The 28th Annual Symposium on Jewish Civilization

“olam ha-zeh v’olam ha-ba: This World and the World to Come in Jewish Belief and Practice”

Presenters’ Abstracts
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Rabbinic traditions about meals for the righteous in the World to Come are contradictory. On the one hand, the righteous are promised a banquet of Leviathan, Bar Yochnai (or Bar Yuchnai), and Behemoth in a tent made of Leviathan’s skin. But Rav says, “In the World to Come, there is no eating and drinking.” Rabbenu Bahya ben Asher, the fourteenth century Spanish Biblical exegete and kabbalist, devotes the fourth and final “Gate” of his short treatise on Jewish eating practices, *Shulhan Shel Arba* [“Table of Four”], to address this apparent contradiction about meals prepared for the righteous in the World to Come.

But since R. Bahya wrote *Shulhan Shel Arba* as a guide for meals in this world, the question arises: how does talking about, imagining, and knowing about what meals are like in the next world affect our practice and enjoyment of our meals in this world? Such talk about body- and soul-rewarding meals in the World to Come while at meals in this world is intended to cultivate what Jonathan Haidt calls the “emotion of elevation,” or what Leon Kass describes in *The Hungry Soul* as the transformation of our physical hunger for food from “Fressen to Essen...to sanctified eating.”
Dereck Daschke, Truman State University

“The End of the World and the World to Come: What Apocalyptic Literature Says about the Time After the Endtime”

While Jewish speculation about olam ha-ba, either in the sense of personal eschatology (afterlife) or in the sense of the Messianic Age (cosmic eschatology), has largely been restrained, in one area of theological imagination such speculation has been persistent and insistent: apocalyptic literature. While the central focus for this literary genre, which encompasses works from roughly 400 BCE to the second century CE, is often the events of and conditions behind the end of human history, almost all give some indication as to what kind of existence shall follow.

Frequently in this literature global and personal eschatology are linked together. Themes of individual sickness and healing underscore the healing of a corrupt world in the Messianic Age; some apocalypses reveal the places of cosmic reward and punishment that many Jews and Christians expect await them after death; individual fealty to Jewish Law not only redeems the people but also restores the earth. This paper will highlight key disclosures regarding the World to Come from several Jewish apocalypses – the Books of Enoch, Daniel, 4 Ezra, 2 Baruch, the Christian Book of Revelation (a work composed well within the Jewish literary tradition)—and attempt to sketch out what that world after the End shall be like.
In my paper I will address Levinas’ reading of some pages from the Babylonian Talmud that specifically treat the notion of “messianism” and amplify the contrast between “this world” and “the world to come”—according to traditional Jewish terminology. My assumption is that Levinas reads these Talmudic pages not according to, but rather in contrast with, the traditional notion of “religion.” Levinas does not consider religion as a specific “belief” in a deity—among many others who are in theological-political contrast between them. He rather refers to his philosophical-phenomenological education and interprets “religion” fundamentally as a form of “ethical-moral association” between human beings. With respect to this, Levinas recasts the notion of “messianism” as well as its two correlated notions: “this world” and “the world to come.” Yet these are not accounted for in their traditional “religious” sense, rather under a different perspective: in ethical-philosophical sense.

My paper divides accordingly into three sections.

In the first section I intend to show how Levinas actually reads the pertinent Talmudic pages (specifically: *bSahn* 96b-99a) and how he methodologically relies on the teachings of the mysterious “Monsieur Chouchani,” an enigmatic Jewish individual who had anprodigious memory and intellect. Levinas’ and Chouchani’s method fundamentally consists in framing together *halakhah* and *aggadah*.

In the second section I will examine specifically Levinas’ treatment of the notions of “this world” and “the world to come.” In particular, I will try to show how Levinas has systematically spoiled these traditional Jewish notions from any confessionally recognizable traits and has rephrased them in these terms: as the present “unrighteous” world and the future (utopian?) “righteous” world.

In the third section I will criticize this kind of “hyper-philosophical” approach and try to show how Levinas’ reading of the Jewish notions of “this world” and “the world to come” actually neutralizes its cultural specificity with some relevant consequences, especially for so-called “inter-religious relationships.”
Morris M. Faierstein, University of Maryland

“Trapped between This World and the Next World: The Mystical Origins of the Dibbuk and its Historical Significance”

The concept of the Dibbuk in contemporary Jewish culture is identified with S. Ansky’s play, which has nothing to do with the historical concept of the Dibbuk, from its origins in medieval Kabbalah and its first appearance as a phenomenon among the Kabbalists of Safed in the late sixteenth century. My lecture and the resulting paper will discuss the following points.

1. The concept of the Dibbuk has its roots in the concept of transmigration [gilgul] that is first mentioned in the Sefer Bahir and expanded in the Zohar. The concept of transmigration was rejected by the medieval Jewish philosophical tradition and also by the teachings of the Catholic and Protestant churches.

2. The first locus for an appearance and exorcism of a Dibbuk is Safed and its kabbalistic circles. All later manifestations are built on these earliest models.

3. In the eighteenth century the motif of the Dibbuk and exorcism becomes a literary genre that is not based factual events, but is created as “folktales.”

4. Ansky takes these folktales and writes a play based on the style of late nineteenth century Russian literature (the so called Silver Age). Very little of his play is based on historical or cultural realities.
Zev Garber, Los Angeles Valley College

“Emet: The Paradox of Death and Afterlife”

What is the Jewish response to death? The laws of mourning require the mourner to behave as if he or she is dead. No normal activity (positive religious requirements, work, study, food preparation, excessive personal hygiene and grooming, conjugal relations, etc.) is permitted during the period of Shivah, the seven days following death. The mourner is touched by the anti-life and his/her activities reflect this sense of incompleteness. The mourner returns to religious requirements and social amenities by degrees. Paradoxically, in the mourning observances, the mourner and the mourned are united; that is to say, by observing the absence of life, the mourner is sensitized to the value and quality of life.

My presentation will cover the following topics: (1) a brief discussion on a halachic definition of death; (2) the development of the two opposing yet connected principles of tradition that deal with death: resurrection of the dead and immortality of the soul; (3) conceptual language differences dealing with life, death, afterlife; (4) Kaddish matters: Kiddush HaShem (martyrdom celebrated) and Kiddush Ha-Chayim (choosing life); (5) the advantages and disadvantages of conflating biblical text and rabbinic interpretation on death. Finally, I will argue that the psychology of death and mourning are rooted in the philosophy of ‘emet, the portal to the Academy on High.
Ancient Jewish sources from the Bible to the Talmud contain a dizzying array of ideas about a better world to come (be it a messianic era in historical time, an eschatological end of days, or an afterlife). Some of these sources imagine such a deep disjunction between this world and the world to come that entry into the latter requires an escape from the former. But other sources imagine a conjunction between the two and apply themselves to the task of attaining a foretaste of the world to come in this world. This paper explores the radically diverse strategies employed by ancient Jews to bridge this world and the world to come so as to locate “heaven on earth.”
My paper investigates wine as it is represented and employed in relation to the World to Come in rabbinic and kabbalistic literature. I argue that an analysis of the ways in which the rabbis and certain kabbalists (such as the authors of the Zohar, Joseph Karo, and Moses Cordovero) pictured and/or used wine gives us an intoxicating taste of their perspectives on the present world and the hereafter alike.

On the one hand, the rabbis' discussions of wine mirror their perspectives on the olam ha-zeh: both winemaking and this-worldly existence require much toiling; the joys we can derive from them need to be regulated and confined to holy times; both can easily end up in degradation and sin. On the other hand, the wine of the olam ha-ba is deprived of all of its negative aspects: it is easy to make, abundant, and gladdens without ever leading to sinful drunkenness—thus coming to represent the very delights that characterize existence in the World to Come.

Kabbalists further contributed to the development of this picture by variously elaborating on the role of wine-drinking for the sake of earning one's place in the hereafter. I contend that while Karo’s insistence on the importance of abstention and the Zoharic author's recommendation to imbibe the symbolic wine of Torah signal their negative perception of this world, Cordovero's strategic emphasis on the significance of preserving wine from gentile contact for the sake of reaching the olam ha-ba reveals much about his overall plan for the olam ha-zeh.
"Warriors, Wives, and Wisdom: olam ha-zeh v’olam ha-ba in the (so-called) Apocrypha”

The vast array of Jewish late Second Temple Period religious texts written under the pressures of imperial and Hasmonean domination presents almost as diverse an assembly of responses to the political as to the cultural challenges of the times. For some groups, the perceived hostilities of the Hellenistic world could not help but provoke the question of what it might mean ultimately to be a Jew.

This presentation examines Jewish texts abandoned by the rabbis after the destruction of the Temple, but which retain quasi-canonical status in the Roman Catholic Church and have remained fully canonical throughout the Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox traditions. Although no longer part of the Jewish canon, the real value of these texts lies with the insight they provide into the minds of late Second Temple period Jews regarding the world in which they lived—as well as any world to come.
Entrance into The World to Come requires a proper rabbinic diet. Unlike This World, however, The World to Come features a smorgasbord that would put the fanciest Las Vegas buffet to shame, including such mythical creatures as the famous Leviathan and Behemoth, as well as the lesser known Ziz.

This paper examines classical rabbinic discussion about the diet that merits entrance into the World to Come and about the menu that awaits therein. It concludes that such discussions are used to justify rabbinic dietary practices in This World. Included in this conversation are topics such as why non-Jews need not keep kosher and why nonkosher foods are prohibited for Jews only in This World (but not in The World to Come).
The transition between life and death is a major focus for discussion about life in this world and the next in Talmudic literature. The passing of sages in general and the execution of the Ten Martyrs in particular feature prominently in rabbinic literature. Rabbi Akiva’s death, however, would seem to have left a greater impression than the deaths of all of the others especially in the context of the question of the meaning of death for someone who strove so hard to give meaning to life.

The focus of my paper will be a comparison of the discussion between Rabbi Akiva and his students (BT, Berakhot 61a; JT, Berakhot 9, 14b) during his execution and Socrates’ discourse with his friends as the time approached for him to drink the cup of hemlock (Plato, Phaedon) – in connection with the immortality of the soul. The equanimity with which both men accept their deaths stands in sharp contrast to the agitation of those around them. The similarity between the two stories ends, however, at the composure with which the protagonists accept their deaths. The two discussions regarding the meaning of death and the source of comfort are fundamentally different.

Socrates seeks to prove the immortality of the soul, and the body’s perishable, ephemeral nature. He presents theological/metaphysical arguments, from which he draws Moral conclusions, whereas Rabbi Akiva has no recourse to theology, focusing entirely upon moral/practical argument. Despite Socrates’ moral conclusions, however, the main thrust of his parting discourse is his assertion that death is merely a passage to immortality.

From the moment that he has come to terms with his death, Socrates no longer values life: what is another hour of life as compared to eternity in heaven? It is in these few minutes that we discover the difference between the two. Rabbi Akiva cherishes the most terrible moments of his life, refusing to cease pursuing his moral objective in this world for even a single instant. For Socrates, immortality of the soul is the source of meaning; for Rabbi Akiva there exists only the moral dimension.
Elias Sacks, University of Colorado at Boulder

“Worlds to Come Between East and West: Immortality and the Rise of Modern Jewish Thought”

The concept of olam haba [the world to come] is not generally taken to be central to modern Jewish thought. My paper challenges this view, renarrating the rise of Jewish modernity by exploring the neglected Hebrew works of two foundational figures: the German-Jewish thinker Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786) and the Eastern European philosopher Nachman Krochmal (1785-1840). More specifically, I argue that modern Jewish thought emerges, in part, as a soteriological debate between East and West—that one of modern Jewish thought’s earliest episodes is a debate between Krochmal and Mendelssohn about immortality and the nature of Judaism.

I will begin with Krochmal, showing that he casts belief in an afterlife as the product of fierce debates among ancient Jews who disagreed about whether the soul is immortal. I will then argue that Krochmal’s position is best read as a covert critique of Mendelssohn, whose Hebrew writings cast the doctrine of an immortal soul not as an object of ongoing debates among ancient Jews, but rather as a belief affirmed by the Hebrew Bible.

I will conclude by suggesting that this dispute between Mendelssohn and Krochmal is, in part, a dispute about the nature of the Jewish tradition: whereas Mendelssohn’s position implies that Judaism is a vehicle of timeless truths affirmed by the Bible, Krochmal’s position entails that Judaism is a historically developing phenomenon whose content emerges through clashes among human beings. For these foundational philosophical voices, then, olam haba becomes a crucial terrain for formulating—and contesting—theories of Jewish existence.
The mundane *olam ha-zeh* and the eschatological *olam ha-ba* were not the only “worlds” that were of interest to the Jews of medieval Europe. Jewish midrashic and visionary texts charted numerous intermediary strata that served as buffers between this world and the next. This presentation will explore one such otherworldly realm: *TEVEL*, an alternate universe of sorts populated by monstrous creatures, which was thought to be distant from—but accessible to—the human inhabitants of “this world.”

*TEVEL* was the subject of much speculation among medieval Jewish authors, and its monstrous residents were invoked and explored in a variety of literary, mystical, and even legal texts. This presentation will survey the many surprising contexts in which *TEVEL* and its inhabitants are invoked and examine why this motif resonated for medieval European Jewish authors and audiences. In particular, it will attempt to anchor Jewish ruminations on monstrosity and exoticism within the contemporary medieval Christian context—in which it was the Jews themselves who were conceived of as monstrous and otherworldly.
My paper explores how some Jews found empowerment in female imagery when they thought about the time leading up to the Last Days. While women for the most part play a marginal role in these eschatological events, there is one exception: the mother of the messiah. A striking example is Hephzibah, the mother of the Davidic messiah, who appears in a seventh century apocalyptic text, *Sefer Zerubavel*.

Mirroring Byzantine ideas of the Theotokos, the bearer of God, Hephzibah has messianic powers in her own right, and she is responsible for passing them on to her son, the Davidic Messiah. It is thanks to her that the Messiah is endowed with powers that enable him to fight the Antichrist, ushering in the Last Days. Centuries later, early modern crypto-Jews in Mexico declared Juana, the daughter of Blanca Enriquez, to be a quasi-Mary, who would literally birth the messiah. All of this of course is in contrast to much of pre-modern Jewish literature, where Mary is often seen as a "menstruating and wanton woman." I will explore how Jews, deeply familiar with marianic imagery, adopted and inverted such ideas to express Jewish identity and opposition to Christianity, all the while hoping for the coming of a Messiah who would vanquish their enemies.
“The Moral function of Olam Ha-ba in Rabbinic Literature”

The rabbis sometimes express their moral discomfort with a biblical idea or received tradition by declaring it inoperative for the “future world” [עולם הבא]. Whether it refers to the Messianic Era or a soul’s existence after death (or both), eschatology provided the rabbis with a moral safe-haven: although a troubling law or theology might not be eradicated in this world, it could be branded as such in the next. This ethical response does not solve the moral problem, but it does minimize it.

This paper will present three examples to highlight this rabbinic ethical hermeneutic. The first revolves around the biblical concept of the evil inclination [yetzer ha-ra]; the second around the biblical doctrine of inherited punishment (Exod 20:5); and the third example, the case of mamzer—a “bastard” child that is the product of incest or an extra-marital affair. Tragically, this child can never marry a standard (non mamzer) Jew.

No doubt, all three of these doctrines clashed with other values the rabbis elsewhere promote. And, in each of these cases, the exegetical grounding is forced, highlighting the rabbinic agenda to minimize the theological irritant by distinguishing this world from the next.
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