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Judaism

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Introduction

The majority of American Jews do not believe in an afterlife. A pew poll (2008: 32) has 39% of US Jews believing in an afterlife; contrast the total US population, of which 74% believe in an afterlife. The reservations aren't reserved for the Jewish laity, but extend to certain Jewish intellectual circles too.

That's not the way it's always been. On the contrary, belief in some form of afterlife has been counted as a fundamental principle of Jewish faith, and for orthodox Jews it still is. The traditional Jewish view about the afterlife is elaborate. It has a labyrinthine landscape and a complex chronology, including no less than: reincarnation, purgatory, annihilation, a world of departed souls, the bodily resurrection of the dead, and the World to Come.

Our paper first addresses some of the skepticism in contemporary Jewish thought about the afterlife. We then outline the central features of the traditional Jewish view, along with some disagreements within the tradition.

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We then turn to a philosophical puzzle about the significance of the afterlife and close with a related discussion of its purpose.

Contemporary Skepticism

Contemporary American Jews are skeptical about the afterlife. Doubtless, much of this results from a more general rejection of traditional religious views. Doubtless, much of it results from ignorance about what the traditional religious views are. However, some Jewish theologians—who are neither dismissive nor ignorant—endorse a more or less limited skepticism. And allegedly on the grounds of traditional Jewish values.

Lenn Goodman, as instructive a representative as any, bases his treatment on the Hebrew Bible, and it turns out that “*the demand for an afterlife is a rejection of the intrinsic worth of the life we have. It flies in the face of biblical theology, morals, and cosmology because it clashes with the recognition of the goodness of being, which is the basis of that cosmology*” (1991: 202; italics in original). Subsequent Jewish sources about the afterlife are to be interpreted away.

Goodman motivates his view in three closely related ways: first, from the inability of an afterlife to provide a theodicy; second, from the moral outlook of the Hebrew Bible; and, third, from the absence of any explicit treatment of the afterlife in the Hebrew Bible.

The First Argument. An afterlife would serve a purpose only if it would play an essential role in a theodicy. But it can’t play any such role, since “suffering is justified only if it is a condition of this life and this life is good. It is not justified as a condition of another life. For in that case one must ask why it was made such a condition and why this life itself was made incapable of justification” (1991: 202). There is no afterlife if it would serve no purpose. So, there is no afterlife.

Criticism. Two replies are possible. The first denies that the afterlife would serve a purpose only if it plays an essential role in theodicy. There might be other purposes for an afterlife: for example, it might serve the purposes of reward and punishment for deeds done in this life, or it might provide us with opportunities not possible in this life.

The second denies that the afterlife does not serve the purposes of a theodicy. The afterlife could justify God permitting suffering in a few ways. God might permit some to suffer for the sake of others: for example, when someone suffers to provide others an opportunity to help, or when someone suffers as a result of another’s free will to harm. But God might be

permitted to use people for such ends only if he compensates them; at the least, a perfectly good being would be expected to compensate them. Since some are not compensated in this life, they must be compensated in an afterlife (see Swinburne 2004: 261–2).

The Rabbis present a radical explanation of why God permits suffering in terms of compensation in the afterlife—the suffering might exist *just* for the purposes of such compensation:

If a person sees bad things befall him, he should examine his deeds, as it says: “Let us search our ways, and make an examination and return to God” (Lam. 3:40). If he examines [his deeds], but does not find any [wrong], he should attribute [his sufferings] to neglect of Torah study...If he attributes them [to neglect of Torah study], but does not find any [neglect], then they are definitely afflictions of love, as it says: “For the one God loves he will reprove.” (Prov. 3:12). (Ber. 5a)

According to Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki (*Rashi*; 11th c.), the preeminent commentator on the Talmud, “God afflicts [the righteous] in this world even though he is without sin – in order to increase his reward in the World to Come more than he deserves” (*ad loc*). We will see another way the afterlife could help justify suffering towards the end of the next section on historical sources.

The Second Argument. If there is an afterlife, then this life is a mere means to get to it. And if this life is a mere means, then it lacks intrinsic worth. But a tenet of Biblical morality is that our this-worldly life has “intrinsic worth,” and it has such worth at least partly in virtue of the sheer “goodness of being,” itself a tenet of Biblical theology. Thus, the existence of an afterlife flies in the face of Biblical morality, and theology. So, there is no afterlife.

Criticism. Two replies are possible. The first denies that, if this life is a mere means, then it lacks intrinsic value. This life may be a mere means for some purpose of God’s, say, to bestow the World to Come on us. Nevertheless, it might contain certain things of intrinsic value, say, pleasure—even if these values happened not to serve God’s purpose at all.

The second reply denies that, if there is an afterlife, then this life is a mere means to attain it. Even if there is an afterlife, this life could be an end in itself. Indeed, this life is taken to be an arena for the exercise of free choice, especially moral choices to do good or bad. But we are supposed to lack such free will in the afterlife while in the presence of God—*itself* a good. God could be expected to bring about kinds of goods only available in this life and those only available

in the afterlife by creating both, and each for its own sake. More on this in our treatment of the significance of the afterlife in the second half of this paper.

The Third Argument. There is no substantive treatment of the afterlife in the Hebrew Bible. The most we get is reference to a gloomy realm of *sheol* (e. g. Gen. 37:35), where the dead appear to have a degraded kind of being. Indeed, Goodman takes that to be not so much a kind of being at all, but mere poetic fiction (see Goodman 1991: 196). But if there were an afterlife, the Hebrew Bible would provide a substantive treatment of it. So there is no afterlife. Goodman emphasizes the Bible's focus on our this-worldly personal, family, social and national lives, especially against the Egyptian and Canaanite obsessions with the afterlife. Along with the rejection of Egyptian and Canaanite modes and mores—and especially their death rites—belief in an afterlife must go.

Criticism. Two replies are again possible. The first denies that, if there were an afterlife, the Hebrew Bible would provide a substantive treatment of it. It does not provide a substantive treatment on the nature of the soul, the incorporeality of God, the nature of atonement, and so on. Of course, there are hints here and there, hints which might be definitively explained by religious tradition or interminably debated by theologians. A substantive treatment of the Hebrew Bible is not a necessary condition for an idea being correct or Jewish.

The second reply draws from hints of an afterlife in the Hebrew Bible, and for the interpretation of these in subsequent Jewish tradition. This will be addressed in the next section.

Historical Sources

We turn to some historical Jewish sources about the afterlife: biblical, apocryphal, talmudic, medieval and early modern. We focus a little less on the apocryphal sources since they don't explicitly inform subsequent Jewish tradition, and we focus a little more on the classical rabbinic sources (Talmud and Midrash) since these are the main sources for the subsequent tradition (for more extensive overview see Raphaell 2009).

Hebrew Bible. The normative Jewish tradition reads the Hebrew Bible (the *Tanakh*) as teaching that there is an afterlife. The Torah records incidents that seem to imply an afterlife. For example, early on in Genesis there is the apparent assumption of Enoch: "And Enoch walked with God, and he was not; for God took him" (Gen. 5:22). Furthermore, much of the point of the Torah is the explicit rejection of beliefs and practices of the rest

of the ancient near east, especially their theologies and death practices (see Lev. 18: 3, 19:28). Yet there is no explicit rejection of the widespread belief in an afterlife, even while the early Israelites had suggestive death practices of their own.

The later prophetic literature is more explicit about an afterlife when the spirit of Samuel is conjured from the dead: “And the [witch] said, ‘Who should I bring up for you?’ And [Saul] said, ‘Bring Samuel up for me’...And the woman saw Samuel and cried with a loud voice...And Samuel said to Saul, ‘Why have you disturbed me, bringing me up?’” (1 Sam. 28:11–15). The Torah forbids consulting the dead, but that does not mean that there are no dead to be consulted. Here the straightforward interpretation is that there *are*.

The Hagiographa include the most explicit statement in the Hebrew Bible of belief in an afterlife, and of resurrection in particular: “And many of those sleeping in the dust will awake, some to eternal life and some to eternal reproaches and abhorrence. And the enlightened will blaze like the brilliance of the firmament, and they who make the many righteous like the stars for ever and ever” (Dan. 12:2). Goodman interprets this as metaphor: “It cannot mean anything literally to say that someone will shine like the firmament or glow like a star” (1991: 204). But it can. And, in any event, a plausible metaphorical interpretation must be about the lofty station of the righteous in an afterlife.

These are just some examples from the Hebrew Bible. Most of the other sources are just hints about an afterlife. The Hebrew Bible does not present a worked out afterlife story. The subsequent Jewish tradition certainly does. Here we discover purgatory, paradise, reincarnation and an ultimate resurrection.

Apocrypha. Though not canonized by subsequent Jewish tradition, the apocryphal books reflect some similarity with that tradition. In particular, the books of Enoch, Ezra and Maccabees portray more worked out pictures of the afterlife. Much of 1 Enoch, for example, is devoted to detailing the frame and furniture of various afterlife realms Enoch journeys through. In the end, as in Daniel, the righteous will “shine as the lights in heaven” (104:2) whereas the wicked will descend “into darkness and chains and a burning flame” (103:8). And, as in Daniel, there will then be a resurrection and a judgment day, except for some sinners whose “spirits shall not be punished in the day of judgment nor shall they be raised” (22:14; 51:1).

The depth of commitment to resurrection is conveyed especially in a gruesome account in 2 Maccabees. Seven brothers and their mother prefer a tortuous martyrdom at the hands Antiochus Epiphanes over the sin of

eating pork. They tell the king that he “dispatche[s] us from this life, but the King of the world shall raise us up, who have died for his laws, and revive us to life everlasting.” Antiochus for his part will “have no resurrection to life (2 Macc. 7:9–14). The verdict is apparently not for non-Jews generally, who will be resurrected (see 4 Ezra 7:47)

Classical Rabbis. Despite some continuity between the apocrypha and the rabbinic tradition, the classical rabbis (1st–6th c.) were not entirely enamored with the apocrypha. Indeed, Rabbi Akiva (1ST–2ND c.) warns that anyone who reads apocrypha has no share in the World to Come (see Sanh. 90a). However, there is no disagreement about there being a World to Come: “All Israel have a portion in the World to Come, as it is written (Isaiah 60: 21): ‘Your nation are all righteous: they will inherit the land for ever; [they are] the branch of my planting, the work of my hands, for me to glorify myself in’” (Sanh. 90a).

Indeed, the rabbis warn that those who deny that there is a World to Come are another exception to the general rule: “And these are those who have no portion in the World to Come: one who says that the resurrection of the dead is not from [i.e. intimated by] the Torah”; the World to Come is here supposed to be what follows the resurrection: “he denies the resurrection of the dead, and so he will have no portion in the resurrection of the dead” (Sanh. 90a). The rejection of a World to Come by the Sadducee sect was a main point of disagreement between them and the Pharisees, the precursors of the rabbis (see Josephus 1959: 375).

However, it’s not perfectly clear who will be resurrected: whether it will be just the Jews, or just the righteous, or just the righteous Jews. We have already seen that certain heretics won’t be resurrected. More generally, “Rabbi Abahu said: the day of rain is greater than the resurrection of the dead since the resurrection of the dead is for the righteous [only], whereas rain is for the righteous and the wicked” (Ta’ 7a). Other sources limit the resurrection to the Jews: “The resurrection of the dead is for Israel [only], whereas [rain is] for Israel and the idolators (lit. *star worshippers*)” (Genesis Rabbah 13:8).

This view does not entail that non-Jews do not enjoy another kind of afterlife, however. Indeed after the Mishnah states that the Balaam the non-Jew does not have a place in the World to Come, the rabbis explain that this means other non-Jews do (see Sanhedrin 105a). Subsequent Jewish tradition has been more inclusive: so long as non-Jews follow seven specific moral principles they will be rewarded in an afterlife.

The exact nature of the subsequent World to Come is not known (see Ber. 34b). As we will see, the nature of the World to Come became a subject of

intense medieval rabbinic debate. Yet we do know that the World to Come will be radically different from this world:

The World to Come is not like this world. The World to Come has neither eating nor drinking nor propagation nor business nor jealousy nor hatred nor competition—only the righteous sit with their crowns on their heads deriving pleasure from the radiance of the Divine Presence. (Ber. 17a)

However, the rabbis do have a lot to say about what precedes the World to Come. Thus after a brief presence by the corpse (see Shab. 13b), the soul departs to a spiritual realm: either purgatory (Gehennah; heb. *gehinnom*) or paradise (the Garden of Eden; heb. *gan eden*). Purgatory is where the soul suffers for sins not yet atoned for—whether idolatry (Ta’ 5a) and incest (‘Er. 19a) or losing one’s temper (Ned. 22a) and not heeding one’s wife (B.M. 59a). Purgatory is depicted as full of fire, brimstone, darkness—and suffering: “Fire is one sixtieth of [the intensity of the fire in] purgatory” (Ber. 67b). However, the duration of suffering is usually limited to a year (see R.H. 17a).

There are some exceptions, including those who deny the resurrection of the dead, who “descend to purgatory and are judged there for all generations, as it says (Isa. 66:24), “And they will go out and see the carcasses of the people who rebelled against me.” Purgatory will be consumed, but they will not be consumed” (R.H. 17a). These sources convey a combination of annihilationism and eternal hell.

Most of the subsequent Jewish tradition has foregone an eternal hell: after being purged, the soul is either annihilated or ascends to paradise (see Altmann 1972 on a ferocious seventeenth century controversy over whether the classical rabbis accepted an eternal hell). In any case, the souls of the righteous are sent to paradise: “whoever observes [the laws of] the Torah—behold paradise is before him; and whoever does not observe it—behold purgatory” (Exodus Rabbah 2:2). Paradise is a realm of joy and respite for them, and is variously described as full of trees and fruit and their fragrance, and even dancing (see Pesikta Rabbati 50:1; Ta’ 31a; Numbers Rabbah 13:2).

Some caution must be taken with the sources about paradise though: it’s not always clear whether they are describing the postmortem spiritual realm or the post-resurrection World to Come. The terminology of ‘paradise’ and ‘World to Come’ has various meanings, and sometimes the terms are used interchangeably: to each refer to the postmortem spiritual realm or to each refer to the post-resurrection World to Come. The medieval rabbis debated over the depth of the distinction.

Medieval Rabbis. Several prominent medieval Jewish philosophers and talmudists set themselves the task of mapping out the labyrinth of afterlife-concepts they inherited from their classical rabbinic forebears. Their project involved the clarification of ambiguous terminology and the development of a systematic theory of the afterlife.

Broadly speaking, two camps emerged (for more on the views of these two camps, and scholarly disputes about their makeup, see Segal 2016). The first was Maimonides and his followers: they understood the ‘World to Come’ to refer to an everlasting (or possibly atemporal) disembodied state (see Maimonides 1995: 210–11). The world is ‘to come’ not because it has yet to come into existence but because a given subject can enjoy it only after death (see Maimonides 1995: 212). They thus make no distinction between a spiritual world that immediately follows death and the World to Come.

The spiritual world depicted by Maimonides and his followers is not in any literal way the World to Come described by the classical rabbis. Rather, the disembodied subject is constituted by the metaphysical (specifically theological) truths he came to know by the time he died: what many medievals, following al-Farabi and Avicenna, termed ‘the acquired intellect’. In such a state the subject does nothing but think: there is no feeling, emoting, or acting. (Although, somehow, this was supposed to be unimaginably pleasurable!) The image of the righteous “sit[ting] with their crowns on their heads” was understood metaphorically, as the constant apprehension of metaphysical truths.

God plays no active role in ensuring that a given subject has an eternal afterlife: after all, whether a person survives death depends directly on what he knows, and if he does survive, he necessarily exists forever, since he is then constituted only by metaphysical truths, which exist eternally.

Finally, resurrection is at best a sideshow: indeed, Maimonides was accused of denying it. While vociferously denying the accusation, he made it clear that resurrection was not for the sake of those who will be resurrected—it will be done, rather, to demonstrate God’s power over nature—and that its effects will be temporary. Those who are resurrected will die again and return to the more blessed state of disembodied intellect, unencumbered by the bodily veil that would interfere with the apprehension of metaphysical truths.

The second camp was headed by Meir Abulafia and Nachmanides, and reached its pinnacle in Hasdai Crescas (14–15th c.): they understood the ‘World to Come’ to refer to an everlasting embodied state that would follow the resurrection. It is ‘to come’ not just because the subject can enjoy it only after death, but because it has yet to come into existence.

The World to Come depicted by this camp involves much more than thinking: feeling, emoting, and acting play a role. In particular, the resurrected enjoy the spiritual bliss that attends loving God, basking in his love, and devoutly pursuing his commands. The image of the righteous “sit[ting] with their crowns on their heads deriving pleasure from the radiance of the Divine Presence” was understood more-or-less literally.

God plays an active role in determining who will survive death and who will eventually be resurrected. These determinations are made based upon the subjects’ righteousness or wickedness in this life, rather than their intellectual achievements.

Finally, while the dead do exist in a purely spiritual state between death and the resurrection, the eternal life that follows the resurrection is a more blessed state. This is partly because it involves a more just compensation for righteous behavior: the body participates in such behavior and so it is fitting that it should reap the rewards (Abulafia 2000: 332, 334–5 and Crescas 1990: 336). And it is partly because it permits one to serve God more completely, in both body and soul. Indeed, God had originally intended that Adam live an eternal embodied life of just that sort. While Adam’s sin radically changed the nature of *this* life, God’s original intention will be realized in the lives of those resurrected (Nachmanides 1964: 304–5, 1960: 480).

Mysticism. Originally attributed to the classical rabbis, medieval and early modern mystics also developed a doctrine of reincarnation: some souls undergo cycles of life and death in this world, before proceeding to any spiritual realm. Thus there is a kind of afterlife not in a spiritual realm or World to Come, but in this world. Reincarnation is usually associated more with Eastern religions, but it is not limited to them. While the doctrine is not as central for Judaism as it is for Hinduism and Buddhism, it is mentioned in the central Jewish mystical texts (see Blau 2001).

Reincarnation is supposed to serve two related purposes. The first is to punish wrongs that cannot be properly punished in purgatory. The suffering of the righteous is sometimes explained by Jewish mysticism in terms of wrongs committed in a previous life. The theodicy can even be extended to the suffering of animals not usually taken to be capable of committing wrongs deserving of punishments. According Hayyim Vital (16–17th c.), people can be reincarnated as animals:

Behold, after a person’s death, he is repaid for his sins before he is entered into purgatory, through many kinds of punishment, all termed reincarnation. This means that he can be reincarnated as a mineral, vegetable,

animal or person. Almost all people have to reincarnate in these ways. The reason being that [a person] is unable to receive his punishment, until he is an embodied soul, at which time he can suffer and feel this pain, and thereby be atoned of his sins. But the extent of his sinning determines the kind of reincarnation he will have, whether it be as a mineral, vegetable or animal, etc. (1988: 59)

This explanation need not be taken to apply to all cases of suffering, and neither is it the only kind of theodicy provided by the Jewish tradition (see Goldschmidt 2014; Goldschmidt & Seacord 2013).

The second purpose is soul-building: reincarnation makes available opportunities for spiritual development not available in a single lifetime. This is related to the first purpose, since soul-building is supposed to be one of the main purposes of punishment. Suffering can help us to develop virtues and to perform good deeds neglected in previous lives. Thus the early modern mystic, Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto (*The Ramchal*; 18th c.), explains how reincarnation maximizes our chances of becoming virtuous: “one soul would enter this world at different times in different bodies, and in this way, would be able to rectify at one time that which it ruined [by sinning] at another time, or perfect that which it did not perfect” (1997: 124–6).

Reincarnation is to be included alongside other afterlife traditions. While not as familiar or central a component of Jewish tradition, the doctrine is continuous with the tradition’s emphasis on the afterlife as a realm of punishment and justice.

The Significance of the Afterlife

Now that we’ve outlined Jewish traditions about the afterlife, we address a philosophical point about the significance of the afterlife. We opened with a contemporary rejection of the afterlife; while the Torah might not reject an afterlife, its narrative and laws are, on the face of it, virtually all about this life. Judaism is focused on our most pressing moral responsibilities, not some recondite realm. Whether there is an afterlife or not, the idea seems to be that it isn’t all that significant.

However, there are various traditional sources that emphasize the significance of the afterlife. First, we address a classical source, a particularly puzzling Mishnah. Next we turn to various sources and arguments for the significance of the afterlife invoked by Luzzatto.

A Puzzle. Here is the puzzling passage in the Mishnah:

Better is one hour of good deeds and repentance in this world than the whole of the life of the World to Come. Better is one hour of pleasure in the World to Come than the whole life of this world. (Ab. 4:17)

Yom-Tov Lipman-Heller (the *Tosafot Yom-Tov*; 17th c.) notes that it is not clear whether the “World to Come” here means the postmortem paradise or whether it means the ultimate post-resurrection world (see Lipman-Heller 1999: 368). In any case, the Mishnah appears to be at odds with itself, as explained by the *Midrash Shmuel* (16th c.):

We have to precisely examine this Mishnah as it appears that the first clause conflicts with the last. For in the first clause it teaches [that] “one hour of repentance and good deeds in this world is greater than the whole life of the World to Come,” and obviously meaning [by “the whole life of the World to Come”] a life of spiritual pleasure in the World to Come. But in the last clause it teaches [that] “one hour of spiritual pleasure in the World to Come is greater than the whole of the life of this world,” and obviously meaning [by “the whole of the life of this world”] a life in this world in repentance and good deeds. (2000: 315)

If one hour of good deeds and repentance in this world is better than the whole life of spiritual pleasure in the World to Come, then it’s not the case that one hour of spiritual pleasure in the World to Come is better than a life of good deeds and repentance in this world. Since the first clause of the Mishnah tells us that one hour of good deeds and repentance is better than a whole life of spiritual pleasure in the World to Come, it follows that it is not the case that one hour of pleasure in the World to Come is better than a life of good deeds and repentance in this world—which is contrary to the second clause of the Mishna.

Answer 1. The first answer casts doubt on the assumption that if one hour of good deeds and repentance in this world is better than the whole life of spiritual pleasure in the World to Come, then it’s not the case that one hour of spiritual pleasure in the World to Come is better than a life of good deeds and repentance in this world. After all, it isn’t always the case that if one hour of something is better than a whole life of another thing, then one hour of that other thing cannot be better than a whole life of that first thing. For example, one hour of tickling is better than a whole life of loud music, even while an hour of loud music is better than a whole life of tickling. Too much of a good thing could be horrible!

Criticism. However, the puzzle doesn't assume as a general principle that if one hour of something is better than a whole life of another thing, then one hour of that other thing cannot be better than a whole life of the first thing. It only need make the assumption about this particular case, which is not a case of too much of a good thing being bad. On the contrary, a whole earthly life of good deeds and repentance is far better than an hour of it, and a whole spiritual life of the pleasure in the World to Come is far better than an hour of that. The puzzle stands.

Answer 2. The second answer is that each world is better than the other in some way. What the Mishnah means is that an hour of good deeds and repentance in this world is better than the whole life of the World to Come in a certain way, and in that way an hour of spiritual pleasure in the World to Come is not better the whole life of the World to Come. And that an hour of spiritual pleasure in the World to Come is better than the whole of this world in another way, and in that way an hour of good deeds and repentance in this world is not better than the whole of this life.

Yonah of Gerona. There are various ways of working the answer out, and which can be drawn from traditional commentaries. Yonah of Gerona (13th c.) explains that an hour of good deeds and repentance in this world is better than the whole of the life of the World to Come:

because in a short amount of time in this world a person is able to earn the next world...and it is with respect to this that it is said [in the Mishnah] "better is one hour of good deeds of repentance," and nothing else is praiseworthy about this world...as they [good deeds and repentance] are effective in this world and not in the World to Come. (1993: 82–3)

Thus one hour in this world is better in containing opportunities to earn the World to Come, opportunities that are no longer available there; whereas one hour of the World to Come is better for containing a degree of spiritual pleasure not available in this world. The worlds are better in different respects, and the contradiction is avoided.

Criticism. It is peculiar to say that one year of work is better than the whole of retirement because it affords one the opportunity to save for retirement, an opportunity that one no longer has once retired. If working is good *only* because it promotes a better retirement, then there is no real sense in which a year of work is better than the whole of retirement. Similarly, if good deeds and repentance are good *only* because they secure a better portion in the World to Come, then there is no real sense in which an

hour of good deeds and repentance in this world is better than the whole of the life of the World to Come.

Midrash Shmuel. The *Midrash Shmuel* points instead to a difference between God's perspective and the way things are:

in the eyes of God one hour in repentance and good deeds in this world is greater than all the reward that He will give [the subject] in the World to Come in that in the eyes of God, if He gave him thousands of times more than He did, it would appear to Him that it is still fitting to bestow more reward since He delights in beneficence. But, according to the truth, one hour of spiritual pleasure that [God] gives man in the World to Come is greater than the whole life of this world with all the repentance and good deeds he will do, and hence in the hour of spiritual pleasure all [the reward for] his commandments are paid him, and the remainder is a free gift, as they said. (2000: 368)

From God's perspective one hour of good deeds and repentance is better than the whole of the life of the World to Come, since God values our repentance and good deeds more than our spiritual pleasure and would like to bestow even more spiritual pleasure on us for it. But in truth, just one hour of spiritual pleasure suffices to compensate for all the good deeds and repentance performed in this life: anything beyond that goes beyond mere compensation.

Criticism. The explanation implies that God gets things wrong in taking our good deeds to be of greater value than the spiritual pleasure of the World to Come. The problem is avoided if we instead contrast God's ultimate purpose with our own, as do our next two commentators.

Hasdai Crescas. Crescas puts the distinction as follows:

But the existence of these two purposes is required, as prefaced, but from different perspectives. For from the perspective of the commanded, the ultimate purpose is the love [of God] but from the perspective of the commander, the ultimate purpose is the bestowal of the good and the eternal attachment to the radiance of His presence. And they are indeed implied and explained in their saying in the Mishnah...: "Better is an hour in repentance and good deeds in this world than the whole of the World to Come"—meaning that the ultimate desire of the true servant and lover [of God] is the service [of God], and toward it is the whole orientation [of his life]...[However,] the ultimate purpose for the commander was the what the Mishnah determined about it, in their saying (Ibid): "Better is one hour of spiritual pleasure in the World to Come than the whole of the life of this world." (1990: 250)

That is to say, God's ultimate purpose is for us to bask in His presence, a state that can be achieved only in the World to Come. Our ultimate purpose, on the other hand, is to serve God with all our heart and soul, an endeavor that can be undertaken only in this world. By an 'ultimate purpose' we mean something like the end which the subject values the most (compare "chief end" in Edwards 1989: 407). So an hour of good deeds and repentance is indeed better than the whole of the World to Come, with respect to fulfilling our ultimate purpose; and an hour of spiritual pleasure in the World to Come is indeed better than the whole of this world, with respect to fulfilling God's ultimate purpose. The worlds are better in different respects, and the contradiction is avoided.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe. The seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneersohn (20th c.), also contrasts God's ultimate purpose with our own, but in the opposite direction. He explains the difference as between the "inner" and the "revealed," where with respect to the "inner" this world is better, and with respect to the "revealed" the World to Come is better:

This is to be explained according to what is explicated in the Hassidic tradition: the greater value of repentance and good deeds is had in that, on account of fulfilling of the commandments in this material world, a dwelling place is made for God in the lower realms...thus in the inner respect of the intention, there is greater value in this world, whereas in the revealed respect of the intention of God's commandments, there is greater value in the World to Come, for there the righteous "sit and bask in the radiance of the divine presence," that is, they attain the revealed infinite life that is in the fulfillment of the commandments in this world. (2004: 238)

Schneersohn goes on to simplify that "in respect of the soul there is greater value in the World to Come, for there is the revelation of the divine." That is to say, the World to Come is better for us—because in the beatific vision there the goodness is most apparent. By contrast "in respect of God's intention in creating the material world and body, there is greater value in this material world." That is to say, with respect to fulfilling God's ultimate purpose, this world is better—because "God desired an abode for Himself in the lower realms." So an hour of good deeds and repentance is indeed better than the whole of the World to Come, with respect to fulfilling God's ultimate purpose; and an hour of spiritual pleasure in the World to Come is indeed better than the whole of this world, with respect to our well-being. The worlds are better in different respects, and the contradiction is avoided.

Criticism. Each answer avoids the problems facing the previous interpretations. Each is consistent and elegant considered in itself. But they are not consistent with *each other*. It will be difficult to tell which is preferable.

Moreover, there are other classical sources contrary to both interpretations. Indeed, the preceding Mishnah states in the name of the very same teacher as ours: “Rabbi Jacob used to say: This world is like an anteroom before the World to Come. Prepare yourself in the anteroom so that you can enter the banquet hall” (Ab. 4:16). That would appear to imply that both God’s and our ultimate purposes are fulfilled in the World to Come. One usually builds an anteroom for the sake of the banquet hall, not for its own sake; and ordinarily one proceeds through the anteroom as a mere means to go beyond it.

To be sure, as Crescas notes, a prior Mishnah states: “Be not like servants who serve their master for the sake of reward; rather, be like servants who do not serve their master for the sake of reward” (Ab. 1:3). But that only means that one ought not to aim for reward, whether this-worldly or other-worldly. It in no way implies that man’s ultimate end, or *telos*, or that for which he was designed, is anything other than basking in God’s radiance in the “banquet hall.” These two senses of ‘purpose’ should not be conflated.

Cosmology and Eschatology

Luzzatto takes the World to Come to be God’s ultimate purpose and our ultimate purpose—or, at least, what should be our ultimate purpose:

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 splendour 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, as our Sages of blessed memory have said (Ab. 4:16), “This world is like a anteroom to the World to Come.” (1990, 16–17)

Though Luzzatto, might not have intended them as such, three arguments for this view can be distilled from his ethical treatise, *Mesilat Yesharim*, and his theological dialogue, *Da’at Tevunot*. We’ll first summarize the arguments and then evaluate them. Our order for the arguments does not follow Luzzatto’s.

The First Argument. The first argument is from Luzzatto's cosmology. Luzzatto sees the reason why God created the world in His generosity:

The blessed Creator is the very essence of good. It is the nature of good to bestow good. This is why the Lord created men—so that He could bestow good upon them. For where there is no receiver, there is no bestowal of good. (1982: 17)

God is perfectly good. Perfect goodness is diffusive: it wants to bestow goodness, and it can't do that without other beings in place to receive that goodness. So God creates other beings. Such a principle is at work in various theological writers, both Jewish and non-Jewish (compare Kretzmann 1997: 223–5). Luzzatto explains that God won't bring about just any kind of being:

In his sublime wisdom, however, He knew that for this good to be complete it should be received as the fruits of one's labor. For then the recipient would feel himself the proprietor of that good and would not be shamefaced in receiving it, as if he were receiving charity. As it is said: "One who does not eat of his own is ashamed to look at his benefactor." (*Yerushalmi, Orla* 1:3) (1982: 17–19)

God wants to bestow goodness in the best way, and the best way is for the being receiving it to earn it, for goods that have been earned are enjoyed more than goods that have not been earned. This means that God must create free beings who can earn their reward in a world of moral trials—this world. But this world will ultimately be displaced when the beings will receive the reward earned. The goodness received, the greatest goodness of all, is an eternal vision of God—the World to Come. Thus this world turns out to be a means—a "path," an "anteroom"—to the World to Come. The good things in this world and the good things we do in it are those that move us towards the greatest good in the World to Come—the "sole purpose" of our creation.

Criticism. Luzzatto's argument relies on a feature of our psychology: that we enjoy the goods we have earned more than those we have not earned—indeed, that we are ashamed to receive such goods. Even granting the truth of these psychological assumptions, they appear to be merely contingently true. For could God not have created beings without such features—creatures who feel just as good about unearned goods as about earned goods? But then, at least so far as Luzzatto's argument goes, God need not have created this world in order to bestow the greatest good.

Reply. God could have created beings who enjoy unearned goods as much as earned goods. However, immediately bestowing the ultimate good upon such beings would not have been best, for even if beings could enjoy unearned goods as much as earned goods, enjoying earned goods is still better than enjoying unearned goods just as earned goods are better than unearned goods. They need not be better in any psychological respect though. The psychological language Luzzatto employs is inessential to Luzzatto's argument.

Indeed, elsewhere Luzzatto explains that earning the good allows us to resemble God a little:

His wisdom decreed that, for the good to be complete, it is fitting that the one who enjoys it will be the master of this good, meaning one who acquires the good by himself, and not one to whom the good is attached by [mere] chance. And you can see that this can be regarded as a bit of a resemblance, as far as is possible, to the perfection of God. For behold he (Blessed be He) is perfect through Himself, and not through chance. (1997: 38–9)

The resemblance to God appears not to be incidental to the superiority of earned goods over unearned goods, for immediately after explaining how earning the reward allows us to resemble God, Luzzatto tells us that that “therefore” (Ibid) God created a world of moral trials.

Reply to Reply. The assumption that earned goods are better than unearned goods—contingent psychological factors aside—is not obviously true. For it is not obvious that it is good to resemble God in this respect. Indeed, there is reason for thinking that unearned goods are better than earned goods. For the unearned good allows God to more fully express unconditional love and grace. Of course, earned goods might be better in some respects, even while unearned goods are better in other respects. The point is that it is not obvious that earned goods are superior overall.

The Second Argument. The second argument is from the overall quality of our this-worldly lives. This world does not make available the kinds of goods we'd expect from God. Luzzatto laments:

For what is man's life in this world! Who is truly happy and content in this world? “The days of our life are seventy years, and, if exceedingly vigorous, eighty years, and their persistence is but labor and foolishness” (*Psalms* 90: 10). How many different kinds of suffering, and sickness, and pains and burdens! And after all this—death! Not one in a thousand is to be found to whom the world has yielded a superabundance of gratifications and true contentment.

And even such a one, though he attains to the age of one hundred years, passes and vanishes from the world. (1990: 23)

Luzzatto's view about this world is quite at odds with Goodman's. On Luzzatto's view, the World to Come will rectify the misery of this world, by compensating for it or by giving it deeper meaning. However, the point here is not to make for a theodicy in terms of the World to Come, but to show us that this world cannot be the main point. The World to Come is more important.

Criticism. Even accepting the controversial value judgment about our world, the conclusion is ambiguous: it could be either that the World to Come is more important to God or that it is more important to us. If the conclusion is that the afterlife is more important to us, then it remains possible that this world is God's ultimate purpose. God's ultimate purpose could be our good deeds and repentance in this world, while the World to Come is just a means of realizing justice for the misery of this world.

The Third Argument. The third argument is from scriptural and rabbinic authority. In *Mesilat Yesharim*, the scriptural sources are limited to a couple of Psalms, intended to show that a relationship with God is the only real good there is (see Luzzatto 1990: 19): "But as for me, the nearness of God is my good" (Ps. 73: 28), and "I ask one thing from God; that will I seek—to dwell in God's house all the days of my life" (Ps. 27: 4). Luzzatto takes that "nearness" and "life" to be a relationship with God in the life of the World to Come. *Da'at Tevunot* in turn presents a host of prophetic verses to the effect that the ultimate state will in fact be the manifestation of God in the World to Come (see Luzzatto 1997: 27–51).

As for the rabbinic sources, we have already seen how the rabbis construed this world as "an anteroom to the World to Come" (Ab. 4:16). They variously describe this world as a prelude or means to the World to Come—like a beach before the shore, or like preparation before the feast: "This world is like the shore and the World to Come like the sea" (Kohélet Rabbah 1: 36); "He who exerted himself on Friday will eat on the Sabbath" (A.Z. 3a); and "Today for their [the commandments] performance, and tomorrow for their reward" (Er. 22a). This world is the means; the World to Come it the goal.

Criticism. As for the biblical sources, the Psalms might mean that the relationship with God in the World to Come is of supreme value to the Psalter, but this does not mean that it is God's main purpose. Furthermore, the Psalms do not explicitly state that the relationship the Psalter longs for is only to be had in the World to Come; perhaps the Psalter seeks nearness to

God in good deeds and repentance in this world. As for the rabbinic sources, that the world is a means does not mean that it is a mere means. Furthermore, even if the World to Come is more important to us, God's main purpose could be in this world. The criticisms of the previous argument apply again.

Reply. However, Luzzatto argues in another way for the conclusion that this world cannot be God's ultimate purpose: from scriptural prophecies and rabbinic teachings that predict the replacement of this world with the World to come. If this world were God's ultimate purpose, then it should keep on going forever. This world could forever remain a place of moral trials, where subjects could do good deeds and repent. They could then die and proceed to another place of reward and punishment, while new subjects take their place in this world—and so on forever. But, Luzzatto points out:

we know this not to be so, as we have demonstrated through Scripture, and as is clear to us from the words of the sages—that ultimately men will be divested of freedom of choice, and evil will cease from the world, as they have stated (Ber. 10a): “It is written: ‘And sins will vanish from the earth.’” The ultimate intent then is not reward and punishment, but universal perfection. It is just that the Holy One, Blessed be He, has linked the two systems together as one, in the depth of his design channeling all towards universal perfection. (1982: 59–61)

It would be odd for God to put an end to something that is so good as to be his main reason for creation. But, in the end, this world will disappear, and the World to Come will last forever. Thus, this world cannot be God's ultimate purpose; the World to Come must be.

Reply to the Reply. Even if this world is God's ultimate purpose, it need not keep going on forever. God could of course create another world like ours elsewhere. In any case, it is not always better for an agent to extend the realization of his purpose in time. As the passage from the Lubavitcher Rebbe suggests, it is not just the performance of good deeds and repentance that is God's purpose, but that this performance make God's presence manifest in the world. This might be the kind of activity that can be completed, and once completed, cannot go on.

Indeed, Luzzatto emphasizes that God's ultimate purpose is the divine manifestation, particularly the manifestation of divine power in the eventual annihilation of evil. Now the other divine purpose of benefiting us is subsidiary to and contingently linked to this higher purpose: “The final intent is not for reward and punishment, but for universal perfection. However, the Holy One Blessed be He has brought these two [intents] together as one” (1982: 60).

Conclusion

That completes our discussion of rival views about the relative significance of the afterlife versus this life. We reach no definite verdict. At any rate, we have seen that the Jewish tradition takes the afterlife and belief in the afterlife to be significant. Yet, within limits, diverse views about the nature of the afterlife are possible. The exact details will have to wait.¹

Note

1. We reference English or bilingual editions of sources where possible, though the aforementioned translations even in these cases are often our own. Thanks to Benjamin Matheson for comments on the draft of this essay.

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