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## **Confronting Mortality: Death and Life in Rabbinic Ethics**

### **A. Stages of Life in Classical Rabbinic Sources**

#### **Fathers 5:21**

A male of age 5 years, for Scripture.

Age 10, for the Mishnah.

Age 13, for the commandments.

Age 15, for the Talmud.

Age 18, for the wedding canopy.

Age 20, for pursuit.

Age 30, for strength.

Age 40, for understanding.

Age 50, for counsel.

Age 60, for being an elder.

Age 70, for grey hair.

Age 80, for might.

Age 90, for being bent.

Age 100, it is as if one is dead and passed and ceased from the world

#### **Song of Songs Rabbah 1:10**

Rabbi Yonatan said, 'He wrote the Song of Songs first, and after that Proverbs, and after that Ecclesiastes.'

Rabbi Yonatan derives this from the way of the world: when a man is young, he speaks in song; when he grows up, he speaks in proverbs; and when he become old, he speaks of vanity.

#### **Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1:2**

Rabbi Samuel bar Rabbi Isaac taught in the name of Rabbi Simeon ben Eleazar: Seven "vanities" that Ecclesiastes spoke correspond to seven worlds that a man views.

At one year he resembles a king placed in a covered carriage, and everyone hugs and kisses him.

At two and three years he resembles a pig who sticks his hands in the gutters.

At ten years he skips like a kid.

At twenty years he is like a neighing horse, making himself attractive and seeking a wife. He marries a woman, and he is like a donkey.

He bears children, and he is defiant like a dog in order to bring in bread and food.

He grows old, he is like an ape.

This is said about ordinary people, but about children of Torah it is said, "The king David grew old" (1 Kings 1:1). Even though he grew old, he was a king (Eccles. R. 1:2).

**B. Marcus Aurelius, Meditations (trans. C. R. Haines, Loeb), on living each day as if it were one's last day**

**7:69:** This is the mark of a perfect character, to pass through each day as if it were the last, without agitation, without torpor, without pretence.

**2:5:** Every hour make up thy mind sturdily as a Roman and a man to do what thou hast in hand with scrupulous and unaffected dignity and love of thy kind and independence and justice; and to give thyself rest from all other impressions. And thou wilt give thyself this, if thou dost execute every act of thy life as though it were thy last, divesting itself of all aimlessness and all passionate antipathy to the convictions of reason, and all hypocrisy and self-love and dissatisfaction with thy allotted share. Thou seest how few are the things, by mastering which a man may lead a life of tranquility and godlikeness; for the Gods also will ask no more from him who keeps these precepts.

**2:11:** Let thine every deed and word and thought be those of a man who can depart from life this moment...

**C. Marcus Aurelius, Meditations (trans. C. R. Haines, Loeb), on the end of all human bodies in death and decay**

**2:17:** Of the life of man the duration is but a point, its substance streaming away, its perception dim, the fabric of the entire body prone to decay, and the soul (*psychē*) a vortex, and fortune (*tuchē*) incalculable, and fame uncertain. In a word all the things of the body are as a river, and the things of the soul as a dream and a vapour, and life is a warfare and a pilgrim's sojourn, and fame after death is only forgetfulness. What then is it that can help us on our way? One thing and one alone—Philosophy; and this consists in keeping the divine 'genius' within pure and unwronged, lord of all pleasures and pains, doing nothing aimlessly or with deliberate falsehood and hypocrisy, independent of another's action or inaction; and furthermore welcoming what happens and is allotted, as issuing from the same source, whatever it be, from which the man himself has issued; and above all waiting for death with good grace as being but a setting free of the elements of which every thing living is made up. But if there be nothing terrible in each thing being continuously changed into another thing, why should a man look askance at the change and dissolution of all things? For it is the way of Nature, and in the way of Nature there can be no evil.

## **D. Classical Rabbinic Sources on living each day as if it were one's last day**

### **Fathers 2:10, attributed to Rabbi Eliezer**

"Repent one day before your death"

### **Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan, Version A, ch. 15**

Repent one day before your death: Rabbi Eliezer's students asked him, "Can a person know what day he will die, such that he can enact repentance?"

He said, "Of course, let him practice repentance today, lest he die tomorrow. Tomorrow let him repent lest he die the next day. So, all his days will be in repentance."

### **Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 153a**

We learned there [in the Mishnah]: Rabbi Eliezer says: Repent one day before your death. Rabbi Eliezer's students asked him: Does a person know what day he will die?" He said to them: All the more reason—let him repent today, let he die tomorrow. And it will be the case that all of his days will be in repentance.

Also Solomon said in his wisdom: *At all times let his clothes be white, and oil upon his head he should not lack* (Eccles. 9:8). Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai said: A parable. [This can be compared to] a king who invited his servants for a feast, but did not fix a time for them. The smart ones among them adorned themselves and sat at the door of the king's palace, saying, "Is anything lacking in the king's palace? The foolish among them went about their business, saying, "Is there ever a feast without preparations?" Suddenly the king summoned his servants. The smart ones among them entered before him when they were adorned, and the foolish ones entered before him when they were dirty. The king was happy to meet the smart ones, and angry to meet the foolish ones. He said, "Those who adorned themselves for the feast: they shall sit, eat, and drink. Those who did not adorn themselves for the feast: they will stand and watch."

## **E. Classical Rabbinic Sources on the end of all human bodies in death and decay**

### **Fathers 3:1**

Akabya ben Mahalalel says: Look (histakkel) upon three things and you will not come into the hands of transgression:

Know from where you come, to where you are going, and before Whom in the future you are to give judgment and reckoning.

From where you come? From a putrid secretion.

To where you go? To a place of dust, worm, and maggot.

Before Whom in the future you are to give judgment and reckoning? Before the King of the kings of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He.

### **Leviticus Rabbah 18:1, commenting upon Leviticus 15:2 (introductory note)**

This long midrashic (exegetical) unit integrates three elements: a law concerning purity in Leviticus 15:2, a poem about aging and death in Ecclesiastes 12:1-7, and the maxim of Akabya ben Mahalalel in Fathers 3:1. The maxim is listed above, and the two biblical passages are below, followed by the midrash.

### **Leviticus 15:2**

When any man has a discharge from his body, he is in the status of impurity.

### **Ecclesiastes 12:1-7**

(12:1) Remember your creator in the days of your youth,  
before ('ad 'asher lo') the days of unpleasantness come, and years arrive of which you say,  
I have in them no joy,

(12:2) before ('ad 'asher lo') the sun darkens, and the light, and the moon and stars, and  
the clouds return after the rain,

(12:3) in the day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the powerful men writhe,  
and the grinders are idle for they have dwindled, and those looking through the lattices  
darken,

(12:4) and the double-doors in the market are closed, when the sound of the mill lowers,  
and he rises to the voice of the bird, and all the woman singers are bowed low,

(12:5) and also they fear from on high, and terrors are along the way,  
and the almond tree blossoms, and the locust is laden, and the caperberry fails,  
for the man goes to his eternal home, and the mourners surround the market,

(12:6) before ('ad 'asher lo') the silver chord breaks, and the golden bowl is smashed,  
and the jug breaks upon the spring, and the wheel breaks in the pit,

(12:7) and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the life-breath returns to God, who  
gave it.

### **Leviticus Rabbah 18:1**

*When any man has a discharge from his body, he is in the status of impurity (Lev 15:2).*

*Remember your creator (בּוֹרֵאֵךְ) in the days of your youth (Eccles 12:1).*

We learn, Akabya ben Mahalalel says, Look upon three things and you will not come into  
the hands of transgression. Know from where you come: from a putrid secretion. And  
to where you go: to worm and maggot. And before whom you in the future will give  
reckoning: before the King of the kings of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He.

Rabbi Abba bar Kahana in the name of Rabbi Pappi, and Rabbi Yehoshua of Siknin in  
the name of Rabbi Levi: Akabya interpreted all three of them from one phrase:

"Remember your creator (בּוֹרֵאֵךְ)." Remember your origin (בְּאִירֶךְ), your pit (בּוֹרֶךְ), and  
your Creator (בּוֹרֵאֵךְ). Remember your origin: this is a putrid secretion. Your pit: this is  
worm and maggot. Your creator: this is the King of the kings of kings, the Holy one,  
blessed be He, who in the future will give reckoning.

*Before the days of unpleasantness come.* These are the days of old age.

*And years arrive of which you say, I have in them no joy.* These are the days of the  
messiah, which have neither merit nor guilt.

*Before the sun darkens (Eccles 12:2).* This is the brightness of the face.

*And the light.* This is the forehead.

*And the moon.* This is the nose.

*And the stars.* These are the cheekbones.

*And the clouds return after the rains.* Rabbi Levi said, two [interpretations], one for  
fellow disciples and one for uncultivated people. One for fellow disciples: He is about to  
cry, and tears flow from his eyes. One for uncultivated people: he goes to urinate, and  
balls [of excrement] come first.

[the commentary to Eccles 12:3-4 has been omitted]

*And also they fear from on high, and terrors are along the way, and the almond tree blossoms, and the locust is laden, and the caperberry fails, for the man goes to his eternal home, and the mourners surround the market* (Eccles 12:5).

*And also they fear from on high.* And old man thinks, when they invite him to go to a place, and he asks them, Are there up-hills and down-hills?

*And terrors are along the way.* Rabbi Abba bar Kahana and Rabbi Levi. Rabbi Abba bar Kahana says, Dread of the way falls upon him. The other says, He begins to mark out limits on the way, saying, Up to this place I have it within me to go; to another place I do not have it within me to go.

*And the almond tree blossoms.* These are the ankles.

*And the locust is laden.* This is the nut (luz) of the spinal column. Hadrian, may his bones be crushed, asked Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananyah, From where will the Holy One, blessed be He, make a man sprout in the world to come?

He said to him, From the base of the spine.

He said, How can you make it known to me?

He brought it before him, put it in water but it did not dissolve, ground it in millstones but it was not ground, put it in fire but it was not burned, placed it on a block and started to hammer it with a hammer, and the block was divided and the hammer split, but he did not have any effect.

*And the caperberry fails.* This is desire, which brings peace between a husband and his wife.

Rabbi Simeon ben Halafta would regularly go up to inquire about the health of Rabbi [Yehudah the Patriarch] every new moon. When he became old he would stay and could not go. One day he did go, and [Rabbi] said to him, What has occupied you that you do not come up to me the way that you used to regularly?

He said to him, Near things have become far, far things have become near, two have become three, and that which brings peace at home has ceased.

Far things have become near: these are the eyes, which used to see from afar, now even up close they cannot see.

Near things have become far: these are the ears, which used to hear at one or two times, and even at one hundred times they do not hear.

Two have become three: a walking stick and the two legs.

What brings peace at home has faded: this is desire that brings peace between a husband and his wife.

*For the man goes to his eternal home (bet 'olamo).* Rabbi Simeon ben Lakesh, This teaches that each and every righteous man has an eternity of his own. [This can be compared to] a king who enters a capital city, and with him are commanders, governors, and soldiers. Even though they all enter through one gateway, each one of them dwells according to his honor.

So too, even though everyone tastes the taste of death, each and every righteous man has an eternity of his own.

*And the mourners surround the market.* These are the worms.

[the commentary to Eccles 12:6-7 and the return to Lev 15:2]