

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חרות ואחריות

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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

DIE ANOTHER DAY? SHAKESPEARE, JAMES BOND AND THE RAV

Rabbi Aryeh Klapper, Dean

Cowards die many times before their deaths;

The valiant never taste of death but once.

Shakespeare, Julius Caesar

Was Yaakov Avinu a coward? By Caesar's standard, it seems yes; few biblical characters if any taste death as often as Yaakov. The only patriarch not to suffer the anxiety of childlessness also seems the least at peace with his mortality.

But does Judaism share Caesar's standard? In *Genesis* 46:30, Yaakov seems briefly to come to terms with death:

ויאמר ישראל אל יוסף

אמותה הפעם

אחרי ראותי את פניך

כי עודך חי:

Yisroel said to Yosef:

I will die this time,

after seeing your face,

that you are still alive.

One *midrash* suggests that this moment denies him immortality, for G-d cannot cause the death of the righteous without their prior permission. It seems to me that in this reading immortality would not be a blessing, since it does not eliminate the fear of death. Moreover, Yaakov's words make clear that his rapprochement with death is not fundamental – he is willing to die **now**, and only **now** – he would not have been willing yesterday, and he will not be willing to die another day.

What made this moment unique?

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, in the footsteps of Seforno, suggests that:

He reached the apex of felicity, so that it would be impossible to experience greater felicity!

At this apex of felicity, he seeks to have his life end.

This reading does not remove the taint of cowardice.

Why wouldn't seeing Yosef's life, and his great-great-grandchildren, be more joyous? If not more joyous, is a life of merely ordinary joy not worth living? The wish for death in such circumstances seems the result of fear that they will not last.

Targum Yonatan suggests that Yaakov previously lacked moral self-confidence:

If I die at this time, I am consoled

that it is the death of the righteous that I die.

Midrash Tanchuma adds a concrete consequence.

When they came and told me "Yosef died,"

I said: "I am dead in both worlds";

Now that I have seen that you live –

I am informed that I will die but once

The question is whether these disquiets are praiseworthy, and properly lead to a generally unresolvable fear of death. Perhaps the Rabbis disagree fundamentally with Caesar, and the rabbinic hero is a Shakespearean coward. Perhaps fear of death can lead to fear of sin, and even to fear of Heaven.

In *Ish HaHalakbah*, the Rav contends that the yeshiva tradition, in sharp contrast to the Mussar movement, firmly rejected the use of mortality as a spur to morality. He is fully aware that this relegates great swathes of traditional literature to the realm of the *bediavad*.

My intention here is to stimulate a reengagement with the Rav's radical claim. To that end, I offer a relevant excerpt here in three versions: Professor Lawrence Kaplan's magisterial translation, the original Hebrew, and then my

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own retranslation. My starting contentions are that, as with any classic, an updated translation is useful for continued relevance, and that it may have more to say as poetry than as philosophy. Your responses are much encouraged and anticipated.

Halakhic Man pp. 74-75

Halakhic man is a man of the law and the principle, a man of the statute and the judgment,

and, therefore, he always possesses in his being, even if at times it should be afflicted with a deep melancholy, a fixed, firm, Archimedean point that is outside and above the turbulence of his soul, beyond the maelstrom of the affective life, a true source of peace and tranquility. Halakhic man vanquishes even the fear of death, which, as was explained above, is rooted in his world perspective, by means of the law and the Halakhah, and he transforms the phenomenon, which so terrifies him, into an object of man's observation and cognition. For when death becomes an object of man's cognition, the fright accompanying death dissipates. Death is frightening, death is menacing, death is dreadful only so long as it appears as a subject confronting man. However, when man succeeds in transforming death-subject into death-object, the horror is gone. My father related to me that when the fear of death would seize hold of R. Hayyim, he would throw himself, with his entire heart and mind, into the study of the laws of tents and corpse defilement. And these laws, which revolve around such difficult and complex problems as defilement of a grave, defilement of a tent, blocked-up defilement, interposition before defilement, a vessel with a tight-fitting cover on it in a tent in which a corpse lies, etc., etc., would calm the turbulence of his soul and would imbue it with a spirit of joy and gladness.

When halakhic man fears death, his sole weapon wherewith to fight this terrible dread is the eternal law of the Halakhah. The act of objectification triumphs over the subjective terror of death.

איש ההלכה עמ' 10-74

איש ההלכה הוא איש החוק והעיקרון, איש הדין והמשפט,
ולפיכך יש לו תמיד בהויותו, אפילו כשתהגה נכאים,
נקודה ארכימדית, קבועה ומוצקת,
הנמצאת מחוץ להמיית נפשו, מעבר למעורבלות החיים האפקטיביים,
שממנה נובעת שלוה ומנוחה.
גם את פחד המוות
המורש, כפי שנתבאר לעיל, בהשקפת עולמו של איש ההלכה,
מנצח הוא על ידי הדין וההלכה
ומהפך את התופעה, שהוא מפחד,
לאובייקט של הכרת האדם.
וכשצל-מוות המטיל אימים עליו לובש צורה אובייקטיבית
של נשוא המשובד לנושא, של חפצא הכפוף לנברא,
האימה פורחת לה כחלום יעוף.
שה לי אבא מרי,
כשפחד המוות היה תוקף על ר' חיים,

היה הלה מתמכר בכל מוחו ורוחו להלכות אהלות וטומאת מת,
ההלכות אלו
הסובבות סחור-סחור לעניינים חמורים ושאלות מסובכות של טומאת
קבר, טומאת אהל, טומאת רצועה, חציצה בפני הטומאה, צמיד פתיל באהל מת,
וכו',
היו משקיטות את המיית נפשו ומשרות עליה רוח של שמחה וחדווה.
כשאיש ההלכה ירא את המוות,
הנשק היחידי להילחם בפחד נורא זה הוא החוק הנצחי של ההלכה.
פעולת האובייקטיבית כובשת את אימת המוות הסובייקטיבית.

My Retranslation

The Man of Halakhah is a man of rule and of principle, a man of law and of judgment.

Therefore he always has in his being – even while experiencing depression

–

*an Archimedean point, fixed and firm,
existing outside the turmoil in his soul, beyond the entangledness of
affective life,
from which tranquility and calm flow.*

Even fear of death -

*which is rooted (as was explained earlier) in the Man of Halakhah's
worldview -*

*he defeats via the law and the Law
by transforming the phenomenon - that he is afraid –
into an object of human re-cognition.*

*When the shadow-of-death which imposes terrors on him wears an
objective form
of a carried subordinated to a carrier, of an object that must bow to a
subject,*

the terror evaporates like an evanescent dream.

My father-and-teacher once said to me in conversation:

*When R. Chaim was powerfully subject to the fear of death,
he would utterly commit all his brain and spirit to the halakhot of
enclosures and death-tum'ab.*

These halakhot –

*which come round and round to weighty matters and complex questions
regarding grave-tum'ab, enclosure-tum'ab, contained tum'ab, barricades to
tum'ab, utensil lids in a death-enclosure, etc. -*

*would quiet the turmoil of his soul and spread over him a spirit of joy
and gladness.*

*When the Man of Halakhah fears Death,
his sole weapon with which to fight this dreadful fear is the eternal rule of
the halakhah;*

The objective act conquers the subjective terror of death.

Shabbat Shalom!

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