

# Death and the "Life Review" in Halakhah

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**ABSTRACT:** Coping with old age involves resolving the task of "integrity versus despair," which demands a nondefensive confrontation with the inevitability of death. Halakhah (Jewish ethics) also considered this task critical in later years of life, spoke of death's inevitability, and attempted to discourage denial of death. The Jewish approach seems compatible with Butler's concept of "life review" as a reconciliation with death and a reintegration of one's identity that occurs throughout later years. While the Eriksonian goal is confronting old age with a certain capacity for "wisdom," the rabbis maintained that such wisdom must culminate in the creative act of repentance.

Some experimental data suggest that changes in developmental progression in the later years of life may not be timed wholly by chronological age, but rather are set in motion or timed by *the nearness of the individual to death*.<sup>1</sup> The emphasis in this view is not a momentary reflection just prior to the cessation of life, nor something akin to confession, but a process or phase, perhaps two or three decades long, during which time the imminence of death and its relation to current living are major psychological themes. Preparing for death, then, becomes the major task of this developmental phase.

This concept has numerous obvious implications for understanding the phenomenon of aging and the successful resolution of the tasks of aging. Some view Erik Erikson's conceptualization of "integrity *versus* despair,"<sup>2</sup> the last of his eight epigenetic life stages, as revolving around the theme of a *future* event—death—as a salient marker, replacing, to some degree, the importance of the number of years since birth as the momentum in the social clock. This notion is evident in an empirically observable shift in aged persons' time perception from "time lived" to "time left to live."<sup>3</sup> One may hypothesize that this shift is triggered by the realization of impending death.

Judaism, as a religion that addresses itself to the mundane, physical, and psychical as well as spiritual needs of humankind, has in numerous applications been shown to be indigenously therapeutic and philosophically compatible with the general goals of psychology and psychiatry.<sup>4</sup> Though its ultimate world view is essentially religious rather than psychological, rabbinic anticipations of modern psychological theory and practice are of considerable

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historical, heuristic, and sometimes clinical value. With specific regard to the study of aging, Spector has carefully delineated numerous midrashic and Talmudic anticipations of what we consider contemporary understandings of the aged and the aging process in both the individual and social context.<sup>5</sup> This paper is more circumscribed. I will attempt a comparison of the psychological correlates of the ineluctable confrontation with death (as a consequence of aging or natural degeneration) and the theory of "life review" with certain analogous halakhic notions about the existential import of death.

The intuitive awareness that death, as the ultimate human limitation, can also serve in an energizing or motivating capacity has been perceived by thinkers perhaps since the emergence of self-consciousness in humankind.<sup>6</sup> If there is an optimistic aspect to Freud's notion of Thanatos (the death instinct) and its fatalistic mechanism, the repetition compulsion, it is that the species universally attempts to escape it, suppress it, deny its potency. From the perspective of striving man, death is an inconvenience and an anxiety-provoking climax which, if it cannot be physically conquered, can be spiritually and psychologically conquered by the belief in life after death and by preparation for it during life. Thus, one could view death as a goad to productive and efficient living. This idea is clearly accepted by the rabbinic world view and is expressed in the following midrash: "In the Torah of Rabbi Meir it was written, 'And behold it was *very good*'—and behold, *death* is very good."<sup>7</sup> In other words, death is "good" because it can be approached as a part of the cycle of eternity, an implement for change and rebirth, an incentive for productivity.<sup>8</sup>

Existentialism has given eloquent expression to so-called authentic approaches to death. In the existential view, death provides ultimate freedom not in the moment of surrender to natural forces but rather in that "one finds meaning in life when one is committed to something for which one is willing to accept death."<sup>9</sup>

The confronting of death gives the most positive reality to life itself. It makes the individual existence real, absolute and concrete. For death as an irrelative potentiality singles man out, and, as it were, individualizes him to make him understand the potentiality of being in others . . . when he realizes the inescapable nature of his own death. Death is, in other words, the one fact of my life which is not relative but absolute, and my awareness of this gives my existence and what I do each hour an absolute quality.<sup>10</sup>

Man is continuously aware of and anticipates another aspect of death: that he can become *nothing*, that he can lose himself and his world.<sup>11</sup> Death is the threat of nonbeing. The reverse is also true: meaninglessness and inauthentic being during a lifetime are always "little deaths," and, as the rabbis put it, "There is no man who does not taste death every day."<sup>12</sup> Concomitant with the creative impetus that can be stimulated by confrontation with death, then, is the despair triggered by the recognition at any point in life that it is too late to change one's life in major ways. For Erikson, the successful resolution of the integrity-despair crisis involves looking back and addressing the questions of

the meaningfulness of one's life, the intersection of one's life with history, and the degree to which one's life was a worthwhile venture.<sup>13</sup> An integrity crisis develops when such a "life review" reveals lacunae, when the individual cannot accept death in some meaningful, nondefensive manner, when the anticipation of death conjures only loss, separation, and grief rather than fulfillment, accomplishment, and love, when the imminence of death causes regression to the illusory safety of an infantile world rather than confrontation with death and resolution of life's demands within the context of the limits it imposes.

Halakhah recognized the inevitability of death and the impossibility of maintaining a wholesome existence if this inevitability is not met with integrity rather than despair or denial. The very fact that midrashic and talmudic writings contain so many references to death and dying is itself some indication of the confrontation with, rather than suppression of, the phenomenon. "When Rabbi Yohanan finished learning the book of Job he said, 'The destiny of man is to die, of animals to be slaughtered—all are destined for death.'"<sup>14</sup> "Each person should place a stake or a post in the cemetery and thereby remind himself that someday he shall be buried there."<sup>15</sup> Everyone realizes—but perhaps below the level of consciousness—that all must die, for even the holiest of men succumbed to this fate.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, for those who attempt to place death out of their perspective by seeking the security of like-minded fellows, the Talmud warns, "When a brother dies, all should worry; when a colleague dies, the entire group should worry."<sup>17</sup> It is obvious that from the halakhic viewpoint the denial of death is a monumental inauthenticity—only the "evil person fears not death."<sup>18</sup>

The rabbis recognized the source of despair when anticipating death. "A man cannot say on the day of his death [to the angel of death], 'I wish to arrange my affairs before I die.'"<sup>19</sup> That is, the resolution of ego integrity versus despair cannot be the result of an isolated reflection, but rather evolves from a consuming project which, though based on the inevitability of death, must be undertaken well in advance of it. At one level, this project begins in late adulthood and is provoked by changing perspectives. "As a man reaches the stage of adulthood [*"perek avotav,"* literally, the age of his fathers], he should anticipate [*"yida'ag,"* literally, be anxious about] death for five years before and for five years afterward."<sup>20</sup> At the optimal level, the project occupies a lifetime—"When Reb Bunim lay dying his wife burst into tears. He said, 'What are you crying for? My whole life was only that I might learn how to die.'"<sup>21</sup> Resolution of the "death issue," in other words, is relevant long before death occurs.

Simone de Beauvoir expresses the following view, "A consequence of biological decay is the impossibility of surpassing oneself and of becoming passionately concerned with anything; it kills all projects, and it is by this expedient that it renders death acceptable."<sup>22</sup> The implication is that there is a functional or adaptational aspect to the reduction in ego energy (broadly construed) as death nears—a preparatory orientation of nonresistance. However, does this exhaust the manner in which old age and death confront each

other? Judaism asks that old age and death be stamped with the presence of the divine just as is life—"Cast me not off in the time of old age; forsake me not when my strength fails."<sup>23</sup> " 'And watch yourself, [this teaches] watch your soul during the time of death,'"<sup>24</sup> or make sure that the process of living a creative, God-oriented life continues up to the moment of death. In one talmudic view, death is less significant as an ultimate reduction of physiological or psychical energy but rather the contrary: a meaningless and stagnant existence causes death—"Man only dies because of boredom (*mitokh ha-batalah*)."<sup>25</sup>

Erikson's view is that achieving ego integrity involves wisdom, "accumulated knowledge, mature judgment, and inclusive understanding."<sup>26</sup> This "wisdom" is actually the embodiment of all previous Eriksonian stages and is recapitulatory in nature.<sup>27</sup> It involves a consideration of so-called ultimate concerns about transcending the limitations of one's identity. All this depicts a psychological task that is far from passive and that involves an expenditure of ego energy far in excess of the amount spent on some other psychological projects.

Butler coined the term *life review* to denote a "naturally occurring, universal mental process . . . prompted by the realization of approaching dissolution and death, and the inability to maintain one's sense of personal invulnerability."<sup>28</sup> *Life review* potentially proceeds toward personality reorganization, including the achievement of such characteristics as wisdom and serenity. It is thus a potential force toward greater self-awareness and, ultimately, self-transcendence. It may also lead to personality disorganization, depression, guilt, and obsessional rumination about the past. Butler's conceptualization emphasizes the adaptational aspects of reminiscence in the aged—in a manner similar to Erikson's stage of ego integrity—and can be further understood as a kind of anticipatory socialization for the final period of life.<sup>29</sup> The key is that some period of work or reflection on themes related to death is either an innate or socially reinforced planning stage (or "organizer") in later years.

Halakhah is aware of the unpredictability of death—"Man, today he *is*; tomorrow he *is not*"<sup>30</sup>—and the tendency to be unprepared for or deny outright its inevitability. The effects of denial and the benefits of confronting death are hinted at in the following talmudic admonition. "If the elders tell you 'Destroy!' and the youths tell you 'Build!'—you should destroy rather than build, for the destruction of elders is actually building and the building of youths is actually destruction."<sup>31</sup> This statement should be viewed typologically; that is, descriptive of two classes or orientations toward the realities of old age, death, and ego integrity. "Youths" seek to build, to protect themselves from the fears of death and individuality through a facade of material extensions of the self, psychological barriers or defenses, and a "wall" of pseudorelationships. Such building is tantamount to denial and leads to fragmentation of the self, a tendency for distortion, to disunity between self and cosmos. This "building" is destructive. "Elders," on the other hand, having perhaps spent much of their lives building barriers and becoming lost in anomie, seek at last to wean themselves from such defenses, to confront

death without unrealistic distortion, to accept human loneliness at a time when its meaning is so important. This confrontation is actually an attempt to reunify the soul, a preparation for an ultimate oneness. Such "destruction" is deemed by the rabbis truly creative.

Judaism also believed that self-transcendence rather than self-actualization alone circumscribes authentic human existence. Consider, for example, "Reflect upon three things and do not come to sin: from whence you come [two small cells], to where you are going [worms and decay], and before Whom you are destined to give an account."<sup>32</sup> Such awarenesses received additional attention in the context of the anticipation of death. "Do not trust yourself until the day of your death."<sup>33</sup> "The work is not for you to finish, but neither are you free to disinvolve yourself from it."<sup>34</sup> "Said Rabbi Tarfon, 'The day is short and the work is great; the workers are lazy . . . and the Master anticipates!'"<sup>35</sup> These may rightly be viewed as inducements against despair.

Perhaps more relevant is the talmudic categorization of life stages, pairing approximate age groups with certain characteristics. "[T]he forty-year-old [achieves the quality of] understanding; the fifty-year-old, to [give] counsel; the sixty-year-old, sagacity;\* the seventy-year-old, venerability."<sup>37</sup> At first glance, one already senses an awareness that later years involve intellectual and perhaps judgmental maturity, the "wisdom" so vital for the achievement of Eriksonian ego integrity. This classificatory scheme can be given an even deeper interpretation that is similar to the earlier cited existential view. "Rabbi Jonah says that the sages list these various stages of old age in order to make a person aware that he need bestir himself to repentance when he sees that he is grown old and approaching his end, and realizes that his days will not stretch on indefinitely. Otherwise, he might be one of those of whom Scripture says, 'Hoary age has also cast its mark and he knows not.'"<sup>38</sup> The talmudic scheme contains the additional insight that it is appropriate for man to confront death as the days wane rather than crash into old age armed with only defensive denials of the potency of death. This, too, is the sense of the psalmist's plea not to be "cast off" into old age without having met the necessary preparatory tasks.

Halakhah is aware that a confrontation with death is inevitable in older years. Does it suggest a possible alternative to despair in the face of this eventuality? I suggest that the rabbis forwarded an alternative in the following: "Said Rabbi Eliezer, 'Return to God one day prior to the day of your death.' But does a man know the day of his death? [Rabbi Eliezer's statement meant] Let a man repent today lest he die tomorrow and, thus, all his days will be spent in repentance."<sup>39</sup> Repentance signifies for halakhic Judaism the paragon of creativity and spiritual heroism. Whether an individual has sinned or never sinned, repentance is the form of all productive change, social and psychological modification, intrapersonal and interpersonal growth.<sup>40</sup> With this in mind, Rabbi Eliezer can be seen as instructing that it is not the *future* moment of death but the *present* moment of anticipation that is critically

\*The term here is *zikhah*, which the Talmud elsewhere renders into *zeh she-kanah hakhamah*, "he who has acquired wisdom."<sup>36</sup>

relevant. Moreover, the ability to temper the present, be it in youth or early or middle adulthood, with the reality of the inevitable is the optimal way to fulfill the psychological task of integrity versus despair. For Erikson, wisdom is the embodiment of all previous epigenetic psychosocial tasks. For the rabbis, wisdom must culminate in repentance. Rabbi Eliezer understands repentance and authentic existence as a continuous recapitulation of action and thought, and the successful encounter with death as a continuous study and acceptance of its constructive and destructive aspects. This common theme of foresight and recapitulation receives inspired expression in the following midrashic comment: "Man is born with tumult [*ba-kol*] and leaves the world in tumult; he is born crying and he dies crying; he is born with anxiety [*anahah*] and dies in anxiety."<sup>41</sup> To be sure, nature duplicates itself; there is evidence for a repetition compulsion throughout the phyla and within the stages of life. Yet despite the duplication, man's introduction and departure from the world remain mysteries, partially involuntary events, ultimate sources of trauma and anxiety.

I have briefly examined certain rabbinic statements that illustrate an understanding of the need for a preparatory confrontation with death and the usefulness of a life review project. Death is seen as bearing directly upon developmental progression in later life. This is emphasized particularly in the instruction of Rabbi Eliezer. *Death, in fact, actually becomes less absolute insofar as its ultimate meanings are determined during life.* "What should man do in order that he live? He should kill himself"—that is, be prepared to sacrifice all for that which he regards as ultimate and beyond death. "What should man do in order that he die? Make himself live"—that is, to preoccupy oneself with the transitional and indulge in the temporal is truly not life!<sup>42</sup> Rabbi Yizhak of Vorki said, "In order to really live, man must give himself to death. But when he has done so, he discovers that he is not to die—but to live."<sup>43</sup>

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11. *Ibid.*, and Becker, *op. cit.*
12. Zohar Gen. 184 and see Eccl. R. 12. This actually echoes the Talmudic view that "sleep is one-sixtieth of death"—that is, death and sleep are related phenomena.
13. Erikson, *op. cit.*
14. *Ber.* 17a; see also Ruth R. 2, "All will die and all are destined for death."
15. Lev. R. 5:5.
16. *Tanhuma Va-yehi*, 1.
17. *Shab.* 105-b-106a. An interesting *halakhah* in this regard is found in *Sh. A.*, Y.D. 335:2. The *Shulhan Arukh* codifies that it is incumbent to visit the sick, but Isserles advises not to visit one's personal enemy lest it be thought by others that he is secretly enjoying his enemy's trouble. However, one can be advised to attend an enemy's funeral, even carry his coffin, since no man can maintain his enmity when confronting mankind's common and inescapable fate (see *Rama* and *SHaKH* citing *BaH*).
18. *Shab.* 31b; similar to "Who is an indisputable fool? Who sees the death of his friend or enemy, but fears not that *he* may die!" R. Judah Alhaziri, *Tahkimoni* (p. 297). See also #17 above.
19. Eccl. R. 8:11; Deut. R. 9:3. See also Eccl. R. 7:9 to Eccl. 7:2.
20. Gen. R. 65.
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32. *Avot* 2:1, 3:1. See also Frankl, V., "Beyond Self-Actualization and Self-Expression," *J. Existential Psychiatry*, 1960, 1, 5-20.
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39. *Shab.* 153a.
40. See Soloveitchik, J.B., *Al Ha-Teshuvah*. Jerusalem, 1974, and also Spero, M.H., "Anxiety and Religious Growth: The Talmudic Perspective," *J. Religion and Health*, 1976, 16, 52-57.
41. Eccl. R. 5.
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