Afterlife in Jewish Thought

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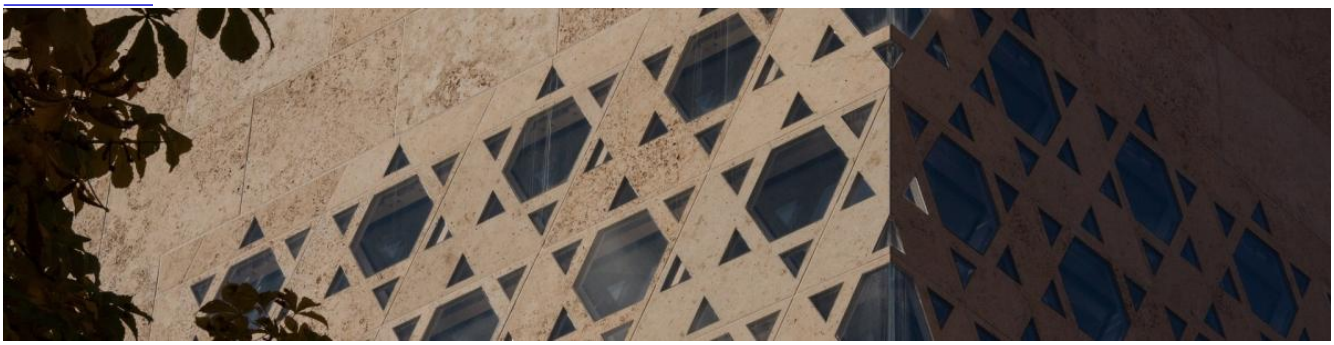

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There is a paucity of explicit references to afterlife—whether a bodily resurrection or a soul world—in Tanakh. The Torah promises this-worldly rewards and punishments for faithfulness or lack thereof to God and the Torah. It does not promise heaven for righteousness, nor does it threaten hell or the absence of heaven for sinfulness. Given the ancient world's belief in, and even obsession with immortality and afterlife, the Torah's silence is all the more remarkable.

Aside from the lack of explicit references to afterlife in the Torah, one might have expected an appeal to afterlife in the Book of Job. For all the arguments raised by Job's so-called friends, they never invoke afterlife in their attempts to vindicate Job's unfair suffering. Rather, Job and his friends agree with the biblical premise that ultimate justice must occur during one's lifetime. Job insisted that his suffering was unjust, whereas his friends assumed that he must have deserved his punishment. [1]

Assessing the Near Absence of Explicit References to Afterlife in Tanakh

Daniel, a late biblical book, does explicitly mention a bodily resurrection:

Many of those that sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to eternal life, others to reproaches, to everlasting abhorrence. And the knowledgeable will be radiant like the bright expanse of sky, and those who lead the many to righteousness will be like the stars forever and ever. (Dan. 12:2–3)

In his Treatise on the Resurrection, Rambam considers this passage to be the only explicit reference to resurrection in Tanakh. [2]

For some time, academic scholars generally concluded that since Tanakh does not explicitly mention resurrection until the Book of Daniel, resurrection must have been a later belief that crept into Israel toward the end of the biblical period from another religion, most likely Zoroastrianism.[3] Until that point, Israel's prophets believed that when people die, they never return. This academic consensus ran against Jewish tradition, which insists that belief in resurrection goes back to the Torah, even if it is only alluded to and not mentioned explicitly:

The following have no portion [in the World to Come]: He who maintains that resurrection is not a biblical doctrine,[4] the Torah was not divinely revealed, and an epikoros…. (Sanhedrin 90a)

In 2006, however, Jon D. Levenson (Harvard University) published a book, Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel: The Ultimate Victory of the God of Life. He demonstrates that Jewish belief in resurrection has an extensive range of biblical antecedents, and that it did not simply appear late in the biblical period. Rather, resurrection is an essential component in Israel's redemption, which itself redeems history. Thus, the classical rabbinic position is fundamentally correct, that the concepts underlying the resurrection trace back to the beginning of the biblical period.

Levenson explains that contemporary scholarship, rooted in the modern world with its emphasis on individualism, has a difficult time understanding the biblical concept of identity. If one asks, "Will I have life after death?" one already misses the heart of the matter. The biblical conception of afterlife is grounded in an identity inextricably linked to the nation of Israel, and ancestors and descendants also are completely linked. Jewish belief in resurrection is rooted in God's promises to Israel, His power over life and death, and His preference for life. Although Daniel was the first to mention resurrection explicitly, the ideas underlying this resurrection trace back to the earliest texts in Tanakh.

Tanakh Assumes Afterlife

In addition to Levenson's thesis, James Kugel cites several biblical verses that clearly presume an existence beyond life in this world.[5] For example, Abraham "was gathered to his kin" after he died:

And Abraham breathed his last, dying at a good ripe age, old and contented; and he was gathered to his kin. (Gen. 25:8)

Abraham could be "gathered to his kin," regardless of where his ancestors were buried, and regardless of their relative righteousness. After all, Abraham rose to religious heights infinitely above his pagan father Terah.

Numerous other biblical references similarly suggest that death is not absolutely final. There are two mysterious deaths in Tanakh: God took Enoch (Gen. 5:24), and Elijah was taken to heaven in a fiery chariot (II Kings 2:11). Malachi prophesies that Elijah will return in the future as the harbinger of the messianic era (Mal. 3:23–24). A witch evidently conjured up Samuel's spirit (I Sam. 28:11–14), and Elijah and Elisha revived dead children (I Kings 17:19–23; II Kings 4:32–36).

From these and several other references, Kugel convincingly concludes that

Some decades ago, the cliché about the Hebrew Bible was that it really has no notion of an afterlife or the return of the soul to God or a last judgment or a world to come. But such a claim will not withstand careful scrutiny. [6]

Why Does Tanakh Give Afterlife So Little Attention?

We have seen that Tanakh regularly alludes to a belief in an afterlife despite its not discussing it explicitly until the late Book of Daniel. Additionally, the notion of resurrection is fundamentally connected to beliefs that span back to the very beginnings of the biblical period. We now must ask, however, why does Tanakh give afterlife so little attention, and why is the covenant of the Torah entirely predicted on this-worldly existence?
Moshe David (Umberto) Cassuto sheds light on this issue in his analysis of the Garden of Eden narrative. There were two trees at the center of Eden. The Tree of Life seems

supernatural. Were Adam and Eve to eat from it, they would have become immortal (Gen. 3:23). An expert in the literature of the ancient Near East, Cassuto observed that nearly every ancient mythology had a tree, a plant, or something else of life. This mythology reflects the obsessive quest for immortality in the ancient world.

In stark contrast with Israel's surrounding cultures, the Torah decisively downplays the Tree of Life. That tree becomes significant to the narrative only after Adam and Eve sinned by eating from the Tree of Knowledge and were expelled from the Garden of Eden. God then sends Cherubim to prevent Adam and Eve from eating of the Tree of Life (Gen. 3:22–24).

To understand why the Torah would diminish the role of the Tree of Life, we must consider the tree that is central to the narrative, namely, the Tree of Knowledge. Whereas the Tree of Life appears supernatural, the Tree of Knowledge seems to have been a regular fruit tree. The Sages suggested that the Tree of Knowledge was a regular fruit, whether a fig, grapevine, wheat, or etrog (Gen. Rabbah 15:7). The effects of the fruit derived from God's prohibition, rather than from any inherent supernatural property of the fruit.

Even though the Tree of Life was prevalent in other ancient literatures, the Tree of Knowledge is otherwise unattested. The Torah is a revolution in human history, shifting focus away from nonexistent mythical fruits that give immortality and replacing them with an emphasis on developing a genuine relationship with God. It teaches that we must live religious-moral lives and take personal responsibility for our actions. The ultimate vision of the prophets is a messianic world, which will achieve a perfected, religious-moral society.

Tellingly, the Book of Proverbs transforms the Tree of Life into Torah and wisdom:

She is a tree of life to those who grasp her, and whoever holds on to her is happy. (Prov. 3:18) [7]

The Jewish Tree of Life is Torah and wisdom, representing a lifelong religious quest, rather than a supernatural fruit that promises physical immortality. [8]

Despite the purposeful emphasis on this-worldly conduct and reward and punishment throughout Tanakh, rabbinic Judaism incorporated afterlife as an essential part of its system of understanding divine justice in this world. When did this change occur?

Malachi and Daniel: Using Afterlife to Vindicate Unfairness

The problem of the righteous suffering and the wicked prospering is a prominent difficulty that runs throughout Tanakh. The classical biblical wisdom approach to justify unfairness, particularly emphasized in Psalms and Proverbs, was to insist that the suffering of the righteous or the success of the wicked was a temporary state. Any injustices would be rectified during the lifetimes of the individuals. Job and Ecclesiastes challenge this approach, leaving unfairness as a matter that lies beyond human comprehension. [9]

Toward the end of the biblical period, the Books of Malachi and Daniel addressed a new situation. For the first time, the faithful suffered precisely because they were righteous, whereas the sinners were successful as a consequence of their wickedness. Divine justice was under siege, and many righteous Jews were sinking into despair and losing faith. No longer could one appeal to the classical prophetic responses rooted in the Torah, that national suffering occurs when Israel sins. It was specifically the most righteous people who were suffering, rather than the entire nation.

Rather than offering any short-term solutions, Malachi appealed to the messianic redemption to vindicate history:

You have wearied the Lord with your talk. But you ask, “By what have we wearied [Him]?” By saying, “All who do evil are good in the sight of the Lord, and in them He delights,” or else, “Where is the God of justice?” Behold, I am sending My messenger to clear the way before Me, and the Lord whom you seek shall come to His Temple suddenly. As for the angel of the covenant that you desire, he is already coming…He shall act like a smelter and purger of silver; and he shall purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, so that they shall present offerings in righteousness. Then the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem shall be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of yore and in the years of old…And you shall come to see the difference between the righteous and the wicked, between him who has served the Lord and him who has not served Him. (Mal. 2:17; 3:1–4, 18)

Daniel invoked the resurrection that would occur during this period of redemption to vindicate injustices (Dan. 12:2–3). The innovation of Malachi and Daniel was not belief in the messiah or resurrection. Rather, their primary innovation was in linking the classical problem of unfairness with afterlife. Their appeal to the future to vindicate unfairness was a formal concession that ultimate justice will not occur during one’s lifetime.

The Sages followed in this spirit, conceding that one requires afterlife to vindicate injustices in this world:

It was taught: Rabbi Jacob says, there is no precept in the Torah, where reward is stated by its side, from which you cannot infer the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead. Thus, in connection with honoring parents it is written: “That your days may be prolonged, and that it may go well with you” (Deut. 5:16). Again in connection with the law of letting [the dam] go from the nest it is written: “That it may be well with you, and that you may prolong your days” (Deut. 22:7). Now, in the case where a man’s father said to him, “Go up to the top of the building and bring me down some young birds,” and he went up to the top of the building, let the dam go and took the young ones, and on his return he fell and was killed-where is this man’s length of days, and where is this man’s happiness? But “that your days may be prolonged” refers to the world that is wholly long, and “that it may go well with you” refers to the world that is wholly good. (Hullin 142a)

Heaven and Resurrection: A Medieval Debate

A second major development in the Jewish discussion of afterlife arose with Rambam’s efforts to bridge Torah and Greek philosophy.[10] Rambam was enamored by the Platonic notion of a soul-world afterlife, and discusses heaven with great passion. Simultaneously, Rambam espoused the classical Jewish belief in messiah and the resurrection. Therefore, he concluded that in the messianic era there will be a resurrection, but then everyone will die again and return to their ideal existence in heaven.

In order to conflate the prophetic ideal of messiah with the Platonic ideal of a heavenly afterlife, Rambam insisted that the prophets and sages longed for the messianic age so that they could live without distraction and thereby work on earning a share in the World to Come:

The prophets and sages longed for the messianic era, not so that they could rule the world, not that they could dominate pagans, not to receive honor from the nations, nor to eat and drink and be merry. Rather, [they longed for it] so that they would be free to learn Torah and wisdom, and there would be no oppressor or distraction. In this way they would earn a share in the World to Come, as we explained in the Laws of Repentance. (Laws of Kings 12:4) [11]

Rambam’s preference of a soul-world over the biblical ideas of a this-world messianic era and resurrection did not go unnoticed or unchallenged. Some of Rambam’s critics accused him of denying the resurrection altogether, leading to his scathing retort in his Treatise on Resurrection. Granting his resolute belief in the resurrection, however, there is little question

that Rambam radically shifted emphasis away from the biblical conception of a this-world ideal society to a soul-world ideal for each individual. [12]

This debate runs throughout all of Tanakh. For example, the most prevalent metaphorical interpretation in Jewish tradition casts the Song of Songs as symbolizing the historical covenantal relationship between God and Israel as a community (e.g., Targum, R. Saadyah Gaon, Rashi, Rashbam, and Ibn Ezra).[13] In contrast, Rambam interprets the Song of Songs as a symbol of the love between the religious individual and God. [14]

Rambam also insisted that a prophet needed to reach the highest intellectual and religious levels as a prerequisite to receiving prophetic revelation (Guide for the Perplexed II:32–45). In contrast, Rabbi Judah Halevi maintained that prophecy is a divine gift. Were God to deem it necessary to send a prophet on a mission, anyone could receive a prophetic message (Kuzari, e.g., 1:4; 1:87). Abarbanel (on Amos 1:1; 7:14) supports Rabbi Halevi's view, insisting that a prophet's mission to his people, and not his personal perfection, is the defining characteristic of biblical prophecy. Abarbanel concluded that Rambam derived his conception of prophecy, which favors individual spirituality over one's communal mission, from Greek philosophy, and this understanding is inconsistent with traditional Jewish thought.

To summarize, the Torah and prophets emphasize communal perfection. The ideal of Tanakh is the messianic age, a perfected society and world harmony. The plain sense of the biblical texts certainly favors the position of Rambam's opponents over that of Rambam, who shifted attention to individual perfection and the soul-world.

Contemporary Applications

This debate is not simply an unverifiable, abstract philosophical disagreement. One's belief in afterlife profoundly informs one's ultimate goals, and directly affects how one lives life in this world. If one's goal is a personal heaven, one could live in a cave completely removed from society, study Torah, pray, observe the Torah's commandments, and reflect philosophically on God. In contrast, the prophets always lived among the people despite all the heartache that entailed, as their goal was to improve their society and bring it closer to the ideas of the Torah. They longed for Israel to become a model nation that would in turn inspire all humanity to serve God.

More broadly, the discussion of afterlife has direct implications on how our contemporary society functions. Much of secular society denies or downplays afterlife. This position leads to the conclusion that this life is all there is. Some idealists use this conclusion to do everything they can to make a positive impact during their lifetimes. Many others conclude that life has little ultimate purpose, and they overemphasize this-worldliness and self-indulgence.

At the other side of the spectrum, some religious communities teach that this world is only a way station to build up points to earn eternal heavenly reward. This system of belief dangerously gives all the power to the religious clerics, who can tell their followers what it takes to earn a place in heaven. When clerics have upright ethical values, they can achieve phenomenal results. However, when clerics preach murder in the name of their religion, it is beyond horrifying. It also is critical to stress that terrorists who murder in the name of their religion are not crazy. They are making a perfectly reasonable decision within their religious system by giving up a temporary and relatively meaningless life in this world in exchange for eternal bliss. The problem here is with the system itself, which, when dominated by clerics and other leaders preaching murder, is truly evil. [15]

In a completely different arena that should not in any way be likened to the above discussion, the Orthodox Jewish yeshiva system confronts a different challenge pertaining to belief in the afterlife. In many yeshivot, particularly those that teach boys, Tanakh receives woefully

inadequate attention.[16] Concurrently, many learn the exceptional eighteenth century work by Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto, the Mesilat Yesharim (Path of the Just).

This remarkable book focuses on self-perfection, and is worthy of in-depth study. However, learning Mesilat Yesharim without Tanakh creates an imbalance in the yeshiva curriculum. Rabbi Luzzatto introduces his work by stating that the purpose of our existence is to gain afterlife:

Our Sages of blessed memory have taught us that man was created for the sole purpose of rejoicing in God and deriving pleasure from the splendor of His Presence; for this is true joy and the greatest pleasure that can be found. The place where this joy may truly be derived is the World to Come, which was expressly created to provide for it; but the path to the object of our desires is this world. (Mesilat Yesharim chapter 1) [17]

Students of the prophets never would stop there, since the prophets were concerned with the perfection of their society. Learning Mesilat Yesharim without learning the soaring visions of the prophets sends the message that personal religious growth lies at the heart of religious Jewish experience. Although of course we aspire to individual personal growth (and should learn Mesilat Yesharim!), this aspiration must be accompanied by the prophetic imperative to channel our religious energies to improve the broader community. It is the longing for the messianic era, and not personal afterlife, that should shape the heart of our religious experience and actions. Lacking this prophetic vision, many students may become connected to God and the Torah, but isolate themselves from the broader community.

If there is hope for understanding and resolution, it is through serious engagement with Tanakh, which forms the very heart and soul of the Jewish vision. Individual religious strengths must be developed and channeled toward the betterment of society. The messianic visions of the prophets are for all humanity, and not just Israel. These beliefs foster a love for humanity, rather than just those who share our particular beliefs.

Tragically, we live in a world where billions overemphasize afterlife, and billions underemphasize it. Most Jews no longer stand by or even understand the alternative of the Torah and the prophets. But the vision of Tanakh has the power to change the world if we will listen to its message and promote it.

[1] There are several passages where Job seems to accept the finality of death. For example, “As a cloud fades away, so whoever goes down to Sheol does not come up; he returns no more to his home; his place does not know him” (Job 7:9). Based on this verse, Rava insisted that “this shows that Job denied the resurrection of the dead” (Bava Batra 16a). Cf. Job 10:20–22; 14:1–10.

[2] Several other biblical verses employ resurrection terminology. Three prominent examples are, (1) “He will destroy death forever. My Lord God will wipe the tears away from all faces and will put an end to the reproach of His people over all the earth—for it is the Lord who has spoken” (Is. 25:8). (2) “Oh, let Your dead revive! Let corpses arise! Awake and shout for joy, you who dwell in the dust!—for Your dew is like the dew on fresh growth; You make the land of the shades come to life” (Is. 26:19). (3) Ezekiel’s celebrated vision of the Dry Bones (Ezek. 37:1–14). However, these prophecies refer to God’s miraculous restoration of Israel in the messianic era, rather than the bodily resurrection of individual people. In contrast, Daniel refers specifically to the bodily resurrection of individuals so that God can mete out ultimate justice onto them.

[3] See, e.g., Neil Gillman, The Death of Death: Resurrection and Immortality in Jewish Thought (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1997), p. 96. See also Jon D. Levenson, Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel: The Ultimate Victory of the God of Life (New

Haven, CT: Yale, 2006), p. x, where he cites the scholarly consensus that Zoroastrianism is the likely candidate for having influenced Jewish thought regarding resurrection. Levenson goes on to reject much of that scholarly consensus.

[4] Not all versions of the Mishnah contain the text that one must believe that resurrection is "from the Torah," min ha-Torah. Rambam stated that one must believe in the resurrection, but does not insist that one must believe that it is from the Torah. See sources in Marc Shapiro, The Limits of Orthodox Theology: Maimonides' Thirteen Principles Reappraised (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civiliation, 2004), p. 152, n. 62.

[5] James L. Kugel, The Great Poems of the Bible: A Reader's Companion with new Translations (New York: Free Press, 1999), pp. 192–210.

[6] Kugel, pp. 209–210.

[7] See also Prov. 11:30; 13:12; 15:4.

[8] It also is significant that the Ark, which contains the tablets of the Ten Commandments, is guarded by Cherubim. The Tabernacle represents the only other appearance of Cherubim in the Torah aside from the Garden of Eden, where they guard the Tree of Life (Gen. 3:24).

[9] For discussion and sources pertaining to this issue in Psalms, Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes, see Hayyim Angel, Vision from the Prophet and Counsel from the Elders: A Survey of Nevi'im and Ketuvim (New York: OU Press, 2013), pp. 227–234, 241–248, 249–257, 288–300.

[10] See sources and discussion in Neil Gillman, The Death of Death, pp. 143–172.

[11] See Rambam, Laws of Repentance, chapter 8.

[12] Louis Jacobs maintains that Rambam was the only medieval Jewish philosopher who committed to the idea that the future existence is in an incorporeal state in a soul world rather than in this world (Principles of the Jewish Faith [New York: Basic Books, 1964], p. 407).

[13] This was not the only midrashic understanding, however. In the summary words of David M. Carr (with minor transliteration changes): "While we see the male fairly consistently linked to God, we find the female of the Song of Songs related to the house of study (b. Eruvin 21b; b. Bava Batra 7b), an individual sage (t. Hagiga 2:3), Moses (Mekhilta Beshallah Shirah 9), Joshua the son of Nun (Sifrei Nitzavim [305] and parallels), local court (b. Sanhedrin 36b; b. Yevamot 101a; b. Kiddushin 49b and b. Sanhedrin 24a; cf. also b. Pesahim 87a), or the community of Israel as a whole (m. Ta'anit 4:8; t. Sotah 9:8; b. Shabbat 88; b. Yoma 75a; b. Sukkot 49b; b. Eruvin 21b; b. Ta'anit 4:a; Mekhilta Beshallah Shira 3)" ("The Song of Songs as a Microcosm of the Canonization and Decanonization Process," in Canonization and Decanonization, ed. A. van der Kooij and K. van der Toorn [Leiden: Brill, 1998], pp. 175–176).

[14] See Laws of Repentance 10:3; Guide for the Perplexed III:51. See Yosef Murciano, "Rambam and the Interpretation of the Song of Songs" (Hebrew), in Teshurah le-Amos: A Collection of Studies in Biblical Interpretation Presented in Honor of Amos Hakham, ed. Moshe Bar Asher et al. (Alon Shevut: Tevunot, 2007), pp. 85–108. For an exploration of the religious value of adopting the views of Rashi and Rambam in one's religious experience, see R. Shalom Carmy, "Perfect Harmony," First Things (December, 2010); "On Cleaving as Identification: Rabbi Soloveitchik's Account of Devekut in U-Vikkashtem Mi-Sham," Tradition 41:2 (Summer 2008), pp. 100–112.

[15] For an illuminating study of the eradication of the idea of sin from Western literature, reflecting the frightening conclusion that many in the contemporary Western World have essentially stricken the concept of evil from their vocabularies and mindsets, see Andrew

Delbanco, The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995).

[16] For analysis of why this has been so, see, for example, Mordechai Breuer, “Bible in the Curriculum of the Yeshiva” (Hebrew), in Mehkarim ba-Mikra u-ba-Hinnukh: Presented to Prof. Moshe Ahrend, ed. Dov Rappel (Jerusalem: Touro College, 1996), pp. 223–235; Frederick E. Greenspahn, “Jewish Ambivalence towards the Bible,” Hebrew Studies 48 (2007), pp. 7–21; Moshe Sokolow, “U-Va Le-Tzion Go’el, Kedushah De-Sidra, and the Yeshiva Curriculum,” in Mi-Tokh Ha-Ohel: The Weekday Prayers, ed. Daniel Z. Feldman and Stuart W. Halpern (New Milford, CT: Maggid, 2014), pp. 293–301.

[17] Translation in Shraga Silverstein, The Path of the Just (Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1980), p. 17.