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The Longing That Dares Not Speak Its Name

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Near the end of his remarkably wide-ranging, humane, and beautifully written book, Hillel Halkin turns away from the complex and variegated traditional Jewish view of death, mourning, and the afterlife to the views of all but the most Orthodox of contemporary Jews. In a word: not my concern. Despite having access to perhaps the most thoroughly worked-out understanding of the afterlife, most especially in its relation to our moral worth as earned in this world, Halkin's thoughtful and extremely representative contemporary Jews show no interest in this "ray of hope" (207). The afterlife, they tell him, plays "no role in [their] religion" (202). The whole question of eternity and its relation to our mortality, that is, "didn't much matter to anyone" Halkin interviewed. Without evincing the slightest grandstanding or morbidity or thoughtless deference to what his tradition has told him, however, Halkin suggests it *does* matter to him—and, I suspect, will to many of his readers. The unstated question that, to no small extent, lies at the bottom of his book, then, is this: Have contemporary, enlightened Jews simply shed a primitive belief that they have outgrown (like a butterfly emerging from its pupa) or have they somehow been distracted from confronting death and its full meaning?

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The stated intention of Halkin's book is to examine the evolution of the Jewish view of death, from its biblical origins as something that is "for all intents and purposes final" to the various (sometimes tension-laden) aspects of death's "superstructure," namely, the afterlife—or various kinds of possible afterlives—that Jews and non-Jews might hope or fear to experience (202). (Halkin does not abide by the Orthodox view that every aspect of the afterlife discovered in postbiblical, chiefly Talmudic, sources was present in the form of "hints" and implications of the original biblical text. As do so many others, he places a great burden on the fact that there is no explicit mention of an afterlife in the Bible until the book of Daniel.) Rather than simply recount, more or less chronologically, the additions and accretions (and even revisions) to the initial biblical account—which he indeed does, in wide-ranging, careful, and generally sympathetic fashion—Halkin makes an effort to sprinkle throughout his story an *interpretation* of the Talmudic, Mishnaic, and other accounts of various features of the afterlife. He is particularly sensitive to the human needs—primordial, psychological, and particularly moral—that can be met (and indeed seem to be met only) in the fully developed traditional Jewish view of the afterlife.

In his brief canvassing of several ancient (non-Jewish) accounts of death and the afterlife, Halkin suggests that a belief in the afterlife was more or less universal—implicitly rejecting Nietzsche's claim that "priests" of various stripes concocted and imposed on humanity the notion of the afterlife (or the "after-worldly"). In its infancy, the afterlife was routinely understood as a somewhat mysterious but rather "grim" place (11). (Indeed: despite glancing at Homer's depiction of Hades in the *Odyssey*, Halkin fails to report Achilles's fierce condemnation of that afterlife, filled as it is with "senseless" shades—which, had he known then what he knows now, would certainly have made him cling to life under even the most unvirtuous and demeaning circumstances.) Halkin focuses here on the most primitive Jewish concept of the afterlife, She'ol. It seems like nothing so much as the "dreamless sleep" that Socrates conjures in Plato's *Apology*. For, as Halkin comments, She'ol was "not a place of reward and punishment; all its inhabitants are treated equally" (15). Or rather, it was a place of punishment simply, death itself being the original punishment (for Adam and Eve's sin in Eden: 16).

The failure of death thus understood to discriminate between good and evil individuals proved intolerable. Halkin seems to present morality itself as the first innovation that had to be created in the face of death: so menacing was the thought of a simple expiration of life, humans could not but wish for

some form of extension of life. And, given its character as manifestly contravening the somber necessity of death's apparent finality, the afterlife would have to be seen as something *deserved*, something to be earned somehow. The manner of earning it, of course, proved to be morality, understood as fulfilling God's will in light of the fact that "all His ways are just" (161, quoting Deut. 32:4).

Halkin is at his most fascinating in sketching the evolution of the meaning of the afterlife as a consequence of our morality. For there is a grave problem connected with the notion of rewarding morality. If an act is undertaken for a (personal) reward—and not for its own sake or, more particularly, for the sake of God—then it is hard to see how it can still be considered a moral act. Any action undertaken to secure for myself a portion in the world to come can be considered only an ante of sorts, a price to be paid for a much-desired outcome. Judaism's initial response is to dissociate my reward from me personally. As Halkin notes, while the demand that the Commandments be observed is placed on every Jewish individual (the singular "you" being employed throughout the relevant places in Deuteronomy), the "consequences" or "benefits" will be enjoyed only "in the aggregate" (Deuteronomy shifting to the plural "you" for those) (25). I behave morally, that is, so that my progeny—be it my flesh and blood or the Jewish people altogether—may prosper.

The purity of such self-sacrifice, however, proved an insufficient compensation: "it wasn't enough" (26). (It may not even have been quite so pure: the continuation of my people is the essential ground for *me* being remembered.) As the "old homogeneous, cohesive Israelite society" gave way to the new, more urban, more dispersed, and more anonymous "Jewish" one, it became harder and harder to envision, with any degree of certainty, that one "would have anything in common with [one's] own progeny" (28). That posthumous reward for my good deeds having been rendered uncertain, I would now have to seek their effects "in the course of my own life" (29). The afterlife, then, seemed to require additional elaboration as individualism—a concern with one's "own separate fate"—emerged (56). And yet, as Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) points out—paraphrasing loosely—bad things happen to good people no less than to bad. In words almost identical to those used by Achilles when justifying his temporary withdrawal from the Trojan War, Solomon notes "one end awaits them all" (Eccles. 3:16–19; cf. *Iliad* 9.318–19). Halkin identifies three possible ways forward: reincarnation (the belief held by the atypical Philo), bodily resurrection in this world, or an afterlife in which one receives "his just deserts" (31–33).

Though all three play a role in classical Judaism, Halkin focuses chiefly on the ways in which the dominant alternative—the afterlife—was conceived (the last group to have been "afterlife skeptics" seem to have been the Sadducees who, Halkin observes, "could afford to be" insofar as they were wealthy and powerful and hence unique in their capacity to enjoy this world: 41). What effect did the afterlife have on this life? Unlike certain "mystical" religions, Judaism did not preach bodily abstinence. Rather, the soul's task was to elevate—to sanctify—the body (whose sole task often seemed to be to drag the soul down). As a result, there was a sustained dispute over whether the righteous would enjoy the afterlife in some kind of embodied state.

Those who argued that the soul retained a body in the world to come were confronted with a series of practical questions, such as "which of the many ages that I have been in this world will I be in the next one?" (61). On the other hand, if the soul continues to exist without the body, how will it feel or perceive (62)? Halkin turns to Rav's contemporary Plotinus to illustrate the Neoplatonist view—rejected by Rav—of the afterlife. (Neoplatonism, for our purposes, consists of treating various Socratic hypotheses about the afterlife presented in the *Phaedo* as though they were asserted truths.) Under this assumption, the afterlife consists of "pure intellection" (64). But Rav (the chief compiler of the Talmud) rejects both the projection of embodied souls into the afterlife and the "philosophical" alternative of pure intellection. The souls in paradise, according to the final Talmudic position, simply bathe in God's light.

Halkin here notes the fundamental connection between morality and theology: souls admitted to paradise have "earned their place there by living virtuously" (66). Here too a question arises. For if this is so, why should there be a hell? Would not exclusion from paradise itself constitute a "natural" punishment? To make sense of this, Halkin turns to the Talmudic Tractate Rosh Hashanah. Not only does this tractate contain the most extensive treatment of hell in rabbinic literature, it may (in its connection to the holiday of Rosh Hashanah) unlock the mystery of its function or purpose (70). On that Day of Judgment, Jews are to consider the three relevant classes of people: the wholly righteous, the wholly sinful, and the "intermediate." While the wholly sinful (including apostates and skeptics) descend to Gehenna (hell) and remain there forever, the intermediate face one of three fates: go there, quake for a year, then ascend (to paradise); go there and, after their bodies disappear (in twelve months), their souls are "burned" and scattered (71); or, as the merciful Hillel suggests, those whose good deeds balance their evil

ones will be spared Gehenna altogether, while only those whose good deeds are outweighed by their evil ones descend and have their souls scattered. That is, while a ray of hope is held out to those who led "intermediate" lives on earth, the truly sinful will be punished eternally (though not, apparently, on the Sabbath: 76). Halkin might have pressed his original question here: does not the insistence that some punishment exists beyond the mere failure to enjoy a portion of the world to come reflect a certain *doubt* on the part of the rabbis that bathing in God's divine light for eternity is all that need be hoped for? Does it not imply a suspicion that the wicked *got away* with something here? And does not the relative quiet of the whole discussion of hell indicate a certain embarrassment at the moral confusion its very existence might thus seem to entail?

In perhaps the most important section of the book, Halkin contrasts the philosophic and the antiphilosophic attitudes that have manifested themselves in Judaism. He first considers Maimonides's "more radical approach," which rejects "personal immortality" for all but perhaps those who have attained "knowledge" (94–96). This brief but penetrating discussion contains the only misreading of a source that I noted in the work. Despite noting that Maimonides argues "When the intellect comprehends a thing, [it is] *not* a thing distinct from the thing comprehended," Halkin then (in the good company of many readers of the *Guide*) draws the mistaken inference that Maimonides (like Plato) held that there *were* distinct "Ideas" that alone could be comprehended by the intellect (95, quoting *Guide*, 1.48). But to understand what a thing is, for Maimonides, means understanding something of the character that inheres within or defines it, not having recourse to some "metaphysical" realm where the separate, disembodied "Ideas" abide. Wisdom, therefore, can be attained in this world and need not be deferred to the world to come (as part of its reward). Still, Halkin rightly concludes that, for Maimonides, "the philosophically lived life. . . is its own recompense" just as the "life lived in pursuit of material goods and pleasures. . . is its own retribution" (96).

It was the austere and "unrewarding" nature of Maimonides's philosophical approach, Halkin suggests, that led to (greater interest in) the Zohar's more mystical approach, which ultimately constitutes a "rebellion against philosophy" (102). Halkin underplays the importance of his own argument here. For he here demonstrates that Jewish hostility to philosophy ultimately stems not (as the rabbis from Talmudic times on have suggested) from its character as "*epikourses*" (the hedonism that Maimonides also rejects) but from its failure to satisfy the longing for eternal life (at least for the nonphilosophers).

Accordingly, the Zohar posits that the soul preexists this life and so can exist after it parts with the body (103). This, we might note, marks a certain return of Neoplatonism to Judaism.

The vast majority of the features of the afterlife are presented as being designed to answer the questions "How can one be *zocha* (worthy) of a good 'portion' of the afterlife?" and "In what might a 'good portion' consist?" Yet Halkin suggests, at the very end of his ruminations, that a response to a certain animal-like cry against the utter oblivion that death seems to decree on us all may be the most fundamental human need of all. Rather than place this cry in the mouth of some nobody (who might have good reason to fear the afterlife and thus be open to the charge of special pleading), the Jewish tradition (as Halkin points out) places this most pathetic cry (of "let me live at any cost") in the mouth of none other than Moses, surely the most morally worthy (in spite and because of his also being the most humble) of men. Halkin offers a detailed discussion of the famous Midrash (Yalkut Shi'moni on Deut. 31) recounting Moses's extended bargaining with God so that he might not die before entering the Promised Land (or, indeed, that he might not die at all). Moses, we are told, first prayed repeatedly and so deftly and movingly that God had to close the gates of heaven, lest the divine plan be overturned. Moses then began "arguing" with God (210). Appealing to the biblical injunction not to deny workers their due wages, Moses suggests he has earned, through his unstinting leadership of the Israelites for forty years, the chance to see the Promised Land. Silently accepting Moses's premise (that leading the Israelites was a sacrifice and not a goodly gift proffered by God), God suggests He can hardly reward Moses in the hereafter if He rewards him (to such an extent? at all?) now. Yet Moses would prefer life at almost any cost to the hereafter, even when guaranteed by God. At this point, Moses offers a series of ever more degrading transformations he would be willing to undergo in order to stay alive: he would become a beast of the field or a bird that flitters about. (This part of the argument seems to agree with the classical Jewish teaching that "we" are our "souls," our bodies being merely temporary clothing in this life.) This request denied, Moses (seemingly descending one more rung) asks that his *body* ("this face," "these legs," "these arms") be rewarded and not be made "to lick the dust." This request too being denied, Moses responds to God's decree that the time for Joshua's leadership has come with the plaintive offer that he become Joshua's student. But just as a transformation into a "beast" or a "bird" would render Moses no longer Moses (and thus incapable of gaining the reward for which he had sacrificed), so too would unlearning his profound wisdom (necessary to become Joshua's

student) render him no longer Moses. And God, perhaps not a little cruelly, allows Moses to see this. He takes Moses up on his final offer, and sends him to learn from Joshua. But Moses, to his great dismay, cannot understand. Or rather, he cannot understand *Joshua's* lessons. God's lesson, with what seems to be crushing weight and finality, is learned: Moses offers his life to God.

But, in fact, the lesson is still not learned! One after the other, Moses frightens off the various angels (including ultimately the angel of death) sent by God to end his life and bring him to God's side. In the end, God Himself must descend from heaven and convince Moses that he must now die. "None of Judaism's consolations," Halkin observes, "mean a thing to him" (214). Yet, while this is obviously so in one sense, is not something about Judaism's relative downplaying of the afterlife integral to its far more favorable view of (this worldly) life than most any other religion?

Of all the distinctions Halkin draws between the Jewish view of death and those of other cultures, perhaps none is as striking and important as the Jewish insistence on not "conceding to death too much" (22). That is, Jews are taught always to love life and to insure that their response to death—and view of the afterlife—never tempts them to "mortify the flesh" or even to welcome suicide (as did many early Christians and some contemporary Muslims) as a quicker and surer route to paradise. Halkin quotes Maimonides's statement (from his Laws of Mourning) that "a person should not go to too great lengths over his dead" (133), a sentiment that would not be out of place in Plato's "city in speech" in the *Republic*. Perhaps this is connected to the fact that, with regard to the afterlife, "the God of Israel was more merciful than the God of the Christians" (115). For He seems to permit post-deathbed conversions, or rather, permits the additional year of suffering in Gehenna as sufficient atonement prior to being allowed after all into the world to come. (Halkin also discusses the postbiblical innovation of saying Kaddish, the prayer for the dead, whose faithful recital by the dead's offspring can have a beneficial impact on the soul of the dead person. In particular, our tears can ensure that the dead's soul is judged by mercy and not strict justice: 157). Life itself, with all its trials, is good for Jews, for it is only there that one can become worthy of eternal life, by meeting and overcoming those very trials. And it is only through worthiness, it seems, that one can earn the eternal life one craves (116).