress over the loss of Torah scholars. Another perspective on this issue is based upon the verse (Devarim 32:4): “[Hashem is] the Rock, His work is perfect, for all His ways are justice.”

The commentators there explain that a mortal judge of flesh and blood passes judgment upon a criminal without being able to take into full consideration the impact his punishment will have upon the other members of the family and of the community who will be affected by the verdict. For example, if a person is sent to prison, why must his wife and children now suffer? If a person is put to death, how is this fair to his wife, his children, and his parents?

Even the community is affected by the judgment. Nevertheless, a mortal judge cannot fully consider all this in his ruling. Hashem, however, “is perfect in His work, and all His ways are justice.” This means that Hashem's judgment in any situation incorporates everyone who is even remotely going to be affected. Each person must be deserving of his element of the incidental outcome of the punishment meted out to the criminal. This can even work to save the offender from his fate, for he may be spared his deserved retribution if his family is not fit to suffer the second-hand outcome of his condition.

Celebratory dinners upon reaching age milestones

רב יוסף כי הוה בר שיתין עבד להו יומא טבא לרבנן אמר נפקי לי
מכרת .

When Rav Yosef arrived at the age of sixty years, he made a festive day for the rabbis. He explained: “I have left the range of Kares (extirpation)”.

It is recorded (1) that the author of the Terumas Hadeshen made a siyum upon reaching the age of sixty and invited two scholars to fulfill the “age of sixty meal.” (2)

Some authorities (3) state that one should make a celebratory dinner upon reaching the age of sixty. Interestingly, more commonly, great Rabbis (4) celebrated upon arriving at the 70 year milestone.

⁷ <https://www.dafdigest.org/masechtos/MoedKatan%20028.pdf>

Beyond the obvious advantage of an additional ten years, this practice is explained (5) because upon reaching 60 one passes the period of kares, yet one who passes away after 60 may still be subject to Death in the hands of Heaven (שמים בידי מיתה). (However, when one arrives at seventy, he has arrived at the measure of man's days as the verse⁶ states: "the days of our lives are seventy years".

Thus, one who passes away after seventy years has passed the punishments of death at the hands of Heaven. It is questioned whether such a celebration is considered a Meal of Mitzvah (מצוה סעודת) (on its own virtue without sharing words of Torah (7)).

As well, there is disagreement if one may make a שהחיינו blessing upon reaching such a milestone. The Chavos Yair (8) indicates to recite the שהחיינו blessing. However, many authorities (9) disagree. Others (10) advise that one should wear a new garment or eat a new fruit with the intention of including the age milestone as well.

1. סי לקט יושר (חיו"ד עמ' 40).
2. עיי בשו"ת מהר"א"ב ח"ב (סיי סא ד"ה אגב) שכן עשה מעשה האדמו"ר מגור, האמרי אמת.
3. עיי חסד לאלפים (או"ח סי' רכא – רל אות ח) ובבן איש חי (שנה ראשונה פ"ר ראה אות ט).
4. מהר"ח פאלאג'י בסי' גנוי חיים (מע' יי אות טז) וכן נזכר בסי' צוואה מחיים (חלק מהר"א פאלאג'י אות מ). וגדולה מזו חיבר מהר"ח פאלאג'י קונטרס קול החיים שבו סדר למי שהגיע לגיל שבעים עם תפלות ולימוד. וכן נהג גם רבי חיים דוד חזן ככתוב בסי' ישרי לב (חאו"ח מע' ב' ד"ה ברכת שהחיינו). וראה בקונטרס יום הולדת הנדפס בסי' זכרון שלמה (ערכו רבי דוד אברהם מנדלבוים – ירושלים תשנ"ד) במאמרו של רבי דוב מאיר אייזנשטיין (עמ' ריא) שהביא מקורות שכן עשו סימן בהגיעם לגיל השבעים החפץ חיים והשדי חמד והגר"ש מסאלאנט. ע"ש.
5. עיי תשובת רבי משה וואלץ הנדפסת לו בשו"ת דברי ישראל ח"ב (ליקוטי תשובות סיי יח ד"ה אולם) למר אביו. עיי טעמים אחרים במקור חסד לסי' חסידים (סיי ריג סוף אות א) ובהערות מגן האלף לסי' חסד לאלפים (או"ח סי' רכא – רל אות לו, עמ' רו).
6. תהלים (צ"ג).
7. עיי שו"ת חות יאיר (סיי ע"ג) והביאו בפת"ש (יו"ד סי"ס ריז) שמסתפק בזה.
8. שו"ת חות יאיר (סיי ע).
9. עיי ברכ"י (או"ח סי' רכג אות ב) ובהגהות חת"ס לשו"ע (סיי רכה ס"א) ובשו"ת תשובה מאהבה ח"ב (סיי רלט). וראה בפרמ"ג (או"ח סי' תמד במשב"ז ס"ק ט"ו) שמשאיר בצ"ע. ועוד.
10. כן הוזכר בגנוי חיים (שם) וכן נראה בחסד לאלפים (שם) ובבן איש חי (שם). ועיי בסי' הלכות והליכות בר מצוה (פרק טו הערה 90) שכן עשה החפץ חיים. ע"ש. ■

Comforting Mourners

"ואין דובר עליו דבר..."

Someone once shared a concept about comforting mourners with the Rosh Yeshiva of Chevron, Rav Simcha Zissel Broide, zt"l, that surprised him. "Rav Shmuel Salant, zt"l, said that although the Shulchan Aruch rules that visitors may not speak before the mourner does, if a mourner groans it is also considering speaking."

When Rav Shmuel Salant would visit a mourner who would not speak, he would say, “The halachah is that the mourners speak first.” If the mourner as much as sighed, he would say, “A sigh is also like speech!” and start to comfort the mourner.

The Rosh Yeshiva was perplexed at this. “Rav Shmuel Salant’s statement seems confusing in light of what we find in Moed Katan 28b. There we see that the mourner speaks first, and we learn it from Iyov. The verse says that Iyov’s friends didn’t speak to him and also that Iyov only spoke after his seven days of mourning were completed. How can we understand the Gemara if groaning is like speaking? Could it be that they refrained from comforting him because he didn’t even groan the entire seven days?

That seems impossible!” Perhaps the answer to Rav Broide’s question is to be found in the opinion of the Chazon Ish, zt”l. “If you see that the mourners want to talk but it is difficult for them, you can take the initiative and speak first.”

If the visitors can sense that the mourner wishes to speak but it is too difficult for him to do more than groan, they should initiate conversation. Perhaps Iyov’s companions were not able to sense from his sighs that he was ready to accept comfort.”

The Chofetz Chaim, zt”l, would say, “Although a comforter discharges his obligation by saying ‘המקום ינחם’, it is better to speak to the mourner’s heart and relieve his pain with soothing words. This is the main meaning of comforting mourners.”

Similarly, Rav Moshe Feinstein, zt”l, said, “The main point of comforting the mourners is not the blessing ‘המקום ינחם’, but the words of encouragement that relieve the mourner’s inner pain!”

Fooling the Angel of Death

R. Heather Miller writes:⁸

It’s probably a given that most of us would like to avoid death — not only because we enjoy life, but because we worry that dying itself will be painful. The rabbis worried about that too. On today’s daf we read two descriptions of what death might feel like, and six cases of rabbis encountering death. We can’t cover it all in-depth here, so feel free to dive into the page for a deeper look.

If you want to know what it feels like to die, you have to ask a dead person. That’s exactly what Rav Seorim asks his dead brother, Rava, who visits him in a dream. Rava answers that death feels:

Like the prick of the knife when letting blood.

Presumably letting blood was a common enough practice that it was not feared, even if it hurt a bit. This is as if to say: pain of death hurts, but not a lot.

⁸ Mytalmudiclearning.com

Next, we get an even more soothing answer. We learn that, before he died, Rava had harbored the same question, and asked it of Rav Nahman who predeceased him and also appeared to him in a dream. Rav Nahman told him that death felt:

Like the removal of hair from milk.

It's a comforting image — the idea that removing the soul from the body is akin to gently skimming a hair from the surface of a glass of milk. This suggests a practically painless experience. And what's even more reassuring is Rav Nahman's insistence that the fear of death is far worse than the actual experience, as he tells Rava:

Were the Holy One, Blessed be He, to say to me: "Go back to the physical world," I would not want to go, for the fear of the Angel of Death is great.

Rava assures us that though fear of death is great, actually dying and being dead is not so bad.

Still, life-loving humans — including the rabbis — would rather avoid it. Next the Gemara details six cases of rabbis actively trying to avoid death. First, Rabbi Elazar admonishes the Angel of Death who comes to take him as he's eating the holy food of *terumah*. To the Angel of Death, he says:

I am eating terumah; is it not called sacred?

By scolding the Angel of Death for coming at such an inopportune time, the Angel of Death is put off and, the Gemara reports, Rabbi Elazar escapes death in that moment.

Rabbi Elazar lived to see another day — and he wasn't the only one. Rav Sheshet also shamed the Angel of Death by scolding:

In the market like an animal?! Come to my house!

Rav Ashi likewise bought himself more time on earth. Also approached by the Angel of Death while in the marketplace, he asks for 30 days to review his learning. The Angel of Death acquiesces and, 30 days later, Rav Ashi meets him again. Once again, Rav Ashi asks for an extension, at which point the Angel of Death responds:

The foot of Rav Huna bar Natan is pushing you, as he is ready to succeed you as the leader of the generation, and one sovereignty does not overlap with its counterpart, even by one hairbreadth.

With Rav Huna bar Natan ready to take over leadership, Rav Ashi's time has come. This is a theme we have encountered elsewhere in the Talmud — the notion that older rabbinic leaders must pass away to make room for younger leaders (see Megillah 28).

Rav Hisda avoided the angel of death by studying constantly — similar to the technique that Rav Ashi employed. On today’s page, we read that “**his mouth was never silent from study.**” That is, until one day when a cedar column of the study hall cracked and, for just a moment, Rav Hisda was silent, and the Angel of Death was able to take him.

This collection of stories of rabbis temporarily getting the better of the Angel of Death are then contrasted by the story of Rabbi Hiyya who was so righteous that death *couldn’t* come for him. So how did he die?

The Angel of Death could not come near Rabbi Hiyya (to take him). One day, the Angel of Death appeared to him as a poor person. He came and knocked on the door and said to Rabbi Hiyya: “Bring out bread for me.” And he took out bread for him.

The Angel of Death then said to Rabbi Hiyya: “Master, do you not have mercy on a poor person? Why, then, do you not have mercy on me, and give me what I want?” The Angel of Death then revealed his identity to him, and showed him a fiery rod. Rabbi Hiyya surrendered himself to him.

Rabbi Hiyya was so righteous that he didn’t need to do anything special to ward off death — his greatness was such that the Angel of Death needed his cooperation. And perhaps because he was so great, when the Angel of Death told him it was time, he submitted.

Fear of death and avoidance of death can be, as today’s page readily acknowledges, utterly exhausting. And ultimately, as we all know, futile. No wonder Rabbi Elazar said that even if he could come back to life, he wouldn’t — if only to avoid the constant fear of death.

Rabbi Johnny Solomon writes:⁹

This Shabbat we will be reading Parshat Tetzaveh, which teaches us about the various בגדי כהונה (priestly clothes), and it is noteworthy that many of the classic commentaries on Parshat Tetzaveh quote a teaching about the בגדי כהונה that is found in *our daf* (Moed Katan 28a).

To explain this teaching we first need to leap further forward in the Torah where, immediately before Aharon dies, Moshe removes the בגדי כהונה worn by his brother and places them on his nephew Elazar (see Bemidbar 20:28). And it is given this association between the death of the righteous Aharon, and the בגדי כהונה that he was wearing, that we are taught in our daf that ‘just as the בגדי כהונה provide atonement, so too does the death of the righteous provide atonement.’

However, notwithstanding the frequency of this teaching being cited by so many of our commentaries, it is nevertheless a challenging idea: how can clothes – notwithstanding their splendour and beauty – serve to achieve atonement? In response to this question, I would like to share three original insights which I hope speak to you as they speak to me:

⁹ www.rabbijohnnysolomon.com

Firstly, Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Polonne (1710-1784) explains in his ‘Toldot Yaakov Yosef’ (on Parshat Shemini) that just as the בגדי כהונה only atone when worn by, and when attached to, the Kohen (see Yoma 7b), so too, the righteous only atone if they are connected to, and if they work together with, others. What this suggests is that the teaching that ‘the בגדי כהונה provide atonement’ helps teach us that atonement comes from attachment, as opposed to detachment – which is why the source of this teaching relates to the detaching of the בגדי כהונה from Aharon, and their attachment to Elazar.

Secondly, Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch Ferber (1879-1966) explains in his ‘Chamudei Tzvi’ (p. 104) – quoting an idea that he heard elsewhere – that just as the בגדי כהונה only atone due to the עבודה (priestly service) performed by the כהן (priest), so too, the righteous only atone if they repent, and perform good deeds, and do whatever they can do to assist, repair and improve whatever needs assistance, repairing and improvement. What this teaches us is that atonement and transformation only occur when actions are done that help others.

Finally, Rabbi Uri (Ira) Langer (1896-1970) explains in his ‘Or HaDe’ah’ (on Moed Katan) that just as the priestly clothes worn by Aharon reminded the people of his positive character traits (such as how he was a ‘lover of peace and a pursuer of peace’), so too, when a righteous person dies and we, having been inspired by their good deeds, make the choice to ‘wear’ some of the good deeds that they were renowned for, then their death, and the inspiration that we have drawn from their life, helps us achieve greater atonement from the deeds we do having been inspired by their example.



The Burial by William De Hartburn Washington

Honor for the dead

Mark Kerzner writes:¹⁰

Out of respect for the dead, they are buried as soon as possible, and moreover, the biers of women are not set down, but rather proceed directly to the grave. The source for this law is the phrase, "Miriam died there and was buried there" - right away.

Incidentally, why is Miriam's death mentioned next to the story of red heifer? - To compare the two: just as red heifer provides atonement, so the death of the righteous provides atonement. In the same vein, the death of Aharon is mentioned next to the priestly garments, which also provided atonement - each for a specific wrongdoing.

Rav said: "The length of one's life, his material success and the number of his children does not depend on his merit, but rather on luck." Other say that prayer and good deeds can change one's luck for the better.

The Talmud then recounts the stories of various Sages meeting the Angel of Death. For some it was as easy as a puncture of the skin, for another - like a hair drawn from milk. How do we know? They made a pack to communicate this back to their living friends. The one who died like "hair from milk" added that if God told him to go back living, he would refuse, because of the fear of the Angel of Death.

Beyond Our Control

Rabbi Jay Kelman writes:¹¹

It is to be expected that, in a chapter dealing with the laws of mourning, a discussion of the philosophical implications of death will follow. Such discussions are scattered in various places in the Talmud and tend to present a variety of complementary, contrasting, and contradictory views. We find our Sages disputing whether there is reward for mitzvot in this world, or if all the reward due awaits us in--and only in--the World to Come (Kiddushin 39b). While the simple meaning of the Biblical text would surely seem to indicate there is such reward in this world, the realities of the world experienced by all can easily lead one to the opposite conclusion. Of course, such discussion is only speculative, as only the Holy One blessed be He is privy to such understanding.

Nonetheless, such discussions (in moderation) are of great significance, giving us a window into questions that go much deeper than the law. Thirty-six of the mitzvot of the Torah list *karet* as the punishment for their violation[1], yet nowhere are we told what that punishment is. "If one dies

¹⁰ https://talmudilluminated.com/moed_katan/moed_katan28.html

¹¹ <https://torahinmotion.org/discussions-and-blogs/moed-katan-28-beyond-our-control>

[under the age of] fifty, this is *karet*; fifty-two, this is the death of Shmuel from Ramah; sixty, this is death at the hands of heaven[2]" (Moed Katan 28a).

Rabba teaches that *karet* actually extends from the age of fifty up to sixty, but the rabbis did not want to teach such "out of honour to Shmuel". As this great prophet died at the age of 52, such a teaching would have led many to assume that Shmuel was punished with *karet*. While *karet* may cause one to die young, not all who die young die as a result of *karet*. It was this view of Rava that led to "Rav Yosef, when he turned 60, he had a party for the rabbis. He said: I have passed the age of the punishment of *karet*".

Yet, just as some felt there were no rewards in this world, so we have views that there are no punishments in this world. This is world of free choice, with no immediate consequences for our actions--we will reap what we sow only after we take leave of this world. "Rava said: [The years of one's] life, one's children, and sustenance are not dependent on one's merit, but rather, they are dependent on *mazal*, as Rabba and Rav Chisda were both pious rabbis...Rav Chisda lived to be 92 and Rabba lived to 40".

I am not sure whether these words are comforting or frightening--perhaps both--but it is hard to dispute what Rava says. So much of what happens to us is due to factors beyond our control. Issues with children, the struggle to make a living, cannot always be simply traced to any specific cause; it may just be the way it is. This can make it easier to deal with our struggles yet, at the same time, serves to reinforce the idea that much of our success is due to factors beyond our control. As our sages note, everything is dependent on *mazal*, even the sefer Torah in the ark (Zohar Naso 134). Such recognition can go a long way in developing the traits of gratitude and humility, traits that all too often are in short supply.

[1] The penalty of *karet* is reserved for some of the most serious violations of Torah law; many sexual offences, practicing forms of idolatry, eating on Yom Kippur, or eating *chametz* on Pesach. All but two involve violations of negative commandments. The two positive commandments whose non-observance also entails *karet* are neglecting to perform a *brit milah* or to bring the pascal lamb.

[2] As *karet* is also at the hands of heaven, this teaching would indicate that *karet* is given for sins more grave than "death at the hands of heaven". An example of the latter is for a non-Kohen to eat *terumah*.



Why is Death Bad?

Jeremy Brown writes:¹²

Before the death of the great Babylonian sage Ravina, there was a discussion of what would be said at his funeral. Bar Avin, who was known as a talented eulogizer, suggested this:

בכו לאבלים ולא לאבדה, שהיא למנוחה ואנו לאנחה

Cry for the mourners and not for that which was lost, as that which was lost [i.e., the soul of Ravina,] has gone to its eternal rest, while we, the mourners, are left with our sighs.

מועד קטן כה, ב

In these few words, Bar Avin hinted at a philosophical debate that has endured for millennia. What, exactly is bad about death?

¹² <http://www.talmudology.com/>



Klopstock by Johann Caspar Füssli (1750)

WHAT BAD ABOUT DEATH?

The German poet **Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock** (1724-1803) suggested that the badness of death is losing your friends, which he describes in his poem *Separation*:

*You turned so serious when the corpse
was carried past us;
are you afraid of death? "Oh, not of that!"
Of what are you afraid? "Of dying."
I not even of that. "Then you're afraid of nothing?"
Alas, I am afraid, afraid..."Heavens, of what?"
Of parting from my friends.
And not mine only, of their parting too.
That's why I turned more serious even
than you did, deeper in the soul,
when the corpse
was carried past us.*

But the Yale philosopher Shelly Kagan believes there is much more to the badness of death than just losing contact with your friends, sad as that is. In his terrific book *death* (small *d*), Kagan suggests that we cannot think about the badness of death by thinking of the survivors.

Instead “ *we have to think about how it could be true that death is bad for the person that dies...what is it about being dead that is bad for me?*”

And this is harder to do than you might have thought. The Greek philosopher Epicurus (341- 270 BCE) outlined the problem in his *Letter to Menoeceus*:

Death, therefore, the most awful of evils, is nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death is not come, and, when death is come, we are not. It is nothing, then, either to the living or to the dead, for with the living it is not and the dead exist no longer.

So according to Epicurus, death is not bad, and by extension we have no reason to fear it. (A) something can be bad for you only if you exist; (B) when you're dead you don't exist; so (C) death can't be bad for you.

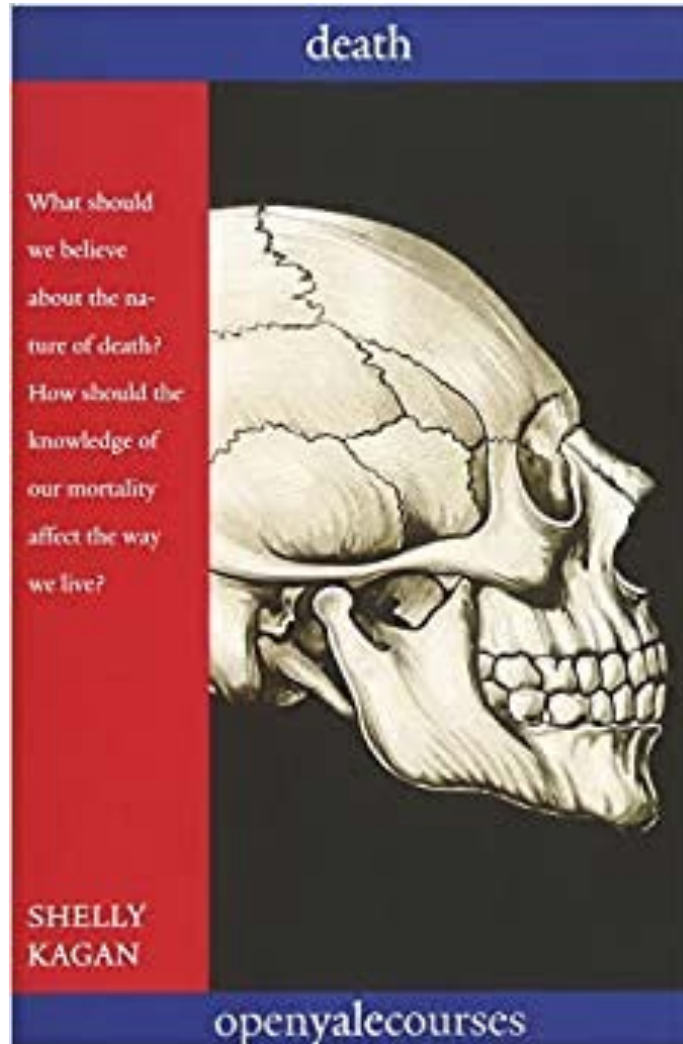
Here is Kagan (p.210) explaining the Epicurean problem:

Isn't it clear that nonexistence is bad for me? Pretty quickly, however, that answer can come to seem pretty unsatisfactory. How could nonexistence be bad for me? After all, the whole idea about nonexistence is that you don't exist!

And how could anything be bad for you when you don't exist? Isn't there a kind of logical requirement that for something to be bad for you, you've got to be around to receive that bad thing?

A headache, for example, can be bad for you. But of course, you exist during a headache. Headaches couldn't be bad for people who don't exist. They can't experience or have or receive headaches. How could anything be bad for you when you don't exist? And in particular then, how could nonexistence be bad for you when you don't exist?

Kagan (or Shelly, as he asks his Yale students to call him), has a terrific chapter (“The Badness of Death”) in which considers this thorny question, and focuses on this aspect, known as *The Deprivation Account*.



Death is bad because it deprives me of something. But that cannot be right because you cannot deprive someone who is dead of anything.

Perhaps then we should reject (A) above, which is *the existence requirement*. Perhaps, Kagan suggests,

“for certain kinds of bads, you don’t even need to exist in order for those things to be bad for you.”

But then we run into another problem. If you don't need to exist (because you are dead) in order for a bad to happen to you, "then nonexistence could be bad for somebody who never exists. It could be bad for somebody who is a merely possible person, someone who could have existed but never actually gets born." These potential people are the billions and billions of people who don't get born when a particular egg fails to get fertilized by a particular sperm. If we get rid of the *existence requirement* "then we have to say of each and every single one of those billions upon billions upon billions upon billions upon billions of possible people that it's a tragedy that they never get born, because they're deprived of the goods of life. If we do away with the existence requirement, then the plight of the unborn possible people is a moral tragedy that simply staggers the mind. The worst possible moral horrors of human history don't even begin to be in the same ballpark as the moral horror of the deprivation for all of these unborn possible people."

"What's bad about death is that when you're dead, you're not experiencing the good things in life. Death is bad for you precisely because you don't have what life would bring you if only you hadn't died.

Shelly Kagan. death. Yale University Press 2012. 233.

But most of us don't consider the non-actualization of potential people to be a moral tragedy (though we've discussed the attitude of the rabbis to the this question [here](#)).

We don't think billions and billions of potential people are harmed because they were never actualized. This leads us to tweak the existence requirement to what Kagan calls a more modest version: "Something can be bad for you only if you exist at *some* time or other." This modest requirement doesn't require that I exist at the same time as the bad thing, and so this allows us to say that death is bad for me. And it is bad for me because I am being deprived of the good things in life, however those are measured.

According to Bar Avin, death is not actually bad for the deceased (in this specific case, Ravina), for he was "at rest." One might have expected him to say that although Ravina was being deprived of the good things in life had he lived longer, this was more than made up for by the rewards that he is getting in the afterlife.

But he didn't, and his phrasing reminds us that in both ancient and modern philosophy, there is an interesting argument that death cannot be bad for the person who died. Indeed, Bar Avin's eulogy reminds us that the greatest pain is felt by those who are left behind with nothing but their sighs.



Mirth and Mourning

David Curzon writes:¹³

The Book of Ecclesiastes (in Hebrew, “Kohelet,” the Assembler or Preacher) is a compilation of proverbs traditionally attributed to and worthy of Solomon. Its opening in the King James translation is instantly memorable:

Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity

As the Oxford Jewish Study Bible puts it, “the one thing that is clear for Kohelet is death.”

How can we construct positive interpretations of this no doubt realistic but unhappy view of life? I’ll take two of Kohelet’s proverbs on death and try to put a good spin on them, in the spirit of rabbinic midrash, which insists that dark biblical sayings must be understood in a manner compatible with the positive disposition of Judaism toward life before death. As the literary instrument of my interpretations I’ll use a shortened version of the rondeau, an old French poetic form in which the first line is repeated in subsequent stanzas. The meaning is hinted at initially, and fully revealed only in the iterations. Consequently, the rondeau is an excellent means of forcing a writer to think through the meaning of a proverb. My first selection of a proverb on death is Kohelet 7:4:

¹³ <https://forward.com/articles/4899/mirth-and-mourning/>

The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of the fool is in the house of mirth.

So following my plan, I will take the unpalatable thought of this verse as the opening of a rondeau and, using the form and the demands and suggestions of rhyme, try to force it into an interpretation I can live with, which of course must also be an understanding of the text compatible with its literal meaning. The biblical verse is in italics in its first appearance because it is a quote, but is not in italics in the iterations because it has, through interpretation, become my own thought:

THE HOUSES OF MIRTH AND MOURNING

The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning but the heart of the fool is in the house of mirth. Wisdom is in you as a joke is dawning. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning where it dawns on them it's death that wit is scorning. Wit must contain its rue to have true worth. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning but the heart of the fool is in the house of mirth.

We all have heard jokes containing no hint of what Yeats called “the desolation of reality,” told by people who have no trace of the melancholy necessary to a good clown.

My second proverb is Kohelet 7:8

Better is the end of a thing than its beginning and the patient in spirit is better than the proud.

The rabbis of the collection of midrashim in Kohelet Rabbah had several explanations of the first line, strung together by a phrase that is one of the glories of the rabbinic mind, “another interpretation.” Anonymous rabbis are quoted as providing the following illustrations of our line, among others: A man can commit evil deeds in his youth but in his old age can perform good deeds. A man can learn Torah in his youth and forget it, but in his old age can return to it.

These interpretations, while perfectly reasonable in their way, are too pious for me, and too incompatible with my sense of the mordant disposition of Kohelet himself. Playing around with the first line and the demands of rhyme, I got something I consider more in the spirit of Kohelet:

Better is the end of a thing than its beginning. It's only at the end our skull is always grinning.

But what about the enigmatic second line of our proverb? To help me think, I made use of an old rabbinic interpretative technique, the pun. The word “patient” can mean both a quality of forbearance and a person in the care of a physician, which patient is better off exhibiting forbearance than being too proud, particularly (to introduce a biographical note) if he's not as young as he used to be. And so,

THE END AND THE BEGINNING

Better is the end of a thing than its beginning And the patient in spirit is better than the proud. It's only at the end our skull is always grinning. Better is the end of a thing than its beginning: memento

mori is our underpinning; pride makes the patient still in spirit laugh aloud. Better is the end of a thing than its beginning and the patient in spirit is better than the proud.

After all, we shouldn't always be grinning if it's death that wit is scorning and we still have enough spirit in us to enjoy life, even if we accept what's coming without the interference of pride. As it is said,

The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning.



First – listen. Then – entertain heresy

White Americans must learn what Black Americans have always known, that America is not only the promised land, it is also Egypt

Jason Rubenstein writes:¹⁴

In recent weeks Black Jewish thinkers have produced the latest chapter of a powerful body of writing that combines first-person narrative and Jewish thought in mutually revelatory ways. These essays, at turns inspiring and challenging, provide a powerful starting-place for non-Black Jews like myself to assess American race relations in light of Judaism, and Judaism in light of

¹⁴ <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/first-listen-then-entertain-heresy/>

American race relations. In the following, I want to begin with a poignant suggestion made by Shekhiynah Larks in her essay *Black Jews Are Grieving, and We Need You to Help Us Mourn*: non-Black Jews should take the act of comforting mourners as the framework for responding to and participating in the national reckoning in the wake of George Floyd’s murder:

Now more than ever, we should be using the traditional etiquette of shiva to reach out in love to Black people in our personal networks and communities...

It is so hard to be safe and to feel safe as a Black person in the United States. I feel like I’m always on guard. Always mindful of how I speak, how I hold my body, when to give or avoid eye contact, how much public space I’m allowed to occupy because I want you to feel safe around me.

Larks’s profound insight is that the Jewish practice of comforting mourners is a technique for members of a broader community to effectively convey their care, concern, and support to a smaller group more directly affected by a life-shaping loss. Perhaps the most salient implication of Larks’s framing is the application of Rabbi Yohanan’s norm (unevenly followed) that any conversation must be initiated and guided by the bereaved (Moed Katan 28b), “Those who come to offer comfort may not utter a word until the mourner opens her mouth, as it says (Job 3:1) ‘Then Job opened his mouth’ and only afterwards (4:1) ‘And Eliphaz the Yemenite answered.’”

Ceding the authority to define a conversation is not mere etiquette. It is an intentional disruption of default roles, and of authority – it is, in other words, about power. This gracious practice of comforting mourners enshrines a pair of truths: those most immediately affected by a loss are in need of the loving attention of those more distantly affected (that everyone is somehow affected by every death is a bedrock tenet of Jewish belief and practice), and those who are mourning also possess an expertise (which garners them authority) about what to discuss and how. Translated into our moment, shiva is a call for those of us who are not Black to lead with caring attention to, and careful learning from, the Black community, including the Black Jewish community.

Listening is easy – until it isn't. After all, Job's "friends" begin well enough, waiting for Job to speak – but then respond in a twenty-chapter torrent of counterargument. The 'friends' can handle Job's sadness but not his anger – which is, after all, a stage of mourning. Job does not shy away from asserting his own innocence or impugning God's justice – and thereby threatens the pious orthodoxies that his friends rely on for their daily psychic support. In a harrowingly contemporary moment, Job hurls an accusation of unaccountability at God, claiming that an independent and fair judge would find God guilty of abuse of power and enforce a judgment against God, (9:33) "There is no arbiter between us, who may lay his hand upon us both." But since God is subject to no outside oversight, Job has no hopes of redress – and he is therefore oppressed by God.

These are hard words, and many of Rabbi Yohanan's colleagues continue the legacy of Job's friends, charging Job with heresy. Regarding Job's criticism of God's never facing account, Rav says (Bava Batra 16a) "Dust should be put in Job's mouth for saying this! Does a servant rebuke his master?" Rav's linking of a victim's inability to prosecute an abuser on the one hand, and roles of master and slave on the other, echoes and even anticipates present-day linkings of meagre police accountability to the legacy of American slavery. Rav is not alone in decrying Job's heresies: Rava claims that Job has been denied the resurrection of the dead; Rabbah thinks that Job has impiously suggested that God confused him for a different person whom God meant to punish (!). (To be clear, other Rabbinic voices express unqualified praise of Job, though they are more marginal to the tradition.) These rabbis, overwhelmed by the radical conclusions Job draws from his recognition of the undeserved, and therefore unjust, nature of his pain and degradation demand that Job measure his tone, pull his punches, and not disturb their cherished beliefs. But Job's translation of his pain into philosophy threatens their theologies and their theodicies: the rabbis know that they cannot both faithfully listen to Job's account and remain unmoved in their loyalty to God – and they choose God, framing Job and his protest as the problem.

What is strangest about the Rabbinic condemnation of Job is that God agrees with Job, not the friends who thought they were defending God's honor! In a blistering and shocking rebuke, God

demands an offering of atonement from the friends because “you have not spoken of Me what is right, as My servant Job has.”(42:7) God’s *deus ex machina* is on one level a criticism of the friends for engaging in the wrong language-game with Job: they were there not to engage in philosophical disputes, but to comfort a heartbroken man. The friends forgot that, putting their own spiritual and emotional needs front and center and demanding Job measure his words so as not to sadden *them* – an abdication, even a perverse reversal, of their role.

On a second level, God reveals that the philosophical insights attained through the recognition and rejection of injustice by its victims of injustice have a privileged status. A devastated mourner who hurls insults at God is closer to God, and better understands who God is, than a collected and traditional adherent of time-honored, pious doctrine.

A story like this one recurred in the American public sphere last week: in her emotional speech at George Floyd’s funeral, Brooke Williams, Mr. Floyd’s niece, said, “Someone said, ‘Make America great again.’ But, when has America ever been great?” Like Job, Ms. Williams translated the tragedy of irreparable, senseless loss at the hands of the very entities who had sworn to protect her family into a sharp and fundamental critique of the justice of that entity. In Job’s case it was God, in Ms. Williams’s case, America. And, like Job, Ms. Williams’s conclusion was criticized as American heresy: when Yamiche Alcindor tweeted Ms. Williams’s words (and the applause with which her fellow mourners received them), the top reply was simply “Disgusting” and many others (though by no means all) echoed that sentiment.

It may be the case that right now, the hardest and most important thing that is asked of the non-Black Jewish community is to recognize, as Shira Telushkin did in a moving piece this week, that compared to Black communities, the non-Black Jewish community “live[s] in a different America, one that offered us a haven. We fled to America and away from the lands of our greatest horrors, while the Black community was forced to overcome their greatest horrors among the people who wrought them...”

It is not merely to acknowledge the suffering of individuals, but to take seriously, and to learn from, their perspective on the world. It is to realize that, paradoxically, the real heresy is decrying their visions of justice and God as heretical. It is to refuse the easy path of Job's friends, and of some of our rabbis in favor of the insights of innocent victims of oppression and in favor of God. For families like mine it is impossible to not feel a profound personal, intergenerational gratitude for the prosperity, freedom, and peace America has afforded us as Jews. Honoring that gratitude is an ethical obligation of the first order. For a long time now – and especially today – we face another challenge as well: to learn what Black Americans have always known, that America is not only the promised land, it is also Egypt. This is what it means to answer the calls of our Black Jewish leaders, it is what it means to comfort those around us in mourning and grief, and it is what it means to be open to the possibility of real revelations – new horizons of hope, justice, and solidarity.



Women and Mourning

After Sarah's death comes the first biblical account of mourning

MAEERA SCHREIBER WRITES:¹⁵

“And Abraham proceeded to mourn for Sarah and to bewail her” (Genesis 23:2).

With this verse, our parashah invites us to consider the history of a significant yet often obscured tradition in women’s discourse, namely, mourning.

In this parashah we have the first account of mourning (even though death has figured prominently earlier). Here a woman, Sarah, is mourned, and the mourner is a man, Abraham her husband. Yet sources disclose that in the ancient world the act of mourning was typically associated with women. Margaret Alexiou’s landmark study, *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition* (1974), calls attention to the gendered characteristics of mourning practices and language. Throughout antiquity, in both Greek and Middle Eastern cultures, the lament—a standard feature of ritual life—belonged largely to women who gathered to lead the community in the rites of grief in the Bible, just as in the Classical tradition, the lament was associated with the feminine.

The book of Jeremiah lets us hear the bitter weeping of Rachel, mourning over her absent children (Jeremiah 31:15). That book also conspicuously presents songs of communal loss as a maternal legacy; because of disaster, the prophet instructs the women thus: “Teach your daughters wailing, and one another lamentation” (Jeremiah 9:19). When the world splits open, when history fails, the feminine voice is made audible.

The Bible does not preserve actual descriptions of mourning rituals or women’s laments. What we do have is the book of Lamentations, a national lament, in which—as is common in laments—the poet repeatedly appropriates a female persona, singing as if a woman: “My children are forlorn, / For the foe has prevailed” (1:16). Composed in response to the destruction of Jerusalem (586 B.C.E.) at the hands of the Neo-Babylonian army, Lamentations chronicles a nation’s effort to know itself in the aftermath of a profound severing of its relation to God—the divine principle that confers meaning upon the social order. And in this book, catastrophe is repeatedly gendered.

The female is the subject reciting the lament; she is also the object of exploitation, since to the poet the feminine body represents the site of social disrepair. In this way, Lamentations provides yet another textual example of the widespread symbol of nation-as-woman, ever vulnerable to foreign invasion. Women are cast as the ideal speakers of loss and rupture, for that is a condition which they embody.

Lamentations opens with a cluster of images figuring Jerusalem as an abandoned woman; she is variously to a slave, a fallen princess, and a widow—an *almanah*, a term Alan Mintz points out “designates so much a woman who has lost her husband as the social status of a woman who has no legal protector and who may thus be abused with impunity” (*Reading Hebrew Literature*, 2002, p. 24). Indeed, *almanah* may etymologically linked to the Hebrew verb that to be mute or dumb

¹⁵ The Torah: A Women’s Commentary edited by Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss (New York: URJ Press and Women of Reform Judaism, 2008). <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/women-and-mourning/>

(with the letters aleph, lamed, mem). This association deepens our sense of the widow as one who cannot speak on her own behalf. Focusing on the structures of meaning in the Hebrew Bible, Elaine Scarry identifies a crucial division between God manifested as a voice and humanity as *embodied*: “To have a body is to be creatable, ... and woundable. To have no body, to have only a voice, is to be none of these things; it is to be the wounder but not woundable” (*The Body in Pain*, 1985, p. 206). The distinction is central to Lamentations, where “daughter Zion” is represented, especially in the first chapters, as virtually all body, broken and disabled.



Adrienne Rich.

Turning to the post-biblical period, women continue to dominate in the mention of laments. Rabbinic tractates include a few such references. For example, in Mishnah Ketubot (4:4), Rabbi Yehuda rules that even the poorest husband must provide one lament-singing woman for his wife’s funeral, as a minimum display of honor. In the Talmud, we find a suite of poetic fragments which suggest that the lament, as a standard feature of ritual life, belonged largely to the women who gathered to lead the community in the fires. Attributed to the sage Raba, we read: “The women of Shkantziv say: ‘Woe for his leaving / woe for our grieving’” *our daf* (BT Moed Katan 28b).

To this day, Yemenite and Kurdistani women living in Israel continue to assume a large role in mourning the dead in their communities.¹⁶

In Western culture, meanwhile, the genre of lament has become a useful frame for women poets. Dahlia Ravikovitch, who emerged as an important Israeli poet during the 1950s, has been described as a “*lamenting poetess in the ancient biblical tradition*”.¹⁷ A particularly beautiful and haunting example of Ravikovitch’s contribution to the genre may be found in her poem “*They Required a Song of Us*.” The poem begins with a line from another well-known Israeli poet, Lea Goldberg, who asks: “*How shall we sing a song of Zion / when we have not even begun to hear?*”

¹⁶ See Susan Sered, *Women as Ritual Experts*, 1992.

¹⁷ Shirley Kaufman et al., eds., *Hebrew Feminist Poems*, 1999, p. 13

Like Goldberg's query, Ravikovitch's poem meditates on Psalm 137, a famous expression of exilic despair in the Bible, where the speaker asks: "***How can we sing a song of God on alien soil?***" Ravikovitch answers this ancient query by recognizing the need for a new kind of utterance: "*Sing intimate songs / that the soul shies away from singing ...*"¹⁸

Turning to twentieth-century Jewish American poetry, we find new variations on the lament in the work of Adrienne Rich. Wrestling with the expressive limitations of other forms of poetic mourning, Rich writes of her frustration in "***A Woman Dead In Her Forties.***"

Here the speaker first confronts the genre of lament's potential inadequacy, feeling "half-afraid" to write a lament for one who did not "read it much"—and then gropes for an alternative: "from here on I want," she writes, "more crazy mourning, more howl, more keening".¹⁹

This discontent compels Rich to reactivate the lament in her 1991 volume ***An Atlas of the Difficult World.*** In a later collection, written in the aftermath of the Gulf War crisis (1991-92), Rich longs to convey what she knows to be true: that poetry can be a powerful, socially constructive force for reconfiguring community (*What is Found There*, 1993, p. xiv).

Poets such as Merle Feld, Esther Broner, and Penina Adelman also explore the power of mourning. Their versions of lament, along with Rich's, alert us to the reconstructive possibilities of an ancient biblical form.

¹⁸ Tal Nizan, ed., *With an Iron Pen: Hebrew Protest Poetry 1984-2004*, 2005

¹⁹ *Facts on a Doorframe*, 2002, p. 255



With an Iron Pen
Hebrew Protest Poetry 1984-2004
Tal Nizan (editor)

Seven Laments For The War-Dead

1
Mr. Beringer, whose son
fell at the Canal that strangers dug
so ships could cross the desert,
crosses my path at Jaffa Gate.

He has grown very thin, has lost
the weight of his son.

That's why he floats so lightly in the alleys
and gets caught in my heart like little twigs
that drift away.

2

As a child he would mash his potatoes
to a golden mush.
And then you die.

A living child must be cleaned
when he comes home from playing.
But for a dead man
earth and sand are clear water, in which
his body goes on being bathed and purified
forever.

3

The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier
across there. On the enemy's side. A good landmark
for gunners of the future.

Or the war monument in London
at Hyde Park Corner, decorated
like a magnificent cake: yet another soldier
lifting head and rifle,
another cannon, another eagle, another
stone angel.

And the whipped cream of a huge marble flag
poured over it all
with an expert hand.

But the candied, much-too-red cherries
were already gobbled up
by the glutton of hearts. Amen.

4

I came upon an old zoology textbook,
Brehm, Volume II, Birds:
in sweet phrases, an account of the life of the starling,
swallow, and thrush. Full of mistakes in antiquated
Gothic typeface, but full of love, too. "Our feathered
friends." "Migrate from us to warmer climes."
Nest, speckled egg, soft plumage, nightingale,
stork. "The harbinger of spring." The robin,
red-breasted.

Year of publication: 1913, Germany,
on the eve of the war that was to be
the eve of all my wars.
My good friend who died in my arms, in
his blood,
on the sands of Ashdod. 1948, June.

Oh my-friend,
red-breasted.

5
Dicky was hit.
Like the water tower at Yad Mordekhai.
Hit. A hole in the belly. Everything
came flooding out.

But he has remained standing like that
in the landscape of my memory
like the water tower at Yad Mordekhai.

He fell not far from there,
a little to the north, near Houlayqat.

6
Is all of this
sorrow? I don't know.
I stood in the cemetery dressed in
the camouflage clothes of a living man: brown pants
and a shirt yellow as the sun.

Cemeteries are cheap; they don't ask for much.
Even the wastebaskets are small, made for holding
tissue paper
that wrapped flowers from the store.
Cemeteries are a polite and disciplined thing.
"I Shall never forget you," in French
on a little ceramic plaque.
I don't know who it is that won't ever forget:
he's more anonymous than the one who died.

Is all of this sorrow? I guess so.
"May ye find consolation in the building
of the homeland." But how long
can you go on building the homeland
and not fall behind in the terrible

three-sided race
between consolation and building and death?

Yes, all of this is sorrow. But leave
a little love burning always
like the small bulb in the room of a sleeping baby
that gives him a bit of security and quiet love
though he doesn't know what the light is
or where it comes from.

7

Memorial Day for the war-dead: go tack on
the grief of all your losses--
including a woman who left you--
to the grief of losing them; go mix
one sorrow with another, like history,
that in its economical way
heaps pain and feast and sacrifice
onto a single day for easy reference.

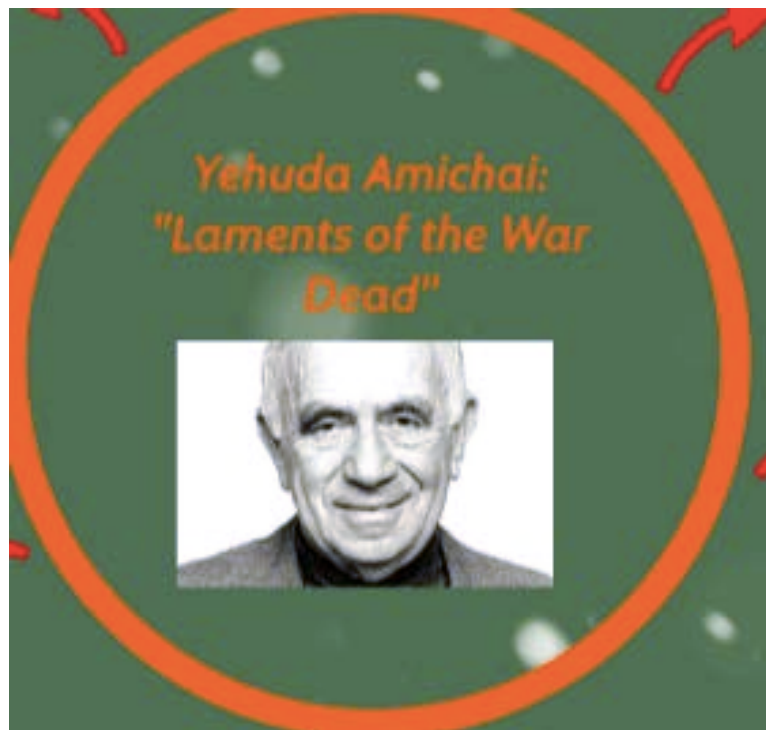
Oh sweet world, soaked like bread
in sweet milk for the terrible
toothless God. "Behind all this,
some great happiness is hiding." No use
crying inside and screaming outside.
Behind all this, some great happiness may
be hiding.

Memorial day. Bitter salt, dressed up as
a little girl with flowers.
Ropes are strung out the whole length of the route
for a joing parade: the living and the dead together.
Children move with the footsteps of someone else's grief
as if picking their way through broken glass.

The flautist's mouth will stay pursed for many days.
A dead soldier swims among the small heads
with the swimming motions of the dead,
with the ancient error the dead have
about the place of the living water.

A flag loses contact with reality and flies away
A store window decked out with beautiful dresses for women
in blue and white. And everything
in three languages: Hebrew, Arabic and Death.

A great royal beast has been dying all night long
under the jasmine,
with a fixed stare at the world.
A man whose son died in the war
walks up the street
like a woman with a dead fetus inside her womb.
"Behind all this, some great happiness is hiding."



From Postmemory to Coping with Holocaust Remembrance

YAEL SELIGER writes:²⁰

I do not know of a more eloquent poem that communicates the meaning of being close but not close enough to the Holocaust than "I Wasn't One of the Six Million" by Yehuda Amichai.

The poem appears in Amichai's last poetry collection, *Open Closed Open* (2000).

²⁰ file:///Users/julianungar-sargon/Desktop/After_Postmemory_Coping_with_Holocaust_R.pdf

I wasn't one of the six million who died in the Shoah,
I wasn't even among the survivors.
And I wasn't one of the six hundred thousand who went out of Egypt.
I came to the Promised Land by sea.
No, I was not in that number, though I still have the fire and the smoke
within me, pillars of fire and pillars of smoke that guide me
by night and by day. I still have inside me the mad search
for emergency exists, for soft places, for the nakedness
of the land, for the escape into weakness and hope,
I still have within me the lust to search for living water
with quiet talk to the rock or with frenzied blows.
Afterwards, silence: no questions, no answers.
Jewish history and world history
grind me between them like two grindstones, sometimes
to a powder. And the solar year and the lunar year
get ahead of each other or fall behind,
leaping, they set my life in perpetual motion.
Sometimes I fall into the gap between them to hide,
Or to sink all the way down.

For people who were not “there” – like the poet – the Holocaust is forever hovering beneath the skies.⁵⁴ People who were not “there” do not quite know how to face those who were. People who were not “there” carry a heavy memory baggage. For a Jewish person like the poet it means to be “in perpetual motion” between “weakness and hope” but sometimes sinking “all the way down.”

It is this notion of perpetual motion, of repeated, never-stopping, ever-flowing changes in the dynamics of Holocaust remembrance which I draw out of Amichai's poem, and seize upon when reflecting on what in my estimation is missing or not present enough in the conceptualization of postmemory.

As articulated in the introduction to my thesis, the crux of my theoretical claim is that with shifting trends in cultural memory, such as postmodern deconstruction of language of remembrance – a topic I pursue in the next chapter – the present and future call for more yielding and inclusive conceptualizations of Holocaust remembrance.

As argued by Wolfgang Müller-Funk (2003) in reference to German cultural and collective memory, it is hardly possible in a postmodern era to “conserve a culture by a monumentalized collective memory” (219). In fact, as Müller-Funk contends, what happens in a postmodern age is that “memory itself, for a long time a guarantor of constancy, becomes dynamic” (219-220). Furthermore, it is precisely memory as active and shifting that prevents the Holocaust from being forgotten or becoming irrelevant.

More so than the Jewish Museum of Daniel Libeskind in Berlin and/or Eisenmann's Holocaust project next to the Reichstag, it is the tension between the two structures – Eisenmann being far more traditional than Libeskind – that according to Müller-Funk propels the continued relevance

of Holocaust remembrance. In terms of my appraisal of the conceptual model of postmemory, I contend that it lags behind in its capacity to set in motion future-oriented trends of remembrance, which, as I will show, are necessary if we are to break through cultural constraints which thwart political justice.

In advocating for greater fluidity and a more future oriented approach to Holocaust remembrance, I am echoing a motif articulated by Geoffrey Hartman in a preface to Jeffrey Alexander's (2009) debate on remembering the Holocaust. In part, Hartman reveals that he is driven by a fear of the wound [Holocaust] becoming an identity.

Zygmunt Bauman's (2000) type of conjuring up a ghost in relation to Holocaust remembrance seems to exacerbate Hartman's fear. In Bauman's mindset, the Jewish people epitomize victims who lost the ability to practice self-defense. Self-defense entails an ability to extrapolate a lesson from the past. The Holocaust, Bauman argues, is far too terrifying and overwhelming to serve as a lesson. Suggesting "a two-pronged legacy of the Holocaust," Bauman claims that on the one hand, Auschwitz assigned Jewish survival a supreme value.

On the other hand, survival has evolved into "a site of conflict between incompatible interests in which the success of some depends on the nonsurvival of others" (9). Unlike, say, the military plans of the Allied forces which called for unconditional surrender by Nazi Germany, but did not require, and hence did not result in the complete annihilation of the German nation, the racial and totalistic nature of the Nazi war against the Jewish people did entail the killing of every living Jew.

This is essentially what Bauman has in mind when speaking of a "self-perpetuating and selfproducing [...] ghost of the Holocaust" (14); an uncompromising ghost incarnated in the notion of total destruction. I do not believe in ghosts. More to the point, I am convinced that a new paradigmatic thinking in terms of coping with Holocaust remembrance can go a long way in disempowering Bauman's ghost of the Holocaust.

I regard Art Spiegelman's demythologizing Holocaust survivors through a true to-life portrayal of Vladek, his father, as an invaluable artistic contribution toward the disempowerment of the ghostly presence of the Holocaust in our collective memory. Having said that, demythologizing does not necessarily mean that knowledge acquired about surviving the Holocaust translates into real understanding.

This is what Geoffrey Hartman (1994) has in mind when referring to Spiegelman's generation as members of a generation that acquired knowledge without any real understanding of it. Acquiring factual knowledge about what a concentration camp and a crematorium means in terms of construction, location, and layout is one thing; understanding what its real function was, and what it meant to actually be in the vicinity of the flames of a crematoria is an entirely different matter.

As depicted in *Nightfather* by Carl Friedman (1994), the dissonance between what children picked up from what they were told by their father who experienced a Nazi concentration camp, and what they actually understood or could imagine, is exemplified in the children's habit of associating the word "camp" with "a condition" (1), not a place. "I've had camp," their father says. "That makes him different from us. We've had chicken pox and German measles" but never "camp" (2).

In fact, as far as the children can tell, father “still has camp, especially in his face. Not so much in his nose or his ears, although they’re big enough, but in his eyes” (2). They think they know the meaning of the word “hungry” except that their father always insists that they have no idea what hunger means. The children are spellbound by their father’s past but somehow they need to process their father’s planet of gas and starvation into an everyday life of school, food, clothing, and play. It is a type of processing that can be done by knowing but not really understanding.

Demythologizing the Holocaust also pertains to experiences encountered in the homes of children born to Holocaust survivors. Helen Epstein (1988) conversed with sons and daughters of Holocaust survivors who recall growing up “acutely aware of how our parents were driven by an impetus toward life as well as death” (203).

As in reference to Spiegelman, here, too, demythologizing does not mean the type of understanding we generally associate with a level of cognition attained through a mental psychological process that facilitates comprehension of something from information received. Rather, as Epstein explains, demythologizing means knowing that one has developed an acute awareness of an existential phenomenon linked to the home life of Holocaust survivors. Epstein identifies Dr. Vivian Rakoff’s 1966 publication in *Viewpoints*, a Canadian-Jewish journal, as the first medical-psychological write-up on children of survivors.

Conversing with generational brothers and sisters whose family trees were “burnt to a stump” (11), Epstein concludes that “our parents’ wartime experiences had not given rise to a handful of clinically categorized symptoms but to a particular world view” (220). Epstein cites Rakoff surmising that this world view consists of appreciating life not simply as a given “but an almost unexpected gift” (207). As such, life is not merely to be lived.

Life becomes a mission. Often this sense of life as-a-mission bore a heavy load of expectation on children of survivors. Rakoff explained that “by virtue of their concentration experiences,” parents became almost sacred figures to be obeyed and not to disappoint. Invariably, children of survivors “could not express towards their parents the aggression that is part of the usual process of growing up” (207). Epstein adds that children of Holocaust survivors are torn between conflicting emotions of being in awe of their parents and their will to live, and ashamed in imagining their parents reduced to starving animals. Eli, a child of survivors, tells Epstein: “I am in awe of my parents” but “I’m also uneasy; I can’t feel too secure” (31).

Delineated by Marianne Hirsh (2012) in her studies of the generation of post memory, and visual culture after the Holocaust, children of survivors are often imbued with guilt for not having gone through the horrors experienced by the parent generation. Guilt transforms into compulsive digging into family ruins and can also manifest itself in phantom physical symptoms. Raised in small families that had no grandparents and only few relatives, Amir Gutfreund’s fictional protagonists in *Our Holocaust* (2006), are in the habit of “adopting” acquaintances as family relatives and referring to them as uncle-aunt (doddoda).

Jewish children born to survivors are often named after grandparents and relatives who perished in the Holocaust. Epstein’s counterparts in North America, Europe and Israel are presumed by

Henri Raczymow to be impelled by “memory shot through with holes (une mémoire trouée)” (1994). His books, he said, do not attempt “to fill in empty memory” nor are they “simply part of the struggle against forgetfulness.” Rather, he presents memory as empty: non-memory which cannot be filled. Raczymow argues that there are too many holes in Jewish remembrance of the Holocaust.

Specifically, there are holes in Jewish genealogy. “We have no family trees. At the most, we can go back to our grandparents. There is no trace of anyone before” (104).



Opening and Closing with Qohelet: The Late Work of Yehuda Amichai:

A Discussion of Patuah Sagur Patuah (Open Closed Open)

Eric Berk, William Cutter write:²¹

²¹ Hebrew Studies, Volume 51, 2010, pp. 175-201
https://www.academia.edu/67454946/Opening_and_Closing_with_Qohelet_The_Late_Work_of_Yehuda_Amichai_A_Discussion_of_Patuah_Sagur_Patuah_Open_Closed_Open

Many critics have noted the densely wrought structure in *Patuah Sagur Patuah*, and have called attention to its rich inter-textual allusions and use of refrains and key words. (One thinks of Kronfeld, Bloch, Arpali, Alter, Band, and Gold.) But the major articles have not fully treated the heavy burden of association to the book of Ecclesiastes, Qohelet. In *Patuah Sagur Patuah*, Amichai created a multi-layered foundation in classic sources which serves as an underpinning to the overall autumnal stance and skeptic's vision of the 300 poem-units. In addition to the specific Qohelet allusions, there are nearly one hundred more elusive associations that emerge once the reader accepts the importance of the boldly etched references to Qohelet. The authors argue that, once Qohelet becomes the dominant metaphoric "trope," other more transient and innocent associations to the biblical scroll take on greater significance. While resisting a glib "allegoresis" (a tendency to see Qohelet in every possible space), the fact is that the Solomonic wise preacher lies in wait in a surprising number of corners of this extraordinary and weighty collection.

1. THE UNITY OF *PATUAH SAGUR PATUAH* THROUGH QOHELET

Patuah Sagur Patuah was Yehuda Amichai's final project, a "late work" in chronological and spiritual terms, in thematic interest, and in the richness of poetic technique. In this essay, we argue that Amichai's cosmos of both thematic and aesthetic coherence in *Patuah Sagur Patuah* is enhanced by an elaborate network of biblical citations and less direct allusions that reveal greater significance in their totality than might appear from examining the separate parts. *Patuah Sagur Patuah* is a collection of over 300 short stanzas, each of which can also stand alone. Several features in the total work add to its coherence—including a recurrence of themes, some interesting progressions from theme to theme and knitting of aesthetic genres into a heterocosm of mixed but related instances of prosody and style. But the bib-

lical material plays a particularly important part in the collection's imaginative unity, and it sets off a constant interplay between contemporary and biblical sensibilities.¹

Patuaḥ Sagur Patuaḥ draws on numerous and separate biblical passages and ideas, some as subjects of the individual stanzas, others as sly allusions within stanzas of more general themes, and some intended to create a resonance between old and new themes. But the most salient of these biblical ideas and passages come from the book we know (in Hebrew) as "Qohelet," "Ecclesiastes" in English. Allusions to Ecclesiastes dominate *Patuaḥ Sagur Patuaḥ* and turn the collection into a kind of conversation with Qohelet, the preacher's, ruminations about time, recurrence, doubt-skepticism, human agency, and memory, resulting in a melancholy acceptance and appreciation of the human condition.² These are indeed appropriate themes and attitudes for the Israeli laureate's "late work" and in themselves establish a strong association with the biblical scroll Qohelet. The task of our paper is to demonstrate how the thematic tone of the work is supported by intertextual strategies and to discuss the significance and range of those strategies.

2. INTERTEXTUALITY IN HEBREW POETRY

The intertextual element in Modern Hebrew poetry has complicated and enriched contemporary poetic texts far beyond the point of reference or allusion. While Clayton and Rothstein, in their anthology: *Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History*³ have already presented numerous faces to the business of intertextuality, the practice has special meaning for Jews, and especially for poets in Israel. In Israeli cultural life the use of biblical material extends a dialogue with a Jewish past in an encounter between secular modernity and spiritual classicism; and it is also a way of claiming a national

¹ C. Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism: Decentering Literary Dynamics* (Los Angeles, Calif.: University of California Press, 1996).

² A. Band, "Hilun hakodesh, suvei habitui haintertextuali bashir shel Amichai" (The secularization of the sacred (language): Aspects of intertextual expression in the poetry of Amichai), in *Al bria ve'al yetzira bemahshavah yehudit* (On versions of creation in Jewish thought; ed. R. Eilior and P. Schafer; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005). See also S. Wieder, "Alterman ve'amichai sharim leqohelet" (Alterman and Amichai sing to Qohelet), *Dimui* 24 (2005): 73–75. See also C. Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism*, chap. 5, "On the Theories of Allusion and Imagist Intertextuality." See also C. Kronfeld, "The Wisdom of Camouflage": Between Rhetoric and Philosophy in Amichai's Poetic System," *Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History* 10.3 (1990): 469–491.

³ J. Clayton and E. Rothstein, *Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991).

heritage in aesthetic terms. Such usage is another form of what Anita Shapira called “restoring the Bible to the focus of Hebrew culture,” in her English article on the place of Tanak in contemporary Israeli culture,⁴ and relates to the history of “*mikra*” in modern Hebrew poetry as amply discussed in Malka Shaked’s recent two volume anthology and lengthy introduction.⁵ The issue of *The AJS Review* in which Shapira’s article is published includes articles on related aspects of biblical intertextuality by Gershon Shaked, Glenda Abramson, and Malka Shaked, which should be added to a discourse which has been fostered by the American scholar David Jacobson, and the work in Israel and America of Ruth Karton Blum.⁶ But Kronfeld’s studies draw the discussion closer than any other to the theoretical work of the schools of Tel Aviv poetics which have given rise to the most critical questions in the intertextual enterprise, and have also emphasized the place of Tanak as critical to the socio-linguistic environment of modern Israel. In all of these scholars and critics, the notion of modern midrash hovers, and Amichai gives expression to the practice of midrash in his title to the third poem: “*Tanakh Tanakh, itakh itakh, umidrashim aherim.*” Like countless of his poet colleagues—the best known in English being Carmi, Pagis, Ravikovitch, Goldberg, Ghouri, Gilboa, Wolloch, Zach, and Reich—Yehuda Amichai drew on Jewish tradition with a variety of techniques and for many purposes, but none has been more important intellectually than his enduring effort to surprise his readers with apparently dissonant associations—in much the same way as he works with similes. Nili Gold has discussed how texts work on Amichai’s poems, and how the reciprocity between poem and reader can form an original *perush* in the text.⁷ Sometimes intertextual practice has actually been the subject of a poem, as in “*Sinanti mitokh megillat esther,*” (I have filtered from the book of Esther):

⁴ A. Shapira, “The Bible and Israeli Identity,” *AJS Review* 28.1 (April 2004): 11–41.

⁵ M. Shaked, *Lenezah anagneh: hamikra bashirah ha'ivrit hahadashah* (I shall play on you eternally: The Bible in Modern Hebrew poetry; 2 vols.; Tel Aviv: Miskal–Yedioth Aharonoth Books and Chemed Books, 2005).

⁶ A. Shapira, “The Bible and Israeli Identity,” pp. 11–41. G. Shaked, “Modern Midrash: The Biblical Canon and Modern Literature,” *AJS Review* 28.1 (April 2004): 43–62. G. Abramson, “Israeli Drama and the Bible: Kings on the Stage,” *AJS Review* 28.1 (April 2004): 63–82. D. Jacobson, *Does David Still Play Before You?: Israeli Poetry and the Bible* (Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 1997). R. Karton Blum, *Profane Scriptures* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Hebrew Union College Press, 1999).

⁷ N. Gold, *Lo kabrosh: gilgulei imagim vetavniyot beshirat Yehuda Amichai* (Not like a cypress: Transformations of images and structures in the poetry of Yehuda Amichai; Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1994), chap. 2.

סננתי מתוך מגלת אסתר את משקע
 השמחה הגסה ומתוך ספר ירמיהו
 את יללת הכאב במעיס ומתוך
 שיר השירים את החפוש האין סופי
 אחר האהבה ומספר בראשית את
 החלומות ואת קץ ומתוך קהלת את
 היאוש ומתוך ספר איוב את איוב.
 והדבקתי לי מן השאריות ספר תנך חדש.
 אני חי מצנור ומדבק ומגבל ובשלוה.

I have filtered from the book of Esther
 The residue and the vulgar joy
 And from the book of Jeremiah the
 Moaning pain in his bowels.
 And from the Song of Songs
 The endless searching
 For love and from Genesis the
 Dreams.....⁸

Putting aside the ambiguity of whether “*sinanti*” (Hebrew for “filter” or “vetted”) might refer to preserving as much as to sorting out, the poet proclaims his dominance over the biblical text—that is the decisive control over what is communicated, and enhances that dominance with a far-fetched analogical coda:

אשה אחת שאלה אותי אמש ברחוב
 החשוך על שלום אשה אחרת
 שמתה לא בעתה ולא בעתו של אף אחד.
 מתוך עיפות גדולה עניתי לה:
 שלומה טוב, שלומה טוב.

A woman asked me last night on the dark street about another woman
 Who died before her time, before anyone’s time for that matter.
 Out of great fatigue I answered her:
 ‘She is doing quite well, quite well.’

In *Patuah Sagur Patuah*, Amichai appropriates a variety of texts, but maneuvers Ecclesiastes to the extent that the book may be re-read in the light of *Patuah Sagur Patuah*. Qohelet becomes the template for contemporary experience through the collection’s seemingly independent poetic ideas.

3. THE *MASHAL* AND THE *NIMSHAL*—AMICHAÏ'S ARS POETICA

While scholars have called attention to Amichai's specific techniques when he utilizes biblical allusions and classic tropes,⁹ we believe that the strategies Amichai employed in *Patuah Sagur Patuah* have structural patterns and strategies that have not been examined adequately. One of those strategies includes developing the relationship between *mashal* and *nimshal*. In *Patuah Sagur Patuah*, the poet calls attention to some of his own figurative language through a poetic treatment of tenor and vehicle, the *mashal* and the *nimshal*. In this regard, we will point out his interest in this literary relationship through two "meta-textual strategies" in the third poem of the collection where he casts a theoretical frame around the chapter-poem "*Tanakh Tanakh itakh itakh umidrashim aherim*." We see this frame as a key to his particular intertextual strategy, and we see it as an affirmation of a rich "ars poetica."

דוד אמר בקינתו על יונתן, "נפלאתה
אהבתך לי מאהבת נשים" הוא לקח
אותנו לדגמה של אהבה גדולה שאהבנו
אלפי שנים אחר-כך בנחל דוד שאהבנו בו
בסבך. זה מסבך זה מסבך, יונתן
לא הבין כי מת ודוד אולי לא הבין
שאת ואני יחדו היינו משל וגם נמשל.
זה מסבך. כך וכך, גבר ואשה,
תנ"ך תנ"ך, אתך אתך.

David said in his lament for Jonathan, "Your love
Is more wondrous to me than the love of women" he took
Us as an example of a great love that we loved
Thousands of years afterwards in the Creek of David where we loved
In the thicket. And it is a thick matter indeed. Jonathan
Did not understand that he had died, and perhaps David did not understand
That you and I together were the *mashal* and the *nimshal*.
This is a thicket tangled like a man and a woman,
Tanakh Tanakh, Ta Ta, with you, with you.¹⁰

⁹ N. Gold, *Lo hakabrosh*; A. Band, *Hilon hakodesh*; C. Kronfeld, "The Wisdom of Camouflage," pp. 469–491; Z. Shamir, "The Conceit as a Cardinal Style-Marker in Yehuda Amichai's Poetry," in *The Experienced Soul: Studies in Amichai* (ed. G. Abramson; n.p.:Westview Press, 1997), pp. 17–26.

¹⁰ Translation by W. Cutter; the poem is not included in the formal translated edition.

The poem then proceeds with small poetic paragraphs using a variety of textual maneuvers—some are commentaries on the texts, some use the text to illuminate a contemporary situation, and some seem to be casual doggerel, although Amichai’s “apparent doggerel” is often deceptive. These maneuvers draw on material from over thirty personalities or themes in the Tanak, from Noah and the *Akedah* to 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings—in each instance a kind of playful re-arrangement of a biblical theme or story, with a “punch line” that comes from the simile which connects the ancient theme to a contemporary association. Each stanza in its own way prompts a reflection on the biblical material that is its basis. But the final stanza in the poem (beginning “The poet of *Shir Hashirim*”) re-visits the more theoretical interest that flows from the opening David-Jonathan parable and comment. “The poet of the ‘Song of Songs,’” our modern poet says, “went looking for the perfect woman whom he could manufacture from the imagery of Solomon’s original poem.” After a lengthy search for the woman who looks like the *Shulamith*, with the strange similes of “The Song of Songs,” (elongated neck, huge aquiline nose, goat hair, etc.) The contemporary poet cites: “Love is as strong as death,” and says:

רק בסוף הבין את הדמיון שדמה
והבין ואהב ומת (הנמשל התפוצץ עם המשל.)

He understood only at the end / the extent of his imagery.
He understood, and loved and then died.¹¹

Thus Amichai places the poetic reflections on parable or metaphor at the beginning and end of the very poem in which biblical foundations of his modern themes are treated most explicitly. The reader is invited, first of all, to think figuratively in general (and even in theoretical terms), and then to think of biblical passages which function like figures of speech—or, “pre-figuring” material: David and Jonathan’s love, and the “The Song of Songs.”

4. QOHELET AS *MASHAL*

It is no surprise to readers of Amichai, and certainly not to those who knew him personally, that he toyed with similes and more complex metaphors in quotidian life and as part of a world view—indeed enough a part of

¹¹ Translated by C. Kronfeld and C. Bloch, except for a concluding line: “For the *nimshal* exploded with the *mashal*.”

that world view that one must disagree with critics who found in him little metaphysical bent. Ours is among the opinions to the contrary.¹² As a man who, in his own words, “stood between” (an “*ish beynayim*”) and a man of divided conscience, (the cleft soul in “I am a Kosher Man”) one of the things he was explicitly “between” was the traditional religious texts and settings of his childhood and his contemporary secular, strongly non-religious experience of the world. And while he seemed most often to settle for the contemporary experience as decisive or preferred, as in the legendary poem “Tourists,” we suggest that his experience with classic texts represented a portion of a larger metaphysical system. His use of those texts is certainly part of the “surprise” that comes from his love of catachresis and the conceit.¹³

Qohelet is a kind of *mashal* that dominates the entire book of *Patuah Sagur Patuah* through its frequent appearance in various contexts—some explicit (where the poet calls attention to the biblical book) and others more stealthy—but enhanced by the presence of seventeen explicit references to Qohelet.¹⁴

5. REVIEW OF THE ARGUMENT

Amichai’s profound affinity with Qohelet, confirmed through intertextual strategies and the attachment of his voice to the autumnal philosophy of the biblical scroll, is adumbrated by his earlier poem: “אָדָם בְּחַיָּו” (A man in his life).¹⁵ There he argues, as he often does, against something that Qohelet does not really say in the first place: “A man in his life does NOT [authors’ emphasis] have time for everything under the sun,” but in so doing he has already begun the dialogue with the ancient book. “A Man in His Life” represented more typical early Amichai-esque gestures. (Amichai’s poet frequently argues with something a text does not say.) *Patuah Sagur Patuah* is shaped by Amichai’s understanding of the man, Qohelet, resigned to life’s recurrences even as he despairs because of them, fretting about human agency, and certainly quarreling with norms (as Chana Kronfeld and Chana Bloch have pointed out in one of their more “popular” essays¹⁶). But that is

¹² B. Arpali, “World View, Poetics, Political Significance: Summing Up Forty Years of Reading Amichai” (lecture given at Yale University, October 2007).

¹³ Z. Shamir, “The Conceit as a Cardinal Style-Marker,” pp. 17–26.

¹⁴ These references are considered more fully in section 5 of the paper.

¹⁵ Y. Amichai, *Shirei Yehuda Amichai* (Poems of Yehuda Amichai; Jerusalem: Schocken, 2002), 4:50.

¹⁶ C. Bloch and C. Kronfeld, “Amichai’s Counter-Theology: Opening Open Closed Open,” *Judaism* 49.2 (Spring 2000): 153–167.

in the “big picture.” In the more intimate singular instances, Amichai weaves Qohelet among the many poems in the collection through the complicated arrangement of specific subject layers he has created: skeins of biblical history, characters and ideas from the Bible and from the poet’s life, allusions to other periods of Jewish history, the establishment of modern sovereignty, loss in warfare and in life, and the Holocaust—all these in terms of personal experience and in terms of their broader Jewish significance. Most of the allusions are grounded in concrete pictures or reports of particular experiences that—as it were—happened to the poet. These references and touchstones appear along with the reflections on acts of remembering and forgetting and on the poet’s recall of personal childhood, in addition to a consideration of his own children’s childhood as a genetic and historical re-combination of the events of his life. Throughout the collection, forgetfulness contends with remembering in a cycle that recalls Qohelet’s interest in the root ר-ז-י , and which is cited in the explicit rhyme: “*Patuah Sagur Patuah / Shakhuah zakhur shakhuah*” (stanza 12 of the book’s final chapter-poem).

Qohelet’s contention about *zikaron* in one sense of the word, memory as monument, is trumped by the modern poet’s concentration on the word in its more traditional usage (memory as an action). The contention of opposites, so congruent with Qohelet’s thinking, is captured in numerous images in *Patuah Sagur Patuah*: see-saws, revolving doors, ping-pong matches, and chairs which open and close depending on the seasons. We have argued that what clinches Qohelet as a kind of *mashal* for the poet is the frequency with which he signals the biblical book’s importance at several turning points in the collection. Once one has seen each of the instances in poetic play, the overall sense of the collection becomes even more clearly associated with the ancient book—including Qohelet’s own progression from despair to acceptance. (See stanza 1 of the poem “*Behayai, behayai*,” where all the contrasting motives of life and colored chess pieces had devolved into “no victory ringing in the wind”—a kind of resignation from competition.)

Here is an example of how the phenomenon works. No victory ringing in the wind is—on the face of it—an innocent notion redolent of Qohelet’s spirit, but not emphatically connected to the intertext. However, once one understands the persistent progression in the Qohelet strategies, the spirit of resignation joins with particular texts in attaching to the biblical book. Thus, the progression: There are specific literal citations of the Qohelet text, “‘*Haval havalim,*’ said Qohelet,” etc.; and the next steps down in intensity are applications of verses from the scroll to situations unrelated, but with the

same language, “*Al sevivotav*.” Then there are implicit uses like “*Hakol yereikhayim*” (from stanza 27 of the poem-chapter, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem / Why Jerusalem?”). And, finally, lines within the collection that are entirely independent of Qohelet, which—in view of the general saturation of the text—become indirect associations of a delightful and sometimes troubling character: “All the sexual positions of my body have already been performed,” is—for example—an attenuated instance of “What will happen has happened before.” Each category has several examples to support our case, but the poet’s use of “*Hakol*” followed by “*hevel*,” “*aval*,” “*aivel*,” “*mei'im*,” and “*yereikhayim*” is most salient and delightful to contemplate.

One reads Amichai and finds oneself associating thing to thing, and finding thing within thing, the opening and closing, and the circularity that are physical images and tropes within the collection. It is precisely this trope of things within things, things being like other things and yet not like them that undergird our consideration of the Amichai work that is before us. The six particular themes through which we tie Amichai to Qohelet have been apparent in some instances, and in other instances have relied on analogical associations and the student’s persistent suggestions. But turning or revolving is depicted in surprising images: “a hesitant key” (poem 1, stanza 24); and a woman who does not turn around to check on a man who is checking out her figure as she walks away from him (poem 4, stanza 4). (Both characters in this little stanza are doing what men and women have always done—what was always will be.) “Seder Plates that go around and around” (poem 1, stanza 15); and “mules walking around and around” (poem 7, stanza 2), and a “centrifuges of time” (poem 8, stanza 7) along with revolving doors (poem 1, stanza 2 and poem 4, stanza 12), headstones that stand around in a circle (poem 7, stanza 17), Jerusalem as a carousel (poem 18, stanza 6), and even the past and future revolving (poem 2, stanza 1).

Some themes and specific phrases had appeared in earlier works, relocating themselves within this larger more comprehensive final opus. This is surely the case with lines from Qohelet. One essential usage is in a stanza which occurs near the end of the first third of the anthology: “*Hadevarim shehayu me'olam*” which initially appears to draw on Rachel’s famous poem: “*Ulai*,” but which takes that association and builds it into a four layered poem which revisits repetition, recalls the *Yishuv*, and insists on introducing the real facts of life (or, “what really was”). Amichai has drawn this theme, it seems, from his earlier poem in the collection *Behind This a Great Happiness is Hiding*:

הַדְּבָרִים שֶׁשׁוּב לֹא יִהְיוּ לְעֹלָם
הָיוּ בְּמִקְוֹמוֹת שֶׁלֹּא הָיוּ בָהֶם

The things that will not occur once again were (or took place) in the places that never were.¹⁷

Recalling the tantalizing association with Qohelet, the idea becomes transformed in the first poem of "*Hadevarim shehayu me'olam*" (p. 59) and begins: רַחֵל הַמְשׁוֹרֶרֶת שָׁרָה וְאוֹלֵי לֹא הָיוּ הַדְּבָרִים מֵעוֹלָם (Rachel the poet wrote, "And perhaps these things never happened") [citing her famous poem which became a song of the *Yishuv*].

אֲבָל אֲנִי רוֹצֵה לְשִׁיר עַל הַדְּבָרִים שֶׁהָיוּ מֵעוֹלָם, הָיוּ וְדָא.
כִּי מָה שֶׁהָיָה מֵעוֹלָם יִהְיֶה לְעוֹלָם, כְּמוֹ הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ
וְהַמָּלְאָה "אוֹלֵי" הִיא הַיָּרֵחַ הַמְעַדֵּן הַבֵּל בְּאוֹרוֹ הַקָּדוּץ

But I want to sing of things that were forever, for what was—ever—
Will be forever, like the sun.
And the word "perhaps" is the moon refining everything in its delicate
light.

The poem then associates to what was historically a physical and realistic part of the *Yishuv*, its textures and colors and its Russified pioneering farmers, and then homes in on an even more concrete event in the poet's life: the story of a cousin who WAS, ("here's something that really was") and who committed suicide, an historical event that punctures the balloon of Zionist idealism. The architecture of this stanza is particularly intriguing, as the poem opens with one of the Amichai markers (disagreeing with a reading of a former poem that is not the intended reading of Rachel's poem anyway), using that as the starting point for a nostalgic recall of the very period from which the Rachel poem speaks. It professes a debunking of the implicit idealism of that period by a description of something that REALLY happened and that was a moment of intimate life more important or more momentous than the building of the nation. Behind all of this poetic development resides Qohelet's message that "what was, will always be."

Thus the poet has drawn an intricate set of associations from an earlier poem which echoes "Qohelet" and carries it forward to this final collection in which he corrects the literal sense of Rachel's poem which itself was never meant to be taken literally. (This is a similar strategy to what we find in "*Adam behayav*," and the short stanza "*Esah eina*" from the poem "*Tiyul*

¹⁷ Y. Amichai, *Shirei Yehuda Amichai*, 3:71.

yehudi" in *Patuah Sagur Patuah*.) Introduced with "aval," a contrarian participle which is an additional marker of Amichai's collection, the poet knows that Rachel herself never meant to say that "these things never happened," (she is, in fact, saying something like "pinch me, I am dreaming"). The poem that begins "*Rahel hameshoreret*" is ostensibly independent of the overall architecture of the book, except that the use of things that were or were not ever in existence calls us to examine Qohelet, and to see the word "aval" in a special light (see above, page 155), and in its aural association with the word "hevel" (which—continuing the exaggerated use of the phrase—winds up in images of smoke).

Once the reader has grasped the centrality of "things that were" (*devarim shehayu*, in one version or another), one realizes how intricately connected are different instances of recalling or describing things of the past. In the fifteenth stanza of the first poem, for example, ritual objects are connected by signifiers such as the ritual *yad*—torah pointer—which reminds the poetic voice of the dismembered "hands" of Holocaust victims who will not again be living: "the remembrance of many *Motza 'ei Shabbat*;" "long hands of steel that point out everything that will not be again;" "orchestras of ghosts"—things that were (in this instance history and the Holocaust) are all recalled by these physical objects, things that now reside in a collection and serve as metonyms in a collection of ritual vessels. Later in the same poem, (stanza 26), the poet recalls his years in the Wurzburg synagogue—that "will not be again." (And ghosts are the subject of an entire chapter-poem in *Patuah Sagur Patuah*: "*Tiyul leili be'emek refaim*.")

Perhaps the most vivid instance of this trope is found in poem 3, stanza 3: "*Ani navi shel mashehaya*" (I am the prophet of what was). This innocent title suggests at first a humorous twist on the popular notion of prophecy as prediction. As the title is more fully explicated in the poem, it becomes less innocent and more attached to the overall theme of "things that were" within the greater work:

אני נביא של מה שהיה אני קורא עבר מתוך כף
 יד של האשה שאני אוהב, אני חזאי של גשמי החורף שיירדו
 אני ממחה של שלג דאשתקד, אני מעלה מאוב
 את הדברים שהיו מעולם, אני מתנבא על תמול שלשום,

I am a prophet of what was, reading the past in the palm
 Of the woman I love, a Forecaster of the rains of winter that have already
 fallen, an expert about the snow of last year,
 Calling up the ghostly past of things that once were.

Now the poet turns to quoting himself, and part of his perspective changes to the intensely personal, the humorous and, as Ziva Shamir has suggested, a preposterous but wonderful conceit: “All the movements and positions of my body have already been ... I am free, my hands are free, but everything (else) has already been.” And a folding chair, whose wisdom the poet has learned, also reflects the repetition of what (once) was—in one instance as innocent as beach chairs being opened up again and again each summer.

The “things that once were” appear in connection with water, an element that Amichai has used frequently in his work. In “*Ha’elegia al hayeled she’avad*,” (The elegy of the lost child), the river’s “Heraclitian” nature, and the path it follows are symbols of changes in essence, but static in nomenclature, or changes in nomenclature but static in essence.¹⁸ Rivers are only one form of water in Qohelet, and Amichai also exploits suggestions about the sea: (Eccl 1:7): “All streams flow into the sea/ but the sea is never full/ to the place from which they flow/ the streams flow back again.” In stanza 11 of the chapter “*Devarim shehayu*” the poet remarks not only on the recurrent nature of water, but on the naming of things:

The flowing waters still wish to teach us
 but we never knew what they taught—yet we learned
 And near the water a bramble and wild birds.
 Nowadays we call them new and precise names
 but they continue to blossom and to fly and to become
 “A nice bird, a fragrant plant.” And what is definite and what is not definite,
 water flows.
 Water flows from the things that never were to the things that will be.

His own son is commanded—(or it is predicted about him, since the imperfect can be represented by both voices) “to change” and yet “not to change”. (Poem 5 of “*Bni mitgaves*”):

אני רוצה להוסיף שני דברות לעשרת הדברות:
 זה הדבר האחד-עשר: לא תשתנה
 זה הדבר השנים-עשר: השתנה, תשתנה.
 גם אבי המת הוסיף לי את אלה.

I want to add two commandments to the ten:
 the eleventh commandment: do not change
 the twelfth commandment: change, you will change.
 My dead father added these for me as well.

¹⁸ Y. Amichai, *Shirei Yehuda Amichai*, 1:366.

Even Amichai's trenchant poetic aside about a human foible turns out to have much to do with other tropes of the larger collection: not only that matters remain the same (and thus recur in their singing or their telling), but that memory of them both remains and yet changes—or is flawed. That may be why "Gods change, but prayers remain the same," which in the overall book relates to the back and forth tendency of "remembering" and "forgetting." It is worth noting that an idea which is interesting enough in its own right gains weight once the larger relevance is realized.

Moving to a touching memory of a particular summer, the poet writes: "This is summer and the *Akhziv* Coast once again once again/ and we are once again once again." The poem then moves into a consideration of responsibility to the fauna of the setting to birds and beasts: "And what responsibility to both/ Like us who must in love establish/ those who never were together or who separated" (Poem 1 on p. 81):

זֶה קִיץ וְחוֹף אַכְזִיב שׁוֹב וְשׁוֹב
וְאִנְחֵנוּ שׁוֹב וְשׁוֹב ... וְאִיזוֹ אַחֲרִיזִית עַל שָׁנִים,
כְּמוֹנוּ, שְׂצָרִיכִים לְקַיֵּם בְּאֵהֶבְתָּם גַּם
אֶת אֱלֹהֵי שְׁלֵעוֹלָם לֹא הָיוּ יַחְדָּו אִו נִפְרְדוּ.

Following this, the poet notes the return of the lovers to *Akhziv*. "Every year at this time we come here, as (it says in) the Tanak: We return to the house where we were together years ago." (This simple act thus implicates both Qohelet's notion of return and attaches to the yearly Torah reading cycle. See stanza 23, page 28.)

Memory, of course, is the theme of the book's final chapter, where almost every question about memory raised throughout the collection is placed within the context of memory for fallen soldiers, and the monuments attendant to their deaths. An unlikely yoking of memory with water joins in stanza 8 of the chapter-poem "*Tiyul yehudi*," where the poet and his family visit the village home of the poet's grandmother: water flows through the small estate, where "what once was, still is." Memory, name change, and water all come together in an innocent family trip. This is a chapter where the Qohelet theme is muted, but emerges in an unusually effective way once one sees the entire collection through the Qohelet lens.

Amichai's contrarian voice joins conveniently with Qohelet's character and concerns. Through Ecclesiastes, Amichai establishes two of the dominant markers of his oeuvre: the quotation of an old idea or biblical trope and then the rejection of it; and (sometimes) disagreeing with the experience of

the text's basic assumptions by way of ironic twists that really do not disagree with the original intent. We add here to the already discussed "A Man in His Life" and "Things That Were in the World," that the importance of Ecclesiastes is enhanced through a wily reference to Balaam, and in a twist where he claims likeness in spite of a more apparent unlikeness.

אני מחפש לי מקום נוף וגבה ויעיל
 כדי להשקיף על חיי לברכה ולקללה.
 אני גם למטה וגם למעלה. אני כמו בלעם על הגבעות
 וגם כמו בני ישראל החונים בעמק.

I seek a place that is comfortable, elevated and advantageous
 in order to look on my life for blessing and for curse.
 I am above and below. I am like Balaam on the heights,
 and like the Children of Israel camping in the valley (stanza 6 of "*Tiyul yisraeli*").

Balaam, of course, was also a contrarian, sent to curse but not able to resist blessing. The Balaam narrative is one of the early instances of the contrarian personality after Abraham's negotiation over Sodom and Gomorrah. The poet ends the unit:

But I am also like a sleepless man
 who is constantly shifting positions in order to sleep,
 but I am also like a lover. But I. But.
Havel havalim, said Qohelet, everything is *hevel* [vanity, absurd].
 But I say "*aval avalim*." Everything is *aval* [but].

And so it is that the poet of *Patuah Sagur Patuah* is able to say that in spite of the song's lyrics: "We sang 'who fired the shot, and who has been felled?' We are really asking: who was loved and who the beloved?" And the song "Who just woke up" (the verb נער, also connected with young person) becomes a song full of longing in the mouths of young sentimental men and women—a lullaby to put the times to sleep (stanza 4). The operative concept is "but" or "however," something usually means one thing, now it means another, (connecting this contrarian quality to the frequent more empirical comments about the names of things). While everything is vanity, absurd (as in *hevel*) everything is really bowels, mourning, and pain. "*Hakol meayim, hakol hevel, hakol evel, hakol ke'ev*" (stanza 4 of the poem "*Yerushalayim yerushalayim lama yerushalayim?*").

6. FINAL COMMENT: A KIND OF CATALOGUE AND REVIEW

Amichai draws on four central themes in the biblical book: circularity (the root סבב), recurrence of events or themes (the construction מה + ש + היה in one form or another), memory (the root זכר), the frustrations of life's absurdities and unfairness (the phrase הכל הכל), and there are three isolated references, two of which come from Eccl 12:13¹⁹ and are particularly important for Qohelet, and one from Eccl 3:19. In many instances, these references are explicit, sometimes even mentioning *Sefer Qohelet*,²⁰ the book of Ecclesiastes, itself. At other times, they are implicit—strengthened in their presence because they relate to the explicit intertextual references that are more definitely established.

6.1 The Root סבב and the Theme of Circularity

The root סבב occurs in Ecclesiastes seven times within five verses, in Eccl 1:6; 2:20; 7:25; 9:14, and 12:5,²¹ and makes frequent appearances throughout *Patuah Sagur Patuah*. The root סבב is central in Ecclesiastes in any event, but Amichai calls particular attention to its suppleness and its significance. Thus, when the root operates adverbially, as it also does in Ecclesiastes, its meaning and significance is magnified, within the text of Ecclesiastes itself as well as within relationship to Amichai's text of *Open Closed Open*. The primary, referenced verse from Qohelet is Eccl 1:6, הולך הרוח שב ועל-סביבותיו הרוח הולך סבב סובב אל-צפון וסובב אל-דרום (Southward blowing, turning northward, ever turning blows the wind; on its rounds the wind returns). In *Patuah Sagur Patuah*, the root is used to reference Qohelet explicitly four times, and implicitly on five occasions.²²

1. Explicitly it appears in lines 13 and 14 on page 6 where Amichai's poetic narrator states: צירה על מסתובבת דלת כמו הוא האל אבל / אחרית בלי ראשית בלי / תסב סביבותיה על, והחוצה פגימה

¹⁹ Eccl 12:13 כִּי הִיא כִּלְיָהּ הָאָדָם (The conclusion of the matter. Everything has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments. For this is the entirety of every man.)

²⁰ "על סביבותיו סובב כמו הרוח / בספר קהלת, אבל כל יום הנה חדש תחת השמש" (on its rounds like the wind / in the book of Ecclesiastes. But every day was new beneath the sun); Y. Amichai, *Patuah Sagur patuah*, pp. 59–60.

²¹ S. Salisbury, ed., *Groves-Wheeler Westminster Hebrew Morphology*, CD-ROM, Release 3.5, (Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster Theological Seminary, 2001), *Accordance 7.4.2* CD-ROM, (OakTree Software, 2007).

²² E. Berk, "Yehuda Amichai's Open Closed Open and Ecclesiastes: An Autumnal Intertextual Relationship" (Rabbinic Thesis, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Los Angeles, 2008).

it turns,” in turn creating an explicit intertextual reference to Eccl 1:6, הוֹלֵךְ אֶל-דָּרוֹם וְסוֹבֵב אֶל-צָפוֹן סוֹבֵב סָבֵב הוֹלֵךְ הָרוּחַ וְעַל-סִבְיֹתָיו שָׁב הָרוּחַ. (Southward blowing, turning northward, ever turning blows the wind; on its rounds the wind returns).

2. The second explicit reference is found on pages 59–60, stanza 2, with the statement, עַל סִבְיֹתָיו סוֹבֵב כְּמוֹ הָרוּחַ / בְּסֶפֶר קֵהֶלֶת. The intertextual relationship continues with the stanza’s second, literal connection to Qohelet, אֲבָל כָּל יוֹם הִיא חֲדָשׁ תַּחַת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ.²³
3. The third explicit reference is on page 75, in stanza 16, שְׁסוֹבֵב סוֹבֵב עַל סִבְיֹתָיו (headstones stand in a closed circle / that turn and turn upon their rounds, a memory of the youths of the *Palmah* / who were killed here). And later, שׁוֹב appears in the line “And they returned to train again.”
4. The fourth explicit reference occurs on pages 82–83, in stanza 5, רוּחַ יָם נוֹשֶׁבֶת דְּרֹךְ הַכְּסָאוֹת הָרֵיקִים, / לֹא עַל סִבְיֹתָיו הָרוּחַ אֲלֵא מִשָּׁם לְשָׁם אַחֵר (A wind comes up from the sea and blows through empty chairs, / not on its rounds, the wind, but rather from one place to another place).

סָבֵב also operates as an implicit reference on five occasions within Amichai’s work.

1. The first implicit reference is on page 20, stanza 1. Here, Amichai’s poetic voice speaks not of Qohelet’s “wind,” but of the “eternal present” which is תָּמִיד סוֹבְבִים וּמְסוֹבְבִים. (always turning and turning). It is much like the wind of Eccl 1:6, and it resembles the language of the biblical verse.
2. The second implicit reference appears on page 46, in stanza 5, stating, הַשְּׁנָה מְסוֹבֶבֶת סָבִיב חַיִּי, / וְחַיִּי מְסוֹבְבִים (The slumber encircles around my life, / and my life goes around and around).
3. סָבֵב appears a third time on page 50, in stanza 12. The poet states: בֵּין דָּלֶת נִפְתָּחַת וְנִסְגְּרָת בַּחֲבָטָה / וּבֵין דָּלֶת מְסוֹבֶבֶת וּמְסוֹבְבָה (between a door that opens and closes with a slam / and between a revolving door that revolves and revolves).
4. The fourth example comes from stanza 7, pages 69–70, “The Upper Galilee and the Lower Galilee,” from the poem “Israeli Travel:

²³ Eccl 1:9, מִהַיּוֹמָה שֶׁעָשָׂה הוּא שֶׁעָשָׂה וְמִהַיּוֹמָה שֶׁעָשָׂה הוּא שֶׁעָשָׂה (Only that shall happen which has happened, only that occurs which has occurred; there is nothing new beneath the sun).

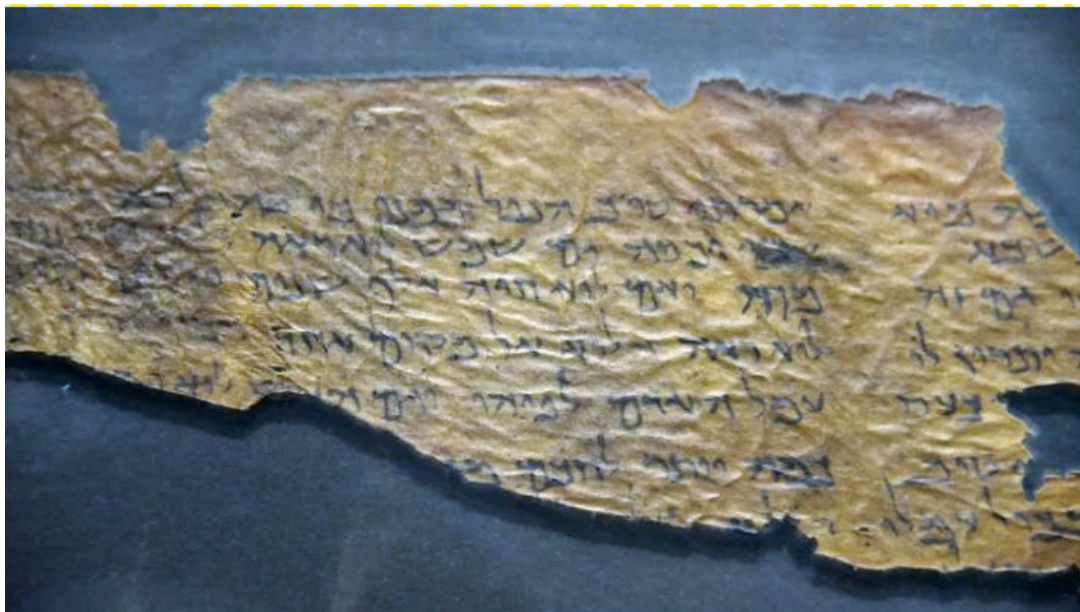
Otherness is Everything Otherness is Love” in which Amichai’s poetic “I” travels throughout Israeli time-space. In this stanza, he states,

בתנועת צנטריפוג הזמן שמסתובב ומסתובב.
ובשרון שורות ברזשים מסביב לפרדסים

in centrifugal movement time that revolved around and around
and in the Sharon, rows of Cypresses encircled the orchards.

5. The fifth and final example appears on pages 142–143, in stanza 6. The poet observes that Jerusalem is like a carousel going around, קרוסלה מסתובבת ומסתובבת ... הסובבים חזב לשלם שוב ... מסתובבת.

What goes around turning to go round again is first a revolving door, second a mule, and third the headstones that stand in a circle. But a greater context for circularity is the almost constant movement: “transport and carry things that are not ours / from one place to another place;” or “the blue highway” which “goes to the future” with those travelers “who go to the past” in a “guiding and crossing over / without a beginning, without an end.” The train tracks carry longings in rail cars. Soldiers are in training to destroy a bridge, then the young men are killed. The headstones are set in a circle near the bridge, and in circular fashion, they “return[ed] to train again” for their next mission: “the resurrection of the dead.” While the stanza overflows with multiple images of movement, the theme of circularity stubbornly remains in place.



The Heart of the Wise Is in the House of Mourning

The most Jewish emotion, Naches, belongs in the language of exile.

Lynne Peskoe-Yang writes:²²

In the small, suburban, Conservative Ashkenazi community where I grew up, Yiddish warmed social interactions like background radiation. Words that had penetrated mainstream American English—*putz*, *klutz*, *chutzpah*, and *kvetch*—glowed in sitcom dialogue and newspaper print, where friends and relatives could point them out proudly, then complain about their embarrassing misuse. The untranslatable phrases would be used for comedic effect, and to occlude bits of gossip. But though my grandparents understood a great deal of the language, their children reached adulthood armed only with what they'd gleaned from private conversations: *English for school*, *Hebrew for synagogue*, they insisted; Yiddish was a distraction, a vice for those who refused to assimilate.

Only Mommy-Anna, my oddly nicknamed great-grandmother, ever finished a sentence in Yiddish in my presence. Perhaps, at the end of a long and linguistically promiscuous life, she could no longer restrict her thoughts to a single language.

The words I grew up knowing were peasant words, unfit for school and work, but used with family and close friends to communicate ideas too intimate for English formality: embarrassing social mishaps, sexual proclivities, casual racism. With my non-Jewish friends, I struggled with their English equivalents; crucial cultural contexts evaporated with every attempt at translation or explanation. *Shonde* could be translated as *shame*, for example, but my grandmother's *a shonde far di goyem* was a vast and terrible malediction; she saved it for the Jewish travesties that put all of us at risk, the Roy Cohns, Bernie Madoffs, and Henry Kissingers, whose betrayals to the causes of Jewish safety, moral integrity, or cultural reputation were unspeakable in any other language. "A shame before the Gentiles" was flattened, sterilized; the results were useless.

Other terms were so rarified, so specific, that they weren't mine until I experienced what they described. To *shep naches* means something like "derive gratification," though it's reserved for pride in another's accomplishment. It can be applied as broadly as its cousin *kvell*; you can see people tweeting *naches* for births, scholarships, graduations, Jewish-adjacent TV shows, good publicity, even a crispy donut. But when I ask my elders to explain the Yiddish word to me, they speak of something more specific: *naches fun kinder*, joy from children; my childless uncle gestures to my infant daughter, explaining that one can *shep naches* from the children of others, if necessary, and when I think of her gummy grin, her chubby, pink hands trying to clap, I start to understand.

After pride in children, strangers on the Internet exult most in *shepn naches* from the existence of the state of Israel. I push back, believing, as I have since adolescence, that Israel suffers for its role as a diasporic fantasy; that an ethnostate has no divine right to its deep commitment to injustice;

²² <https://popula.com/2018/12/06/the-heart-of-the-wise-is-in-the-house-of-mourning/>

that Zion is a feeling, not a place, and that we deserve better than the psychic burden of defending a *shonde* like Netanyahu. But telling Jews to let go of the image of Israel as Zion can be like telling a prisoner to forget the world exists. It is an ancient, inherited coping mechanism, rooted in an abstract hope that sustained us for millennia; once concrete, that hope became a weapon.

But both the word *naches* and the concept it names are bigger, stranger, and more beautiful than their modern incarnations can evoke. What *naches* names could not exist without the Diaspora and the exile from ancient Palestine that set it in motion. It is a prayer to something removed from oneself, whether generationally or geographically; like all Jewish languages after exile, it is made of wandering and alienation, synthesized by creativity and illuminated by survival.

Naches was born in ancient Judea. An elderly apostate who wrote under the pseudonym Qohelet—meaning either “teacher” or “preacher,” known in Greek as *Ecclesiastes*—first recorded the concept in one of the most famously nihilistic poems in the Jewish canon, in which a version of *naches* appears in a kind of existential insult:

Should a man beget one hundred [children] and live many years,
and he will have much throughout the days of his years, but his soul
will not be sated from all the good, neither did he have burial. I said
that the stillborn is better than he.
For he comes in vanity and goes in darkness, and in darkness his
name is covered.
Moreover, he did not see the sun nor did he know [it]; this one has
more gratification than that one.

[Qohelet 6]

In the last verse, *nakhát* is the “gratification” of which the ill-fated man is deprived, the ancient Hebrew ancestor of *naches*. For all his prosperity, that man who “beget one hundred” fails to appreciate his good fortune. As the scholar Étan Levine **argues**, he is therefore a “normative fool”: he has attained the *norms* of happiness, the earthly successes and achievements, without absorbing the happiness itself. Such a man is worse off than “a stillborn child,” for a child who has no worldly experiences cannot covet material pleasures; this child has more *nakhát* than the fool.

Nakhát’s phonological journey to *naches* might be unremarkable to a historical linguist. The distinctive Semitic ending softened to a sibilant and the syllabic emphasis jumped from second to first. But the uvular fricative, a sound that recalls to English speakers a theatrical throat-clearing as in or the Scots-English *loch* and which is a staple of Semitic languages like Hebrew, Arabic, and Aramaic, remains steadfast.

Despite their shared origins in Palestine, Jewish languages other than the reconstructed Hebrew are not Semitic in structure. After the fall of the Second Temple in 70 CE, Hebrew- and Aramaic-speaking Jews fled in every direction in search of safety, into Europe, South Asia, and North Africa. The speakers of proto-Yiddish trudged on winding paths through Central and Western Europe, and the prevailing **scholarship** has the language first developing in medieval Bavaria. Over those first few hundreds of years of interfaith coexistence, Jewish migrants absorbed the surrounding Germanic grammar and infused it with Semitic vocabulary. When the Black Plague's attendant spike in anti-Semitic violence scattered the community in all directions, a majority of Yiddish speakers wound up in the "Pale of Settlement," a desolate, open-air ghetto grudgingly offered by Imperial Russia. There, a nascent Yiddish adopted a slew of Slavic words, though it held on to its Bavarian syntax.

When languages come in contact with one another, "the direction and extent of [linguistic] interference, as well as the kinds of features transferred, are socially determined," as the linguist Shana Poplack **observes**; the way speaker groups coexist—or don't—helps shape the way their languages interact and evolve. Jewish languages are like Diaspora Jews themselves: fluid, isolated, codependent, and always under threat. As Chaim Rabin **puts it**, it's the "special atmosphere" of their usage that defines Jewish languages, the unusual traits of Jewish diglossia, or community-level bilingualism. It was the Germanic-speaking native country of the first forms of Yiddish, for example, that turned *nakhát* into *naches*.

But it was the geographical journey, with its cycles of uncertain peace and certain persecution, that transformed Qohelet's religious imperative into a cultural artifact.

It might seem facile to say that *naches* became a one-word mantra for Jewish survival in a hostile environment, but that doesn't make it untrue. Indeed, if we translate the word that Qohelet used into English—or try to explain the *shep naches* on Twitter—it's too easy to come up with the same sentiment for both, the same flattened and sterilized sense of "derive gratification." For one thing, both *nakhát* and *naches* allude to joy derived from a specific and culturally-determined source: joy that sustains, supports, and distracts from pain. For another, and more importantly, *naches* has evolved enormously over the long centuries of diaspora; it doesn't, and can't, mean the same thing as a *nakhát* in Judea.

Today's *naches* is a Jewish pleasure located somewhere between gratification and pride, between present-day nihilism and the vague and glorious future in a place we tell one another is reserved for us. And the conflation of contentment with pride in one's children makes sense if you think about the image of a free life for one's children which sustained the culture through inconceivable persecution, through two thousand years of fleeing and fighting. The fantasy of that promised future—that was transplanted over time into the physical space of Palestine and Israel—eventually fused into the closest Jewish equivalent to the Christian concept of Heaven. It was something to keep moving towards. For Jews of the Diaspora, our progeny *is* the afterlife.

Naches is faith that one's children will someday have a safe home, a faith that the whole narrative of Jewish survival is greater than the suffering of the present. On the holiest days of the Jewish year, we recite *L'shanah haba'ah b'Yerushalayim*, "Next year in Jerusalem." The invocation of that future in Jerusalem—a place or an idea—was first recorded roughly six hundred years ago.

It's a long timeline if you're planning the coming year; if you're imagining a better life for your descendants, however, it's just about right.

For most Jews, the better life remains elsewhere. Somewhere between half and two-thirds of us live outside of Israel and Palestine, where the anti-Semitism is mounting in ferocity once again. For us, Israel's existence still offers an emergency refuge. The thought of a future in which our children can have *normal* worries is so powerful that it can blind us to what has become of our symbol when it became a nation-state. The modern nation that occupies that land contains real people susceptible to the weaknesses of mortal politics, with the expected waves of racism and authoritarianism. What Israel defends with warfare and political suppression is not—and cannot be—the source of our *naches*. Our children deserve better than survival at such a high moral cost. We can derive joy from their future somewhere else—geographically, metaphysically, spiritually.

The rest of Qohelet is a bitter lament on men's vanity, women's empty-headedness, and the futility of all forms of quotidian pleasure; throughout his verses, the Teacher returns to the ephemeral nature of all things and the unpredictable cruelty of the will of G-d.

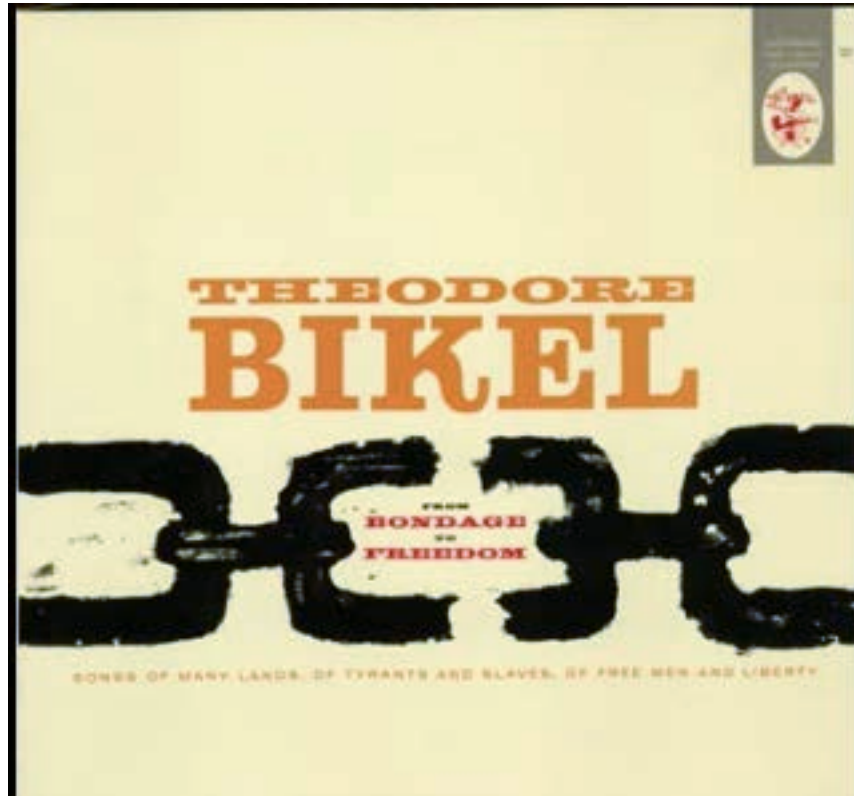
“The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning,”

writes the sage in 7:4; in dwelling on his death and its aftermath (including the fate of his children), the wise man wards off the fear of death that plagues the fool. He imbues his living days with awareness of his mortality. The wise man's thoughts are holy because he knows they cannot last: the experience of his good fortune keeps him anchored in the present.

Qohelet was writing before Jewishness became synonymous with a life of uncertainty, but his insistence that all pleasure turns to ashes remains a powerful force in Jewish thought. No matter the circumstances of the present, the future is untouchable.

Since the Holocaust, there's been a (possibly apocryphal) story about a group of Jewish prisoners in Lublin, a city in Poland where no more than a few hundred Jews survived from a prewar population of 42,000. In the story, the prisoners are taken to a field by Nazis where they're ordered to sing and dance for their captors' amusement. One weak voice intones the first line of a Yiddish folk song, Lomr zich iberbetn (“Let's get along”), but the refrain doesn't catch on, or is silenced. Then another voice offers a different set of lyrics, igniting a defiant chorus: Mir veln zey iberlebn. “We shall outlive them.”

<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1048334151994210>



“We Shall Overcome” sung in Yiddish

Jordan Kutzik writes:²³

While the wave of demonstrations sweeping the world in the wake of George Floyd’s murder will undoubtedly inspire a new generation of protest music, it has also led many to revisit older songs. Some feel that the anthem most associated with the Civil Rights Movement, “We Shall Overcome,” is too passive for our moment. Others see in it a source of strength. Bernice King, daughter of Martin Luther King Jr., for instance, wrote on Facebook last month that the song’s refrain is neither passive nor naïve but a “conscious commitment to courageous work.”

That “commitment to courage” is, doubly present, I feel, in its recent Yiddish adaptation, which combines the original with lyrics spontaneously created during a mass execution in the opening days of the Holocaust.

In the fall of 1939 Nazi officers rounded up a group of Hasidic men in Lublin and ordered them at gunpoint to sing. The group began singing the Yiddish folksong “*Lomir Zikh Iberbetn*” (Let’s Make Up), but soon one man changed the words to “*Mir veln zey iberlebn, avinu shebashaymim*” (We will outlive them, our father in heaven!). What started as an individual’s small act of resistance

²³ <https://forward.com/yiddish/448636/we-shall-overcome-sung-in-yiddish/>

spread, and soon dozens of men took up the song. Even when the Germans attacked them with whips and clubs the song still resounded until a volley of gunfire was heard.

This act of spiritual resistance was not particularly well known until activist Jenny Romaine adopted the words “*mir veln zey iberlebn*” as a slogan for political protests in New York in the wake of President Trump’s election. The Klezmer group “Tsibele” subsequently popularized it as a song.

Two summers ago, at the Jewish Culture Festival in Krakow, Yiddish folksinger Michael Alpert, alongside trumpet player and composer Frank London, clarinetist David Krakuer, and a group of local musicians, performed a stirring trilingual Yiddish, Polish, and English rendition of “We Shall Overcome.”

Instead of translating the English words literally, Alpert adapted the refrain those doomed men had sung in Lublin some 78 years earlier as his version’s new Yiddish chorus. The resulting Yiddish song retains the spirit of the original but takes a less passive tone, a “commitment to courage” as Beatrice King put it, that is more directly stated than in the original.

The lyrics translate to:

**We’re going to outlive them
We’re going to outlive them
We shall fight together till the end
I feel in my heart that there will be justice in my country
Let’s fight till the end.**

While the recent translation of “We Shall Overcome” is a moving addition to the Yiddish protest cannon, it is not the only Yiddish song associated with the American Civil Rights movement.

In 1965 folksinger and Broadway star Theodore Bikel performed for Martin Luther King and several hundred demonstrators in Selma, Alabama. The song he chose to sing for them was the Yiddish worker’s anthem “*Un Du Akerst*” (And You Plow).

Although written by the Yiddishist political theorist and philosopher Chaim Zhitlovsky, it has a much longer history of transcultural adaptation. It was closely based on a poem by the German revolutionary Georges Herwegh, which was in turn based on a poem by Percy Shelley.

According to Bikel, the song, performed bilingually, was a hit with King and his fellow marchers.

<https://forward.com/yiddish/448636/we-shall-overcome-sung-in-yiddish/>