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THE IMMORTALITY IMPULSE AND JEWISH TRADITION

*Because I could not stop for Death –
He kindly stopped for me –
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
And Immortality.*

— Emily Dickinson

Since the creation and hiding of the tree of life at the beginning of time, the debate over immortality remains a quandary within human existence, just as relevant now as it was on the day Adam left Eden. Indeed, human existence continues to obsess over its own transience. For example, this preoccupation with the fragility of existence bookends the day of a Jew, as we awaken with thanks to God for letting us live another day, and drift into sleep with thoughts of protection against “the sleep of death.”¹ The Talmud even suggests weaponizing thoughts of our own mortality as the final bulwark against sinning.² Our palpable mortality, evident in every breath and heartbeat, prods humanity to act and create.

This obsession continues to drive revolutionary scientific research. With the advent of new advances in regenerative medicine, artificial intelligence, and nanotechnology, together with nimble, precise, and cheap genetic engineering, the iron walls of disease, aging, and mortality may soon crumble away into oblivion. After all, death and aging are the result of disease and decay—technical limits imposed by the current biological system. A 2013 article in *Cell* identifies the nine hallmarks of aging: “genomic instability, telomere attrition, epigenetic alterations, loss of proteostasis, deregulated nutrient sensing, mitochondrial dysfunction,

¹ Psalms 13:4, as quoted in the prayer before sleep.

² *Berakhot* 5a: “If one subdues his evil inclination, excellent; if not, he should remind himself of the day of death.”

cellular senescence, stem cell exhaustion, and altered intercellular communication.”³ Death is just another problem waiting to be hacked by scientific progress.

This view, once relegated to the realm of science fiction, is now becoming more and more popular within the science and technology community. It serves as the mission statement behind transhumanism, a cultural movement whose direct aim is to transcend current human physical limitations in areas such as intelligence, strength, and lifespan. Some scientists estimate that humans will achieve immortality by 2200 or even 2100. Ray Kurzweil, a prolific author, inventor, and futurist, believes that by 2029 “we will be adding more than a year every year to your remaining life expectancy, where the sands of time are running in rather than running out, where your remaining life expectancy actually stretches out as time goes by.”⁴ By 2045, Kurzweil claims that humans will be able to live forever. Though still prone to death through traumatic injury, in the absence of such injuries, humans could hypothetically keep living forever. Perhaps the first immortals have already been born.

While most scientists balk at Kurzweil’s ambitious claims, it is still critical to consider how the issue and pursuit of radical life extension may change society. Yuval Noah Harari, a professor in the Department of History at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, writes in his book, *Homo Deus*, about the importance of considering these effects.

Hence even if we don’t achieve immortality in our lifetime, the war against death is still likely to be the flagship project of the coming century. When you take into account our belief in the sanctity of human life, add the dynamics of the scientific establishment, and top it all with the needs of the capitalist economy, a relentless war against death seems to be inevitable. Our ideological commitment to human life will never allow us simply to accept human death. As long as people die of something, we will strive to overcome it.⁵

Even though Harari suggests that immortality will continue to elude us for some time, he firmly believes that the coming “war against death” will redefine and remake human existence. Even as lifespans elongate and the average age of death occurs later and later, the quest for immortality

³ Carlos López-Otín, *et al.*, “The Hallmarks of Aging,” *Cell* 153:6 (2013), 1194–1217.

⁴ Interview with Paul Solman, *PBS NewsHour* (July 12, 2012).

⁵ Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (Random House, 2016), 28.

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will only deepen. Science will not cease until a limited lifespan becomes unlimited, immortal.

The very foundations of human experience, such as politics, economics, education, family, ethics, relationships, and leisure will surely change to fit the new reality. Indeed, Paul Krugman, a Nobel Prize-winning economist and columnist for *The New York Times*, recently called for banning life extension in an “op-ed from the future,” as it would only benefit society’s richest.⁶

But how would the pursuit of immortality impact religious life? How do Jewish texts confront the question of immortality? Are we urged to refrain from such therapies and pass away due to old age? Or are we meant to rage against the dying of the light, and try to live forever? Put another way, is death a fundamental part of the human condition or just another disease humanity must eradicate from the face of the earth? Is immortality—the indefinite extension of a person’s lifespan—a negative development for humanity or a positive one?

The question is no less relevant under a humanistic lens. Would parents deny their children the injection of immortality? Why pass into oblivion when a person could delight in taking their great-great-grandchildren to the park on a flawless, late autumn day? Yet, on the other hand, infinity is quite a large amount of time. Immortality is a downright frightening idea when considering its sheer “bigness.” Our minds fail to grasp the meaning and enormity of such an existence. Bernard Williams claims that an indefinite life would lead to boredom, lack of joy, and a life devoid of meaning.⁷

The list of questions and issues immortality impacts is endless, as are its implications. At stake are fundamental issues concerning the nature of humanity, interpersonal relationships, our role in this world, the relationship between science and religion, the quest for meaning, reward and punishment, eschatology, the role of death, and others. The specter of immortality and its implications loom large.

It is important to qualify the nature of this kind of immortality. The immortality under discussion is merely a biological immortality achieved through science. The body, however, would still be prone to traumatic

⁶ Paul Krugman, “Billionaires Shouldn’t Live Forever,” *The New York Times* (July 15, 2019). Others argue that although life extension will only be available to the rich at first, the technology will become cheaper and trickle down to the rest of society, and is therefore worth pursuing.

⁷ Bernard Williams, “The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality,” in *Problems of the Self: Philosophical Papers, 1956–1972* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 82–100.

injury, such as from a car accident. This scenario technically allows for humans to have an indefinite lifespan, yet still preserves the possibility of death through bodily harm.

To put it succinctly, when a treatment, injection, or pill that provides an expanded lifespan—immortality—hits the shelves, should a God-fearing Jew take it? How do Jewish sources weigh in on this question?

Judaism Approves of Immortality

At one end of the spectrum, ample evidence exists to demonstrate Judaism's approval of the human quest to achieve immortality. Clearly, death is simply the accumulation of disease, which God obligates human beings to eradicate. Also, God commanded humans to improve and perfect the world. Separately, in the absence of sin, humans should live forever. Taken together, these arguments establish Judaism's support for the human impulse for immortality.

It is axiomatic that the Torah affirms the value of life and the act of living. In delivering his final address to the Jewish people, Moses exhorts them to choose life over death, through following the commandments of God (Deuteronomy 30:19). The Torah notes how a long life is the reward for a number of commandments, such as sending away a mother bird when taking her eggs, and respecting one's parents.⁸ Being alive, in other words, is a state that God desires for humanity. Indeed, God's creation of only one person, Adam, is meant to teach that one who saves a life is as if they saved an entire world.⁹ The Torah therefore encourages Jews to act in a manner which will allow them to continue to live. Even then, God promises to one day "eradicate death forever."¹⁰

Yet, the existence of sickness presents a problem. Disease and its inevitable end, death, are widely interpreted as often being punishment from God for one's evil actions. As such, how can a person engage in the practice of healing, as it would seem to contravene the will of God? The Talmud (*Bava Kama* 85a) quotes a *baraita* that uses the verse "and thou shall surely heal" (Exodus 21:19) as a source to show that humans were given permission to heal. Tosafot derive an important lesson from the double language (*rappo yirappe*), writing that not only are wounds inflicted by

⁸ Rabbenu Bahya and Ba'al HaTurim interpret the verse as referring to the world to come.

⁹ *Sanhedrin* 37a.

¹⁰ Isaiah 25:8. While this verse is often interpreted to refer to the world to come, both its simple understanding as well as various Talmudic passages (e.g. *Sanhedrin* 91b and *Pesahim* 68a) can be understood as referring to the eradication of death in this world.

human beings included within the license to heal, but also internal sicknesses that seem to have been afflicted directly through God. As such, humans were granted permission to heal the sick even though God punishes them through their sickness. Were it not for this license to heal the sick, human healers would be contravening the will of God.¹¹

A more radical notion emerges from a story quoted in a *midrash* in which Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Yishmael compare engaging in agriculture to healing, in response to a farmer's claim that medicine interferes with the Divine will. For them, no permission or verse is even needed to heal the ill; it stems from pure logic.¹²

This was codified in *Shulhan Arukh* as not only merely being permissible, but formulated as an obligatory *mitzva* to heal.¹³ Much has been written on the nature, scope, and implications of the commandment, but suffice it to say there exists a strong foundation for the supreme value in healing the sick, allowing them to live longer, healthier lives.¹⁴

Likewise, a tenet of Judaism is its emphasis on how saving a life takes precedence over all commandments, save three. Indeed, it is well known that saving a life takes precedence over observing the Sabbath, for God commands us to save lives, even at the expense of violating God's commandments. Preserving the quality and quantity of human life is a religious imperative.

In the context of indefinitely extending a person's lifespan, the natural conclusion from the sources seems obvious: Judaism wholly supports the healing of all illnesses. We can also apply the same argument to aging, the term given to the results of the slow breakdown of biological processes within the body. If we consider aging to be an assortment of illnesses, then the Jewish perspective on the obligation to heal demands that if a remedy for such an illness exists, it should clearly also be administered to extend the life of a person.

¹¹ Nahmanides (*Torat ha-Adam, Sha'ar ha-Mihush Inyan ha-Sakana*, #6) offers an alternative interpretation of this passage in *Bava Kama*, using the verse's double language to derive that we are commanded to heal, not that it is a mere license.

¹² *Midrash Socher Tov, Shmuel* 4:1. Interestingly, they employ a comparison between working the land and the fragility of man, the same two areas in which God curses Adam, a topic that will be explored below. On the inference from logic see Maimonides's Mishna commentary on *Pesahim* 4:4; and Immanuel Jakobovits, *Jewish Medical Ethics* (Bloch Publishers, 1975), 3.

¹³ *Yoreh De'ah* 336:1.

¹⁴ Avraham Steinberg, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Medical Ethics* (Feldheim, 2003), 635–637; Immanuel Jakobovits, *Jewish Medical Ethics*, 1–6; Howard Apfel and Avi Apfel, "Verapo Yerape: Diverse Approaches to the License to Heal," *Verapo Yerape* 1 (2009), 21–37.

It could be argued that the dispensation to heal the sick only applies to those already ill, but would not extend to preventative medicine as well. Maimonides (*Hilkhot De'ot* 4:2, quoting Deuteronomy 4:9) states, “Only take watch of yourself, and watch your soul closely” to derive that there is also a halakhic obligation to prevent disease. He even includes a list of healthy practices that are widely understood to point to the need to follow the medically recommended practices in each generation. Two more recent rabbinic leaders have taken a similar approach. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein writes in a response that undoubtedly one should also take medication when healthy to prevent sickness, and Rabbi J. David Bleich similarly advocates for the implementation of efficacious prophylactic tests and therapies according to scientific recommendation.¹⁵

Moreover, Maimonides writes (*Rotze'ah ve-Shemirat ha-Nefesh* 1:14) that anyone who can save a person but instead lets them die would transgress the prohibition of “standing by on the blood of your friend” (Leviticus 19:16). Maimonides uses the examples of one who sees his friend drowning, getting robbed, or being attacked by a wild animal to illustrate one’s obligation to directly intervene, or even to pay another to intervene, in order to save that person’s life. The illnesses accompanying aging clearly qualify as deserving treatment.

Judaism strongly believes that not only is it permissible to heal the ill, it is an obligation. Preventing illnesses is also included within this category. God commands humankind to prevent sickness from entering into the world. In other words, the removal of diseases that cause death—the pursuit of immortality—is a Divine imperative.

The Genesis narrative serves as a second angle in analyzing the Jewish perspective on immortality. Many different commentators view Adam and Eve’s sin of eating from the tree of knowledge as bringing death into the world. God decrees, “On the day you eat from it [the tree of knowledge], you shall surely die” (Genesis 2:17). The straightforward implication of the verse is that without sin, human beings would have lived forever. Similarly, Rabbi Hirsch writes on that verse:

In the Hands of God, even the part taken from the dust is eternal, knows no death, as long as Man remained in God’s hands. But since Man withdrew himself out of God’s hands and gave himself up to his guidance, he falls back and goes the way of mortality.

¹⁵ R. Moshe Feinstein, *Iggerot Moshe, Orah Hayyim*, vol. 4, #101; J. David Bleich, “Genetic Screening,” *TRADITION* 34 (2000), 63–87.

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The ideal state of a human is sinless, thereby allowing them to live forever. Likewise, Rabbenu Bahya writes that in the absence of sin, humans would have lived forever. In other words, sin causes irreparable harm to a person's life, as if sin itself causes the breakdown in the intricate mechanisms within the physical body.¹⁶

The notion of sin bringing death into the world is found in a number of other sources. R. Pinhas ben Yair identifies the source of the stringency surrounding impurity from a dead person: "Why from all the other impurities in the world, was [the Torah] stringent with the death of a human? Rather, it is because of sin that caused [Adam's] decree of death."¹⁷

The Midrash views Adam himself as bringing death into the world through his sinning with Eve. This sin induced a penalty, namely that humans must now act in a stringent fashion regarding the impurity brought about through death and exposure to a corpse.

Indeed, a fascinating *midrash* details an argument between Adam and other righteous individuals, who accuse him of causing them to die.¹⁸ Adam retorts that each of them have caused their own deaths, as Adam only committed one sin, while each of them have many sins. Adam therefore believes that he should not be held responsible for their deaths, even though he may have brought death into the world because of his original sin. As such, many different sources support the notion that death is caused by sin.¹⁹ In an ideal world without the presence of sin, however, there would be no more death. Indeed, certain biblical characters, such as Elijah and Hanoch, seem to have achieved immortality, at least within the midrashic tradition, due to their lack of sin.²⁰

The Midrash describes God making a radical promise, despite the current presence of sin and the evil inclination.

"He sets an end to darkness" (Job 28:3). He gave a set time of how many years the world would be in darkness. And what does it mean: "He sets

¹⁶ While this may sound similar to the Christian notion of Original Sin, R. Hirsch notes a critical difference: "Mankind is in no manner whatsoever placed under a ban for its first disobedience... This shows how pure men were able to get as near to God as the first man was before his fall... in every age, in every generation the spiritual and moral highest is attainable."

¹⁷ *Otzar Midrashim, Baraita of Rabbi Pinhas ben Yair* 1:12.

¹⁸ *Talkot Shimoni, Hukkat* 764.

¹⁹ *Shabbat* 55b concludes that there is death without sin; other sources such as the *Baraita of Rabbi Pinhas ben Yair*, Rabbenu Bahya, and Radak, commenting on Genesis 2:17, support the notion that sin is the cause of death.

²⁰ See Resh Lakish on Elijah, *Moed Katan* 26a; *Talkot Shimoni*, Ezekiel 367 for the discussion of the "thirteen that did not taste death."

an end to the darkness”? For so long as the evil inclination is in the world, the world is in “darkness and the shadow of death” (Job 28:3). When the evil inclination is uprooted from the world, no longer will there be darkness and the shadow of death in the world.²¹

God promises that once the evil inclination is eradicated from the world, death will cease and humans will live indefinitely.

At the beginning of Genesis, along with a plethora of *midrashim* and other commentators, Adam’s sin is identified as the tragic introduction of the dark shadow of death and suffering in the world. Still, each person’s own sins cause their own deaths. Therefore death, like sin, ideally would not exist, and has no place within our world. God even promises that one day, once the evil inclination is removed from the world, death will cease to exist. As such, just as much as we despise sin and transgression, so too we despise death itself and one day look forward to its eradication as humanity achieves closeness to God and immortality.

As Rabbi Hirsch writes on the verse describing the punishment for eating from the tree of life:

The exact nature of death is recognized, even today, as a problem of physiology which is still not solved. One day, when mankind will ultimately have worked its way completely back to God, we are told death will disappear from the world (Isaiah 25:8). According to the teaching of the Sages this period would have started for Israel with the giving of the Torah, if Israel would only have fulfilled God’s Laws with absolute devotion.

R. Hirsch, referencing the discussion between Resh Lakish and Rabbi Yosi in *Avoda Zara* 5a, notes that had the children of Israel accepted the Torah at Sinai and not sinned with the Golden Calf, they would have lived forever. Indeed, Rabbi Yosi remarks that “there is no greater good than the absence of death.”

Likewise, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik writes in *Halakhic Man* about Judaism’s perspective on the evils of death:

Authentic Judaism, as reflected in halakhic thought, sees in death a terrifying contradiction to the whole religious life. Death negates the entire magnificent experience of halakhic man... Death is the symbol of the utmost defilement: therefore, he who is holy unto his Lord must keep away from such defilement... The task of the religious individual is bound up with the performance of commandments, and this performance is confined to

²¹ *Genesis Rabba* 89:1.

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this world, to physical, concrete reality, to clamorous, tumultuous life, pulsating with exuberance and strength. Therefore, holiness need keep itself away from death... Holiness means the holiness of earthly, here-and-now life.²²

R. Soloveitchik emphasizes how halakhic man desires to exist within the physical world. Based in Jewish tradition, he despises the defilement of death, how it ends a person's ability to act in this world and improve it. For him, death acts as a barrier to serving God, as it detracts from life and holiness.²³

A third argument in support of immortality takes a broader approach, basing itself in humanity's task of complementing God's work. The presence of death represents an ultimate diminution of the world. It emphasizes the inherent shortcoming of all human endeavor, that nothing will last forever, and all will come to an end. It is little wonder that the most elegant treatise on temporality, Ecclesiastes, features death as a major theme.

Though death was brought into the world by Adam, he was also commanded to work and to guard the Garden of Eden, and to dominate the natural world. These verses point to humanity's task as creatures of action, improving upon the natural world.

The human imperative to improve upon one's natural state also emerges as a theme in Rabbi Akiva's discussion with Turnus Rufus. Rabbi Akiva argues that the natural state of humankind is not to be praised and left alone, but to be worked upon and improved. Nature itself is not perfect, rather it includes odious elements, like illness and death, that are meant to be purged by humans. Our mission is to partner with God and improve the world, without limits.²⁴

Since the beginning of Genesis and the sin of Adam and Eve, humanity has made significant progress not just in improving the world, but in ameliorating the punishments with which God had cursed Adam.

The last punishment meted out to Adam is death itself: "For dust you are, and to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:19). Like the curses mentioned earlier, the conquering of this last, brutal punishment functions as a majestic calling to all humanity. No quest could be more laudable or

²² Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man* (JPS, 1983), 32–33.

²³ However, Gerald Blidstein in "Death in the Writings of Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik" *TRADITION* 44:1 (2011) complicates this understanding of R. Soloveitchik's opinion on the role of death, highlighting death as an important, albeit painful, role within Jewish life.

²⁴ *Tanhuma, Tazria* 5.

grand. God Himself sanctioned humans to partner with God in this journey to perfection. And when humans achieve immortality, the last punishment of humanity will have finally disappeared.

On the Other Hand: Judaism Disapproves of Immortality

At the other end of the spectrum lies the view that immortality would be a negative development for human beings, although clearly most would agree that moderate life extension is beneficial to humanity. Medical progress that adds qualitatively better years to a person's life should be pursued and praised. However, this perspective strongly believes that an indefinite existence is not what God intends for humanity. This staunch defense of mortality is not solely because of one's perspective regarding the pleasures derived from the world to come, but rather from a nuanced understanding of human nature, death's benefits, and our purpose in this world, among other concepts. After all, God hid the tree of life.

Among the questions broached in the beginning of the Torah is the question of life itself, specifically regarding the narrative surrounding the tree of life. Interestingly, while the tree appears early on in Eden, it fails to attract any mention or notice from Man, beast, or even God. Indeed, the only prohibition mentioned is to eat from the tree of knowledge, the penalty being death. No such prohibition exists against eating from the tree of life.²⁵

Nevertheless, after Adam and Eve receive their respective punishments for sinning, God decides to move them away from the tree of life and stations armed cherubim to guard the path to the tree, lest Adam will live forever and become "like one of us." The simple understanding of these verses implies that God hid immortality from humans as a consequence of the sin of eating from the tree of knowledge. Without that sin, immortality would have been available to humans through eating the fruit of the tree of life.

Other commentators complicate the simple interpretation. Nahmanides and Radak both suggest that the fruit of the tree of life may have only granted its eater a long life, not true immortality. Similarly, Rabbenu Bahya maintains that consuming the tree's fruits would only prevent a premature death, not grant indefinite life. On the other hand, both Hizkuni and Sa'adya Gaon maintain that the fruit was poisonous if eaten alone, similar to a drug intended for a sick man that would endanger a healthy man. The fruit could bestow immortality—and stop death—only after a person

²⁵ In fact, Radak (Genesis 2:17) notes Adam and Eve were commanded to eat from the tree of life, as part of the decree to eat from all the trees of the garden.

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had eaten first from the tree of knowledge, since God had decreed that whoever eats from the tree of knowledge will die. The tree of life would have served as the antidote, restoring the immortality Adam enjoyed from the outset.

As such, the narrative here, as understood by Nahmanides, Radak, and Rabbenu Bahya, suggests that the tree of life was never intended to bestow everlasting life, only to lengthen a mortal life. And even according to those who believe that the fruit had the ability to grant immortality, that path was hidden and blocked off from humanity. Accordingly, on a fundamental level, God does not want humanity to find the tree of life and to attain immortality. Instead, God willed a world in which we age, become ill, and eventually pass away. What is the reason that immortality is rejected in favor of death?

One argument that rejects immortality is based in death improving the quality of life. A passage in the *Sifrei* recounts an extraordinary encounter between God and Moses, right before Moses' death. Initially, Moses challenged God's decision that he must die, arguing that one live Moses is worth more than a dead prophet! God replies that death is the decree for all humanity, even those who never sinned and would be immune to Adam's curse of death.²⁶ Moses was wrong for thinking that an indefinite life is necessary for a meaningful life; humans do not need immortality to achieve meaning. Even a limited lifespan, lived in the shadow of death, can be meaningful.

A *midrash* employs a fascinating derivation to take this argument one step further. "In the teachings of Rabbi Meir, it was found written, 'And behold, it was very good'—And behold, death is good."²⁷

This *midrash* reinterprets God's declaration that the result of God's six days of creation is "good" to mean the existence of death itself is a positive value.²⁸ Accordingly, the *midrash* implies that inherent in the creation of the world is the temporariness of life itself; humans were never intended to live indefinitely. Immortality was not lost when Adam and Eve sinned; rather, death is built into creation. As such, mortality is viewed as a positive characteristic of humanity, and living forever would not lead to a more meaningful life.

There are two ways in which an individual's life is improved through the presence of death. First, many sources speak to the power of death as

²⁶ *Sifrei*, Deuteronomy 339:1 (translation from Sefaria.org).

²⁷ *Genesis Rabba* 9:5

²⁸ Some versions of the *midrash* suggest that through death the righteous rid themselves of the toil of this world while the wicked cease to sin, both of which are deemed "good" outcomes.

a useful tool to prevent sin. For example, Resh Lakish advises a person to meditate upon the advent of death as the final way to overcome the evil inclination (*Berakhot* 5a). Similarly, *Avot* (3:1) utilizes a person's mortality in order to allow one to weigh the ramifications of one's actions, serving as a bulwark against sin.

The second way that death assists a person in living a better life is through driving individual human development. The presence of death spurs human creativity, progress, and development. Nahmanides, in his introduction to *Torat ha-Adam*, quotes a *midrash* claiming that the evil inclination actually benefits humanity. Nahmanides interprets the *midrash* as saying that the evil inclination encourages people to build homes and raise families. The *midrash's* invoking of the evil inclination is important as the Talmud equates the evil inclination with the angel of death (*Bava Batra* 16a). Both the evil inclination and the angel of death involve themselves in reducing the immortality of humans. Yet, the *midrash's* surprising approval of the evil inclination as a positive force likewise affirms the constructive nature of death as well. Nahmanides explains how the presence of both inclinations, including the evil inclination *qua* angel of death, encourages a person to engage and build the world.

Many contemporary writers echo the point made by Nachmanides. Among them, the scientist and public intellectual Leon Kass, who wrote, "To know and to feel that one goes around only once, and that the deadline is not out of sight, is for many people the necessary spur to the pursuit of something worthwhile... Mortality makes life matter."²⁹

Another argument against immortality emphasizes the negative outcomes associated with it, most prominently its weariness.³⁰ One of the most explicit texts on immortality subtly provides a reason for its perils. The Talmud relates how the angel of death was unable to enter town of Luz.

It is taught in a *baraita*: This is the city Luz where sky blue wool is dyed. It is the same city Luz where, although Sennaherib came and exiled many nations from place to place, he did not disarrange and exile its inhabitants; Nebuhadnezzar, who conquered many lands, did not destroy it; and even the angel of death has no permission to pass through it. Rather, its Elders, when weary of life, go outside the city wall and die (*Sota* 46b).

²⁹ Leon R. Kass, "L'Chaim and Its Limits: Why Not Immortality?," *First Things* (May 2001).

³⁰ This argument was furthered by Jorge Luis Borges' short story "The Immortal," in *The Aleph and Other Stories* (E.P. Dutton, 1970), 169.

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This description of the city offers a striking and intriguing perspective. The inhabitants of Luz lived in a city in which death was banished and immortality was achieved. However, the elders eventually left the city, opting out of immortality. The passage echoes the language of Genesis 27:46, where Rebecca tells Isaac that she is “weary of her life” due to Esau’s wives. Apparently, the inhabitants of Luz would eventually grow weary of their immortal lives and chose to eventually leave the city, where they would then die through natural causes.

Essentially, the Talmud presents an experiment in immortality. An entire city is granted this special privilege—whole families and old friends were presented with the opportunity to enjoy eternity together, death never to bother them again. And yet they grew weary of their immortal lives. Eternal life failed to bring harmony, inner peace, and meaning. Immortality could have begun a great intellectual flourishing, as people could have dedicated their endless time to study or good deeds. Instead, individuals would leave the city, alone and exhausted, bereft of any companionship or friends, even disgusted with their infinite lifespan. Death, for the inhabitants of Luz, functions as a crucial endpoint that prevents a human life from devolving into the unique despair and horror of an infinite lifespan. As such, the cautionary tale from Luz serves as warning to those who would wish to defeat death forever.

This theme—that an endless life becomes filled with weariness, despair, and pain—is furthered by other sources as well.³¹ For example, a *midrash* describes an elderly woman, burdened by her years, approaching Rabbi Yosi ben Halaftha. He advises her on a passive method—not attending synagogue for three days—to ensure her death.³²

Moreover, our forefathers—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—underwent a similar crisis. Another *midrash* describes how all three requested to die, with God ultimately granting each of their requests as well.³³ Malbim makes a similar comment on the weariness of life as part of his larger comments regarding the tree of life, quoting the travails of Job as a proof to the painful experience of life, with death as a final relief.³⁴

As such, too much life leads to a painful, wearying existence for humans. The human condition is simply not consistent with eternal life.

³¹ It is important to note that there was no pain or illness present in the Luz scenario; rather it was simply the tediousness of living an unenjoyable life.

³² *Yalkut Shimoni*, Proverbs 943. A similar *midrash*, with only minor variations, is also found in *Yalkut Shimoni*, Ekev, 871.

³³ *Tanhuma*, *Vayehi* 4. Admittedly, the *midrash* might also be interpreted to represent a desire for death to enable new people to come into existence.

³⁴ Malbim, Genesis 2:9

As demonstrated by the sources above, various texts throughout the Jewish tradition express this viewpoint through the prism of stories to best elucidate the human problems that emerge from an immortal existence. Immortality would only lead to discontent.

A third argument against immortality is that it delays the soul's entry into the desired realm of the world to come. Jewish thought believes in a person's spiritual essence. The soul, however, is housed within a physical body, leading to a tension between the material and spiritual. As spiritual beings, our destiny lies in the world to come.³⁵ Therefore, an immortal life is antithetical to the ultimate goal of Judaism. Indeed, Maimonides and Malbim writing on the tree of life believe that a person can know certain truths of God only once that person reaches the world to come. Therefore, elongating a person's life separates them from receiving their true reward and basking in God's glory.³⁶

The belief in the supreme importance of the world to come also impacts one's perception of their place within this world, even coming to emphasize the transient existence of humans. Allan Nadler believes that this position is reflected in the thought of Vilna Gaon and his students, Meir ben Eliyahu and Menachem Mendel of Shklov.³⁷ Together they believe that death serves as the only pathway to perfection found in the world to come.³⁸

Essentially, the adherents of this approach believe in the overpowering importance of the world to come as the only place where a person's purpose can be actualized. Therefore, their disdain for immortality stems not from any belief in the good of a bounded life, nor the weariness of an indefinite lifespan, but rather in the affirmation of the overwhelming positives found in the world to come. For them, the unimaginable spiritual goodness that awaits the righteous in the next world overwhelms all other considerations, including an immortal life.

Previous approaches focused on the role of immortality as it relates to the individual's experience. However, a fourth approach in rejecting immortality considers its negative impact on the lives of others. A society

³⁵ R. Moshe Hayyim Luzatto's *Mesillat Yesharim* is a classic example of this worldview.

³⁶ Maimonides, *Laws of Repentance* 8:1–2.

³⁷ Allan Nadler, "Soloveitchik's Halakhic Man: Not a 'Mithnagged,'" *Modern Judaism* 13:2 (1993), 131–134.

³⁸ R. Soloveitchik understands the Gaon's approach to death in a different way; see *Halakhic Man*, 30, which depicts the Gaon weeping on his deathbed, clutching his *tzitzit*, exclaiming, "How beautiful is this world—for one penny a person can acquire eternal life." R. Soloveitchik presents this story to support the Gaon's commitment to life and hatred of death.

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of immortals allows one generation to interact with many subsequent generations. For example, instead of reading about the different manuscripts of a line in Maimonides' halakhic code, a person could simply ask Maimonides what he intended. But is this an unambiguously positive development?

Putting aside the problem of overpopulation, some would obviously prefer an indefinite life for all humanity. Others, however, firmly believe that death allows for creativity and renewal within mankind. Death, like a forest fire, helps plant the seeds for further growth. Rather than augment human progress and development, immortality would impede it.

Rabbenu Bahya, writing on the creation of the tree of life, adapts the teaching from *Midrash Rabba*, which viewed death approvingly. He explains the *midrash's* proclamation that death is good to mean that it allows for originality and innovation by removing the older generation.³⁹ Similarly, another *midrash* suggests that the righteous must pass on to make room for the next generation of leaders.⁴⁰ In other words, death is needed to allow the next rightful leader to rule.

Death is also necessary for the intellectual development of the nation. While immortality ensures that no idea is forgotten, it also hampers intellectual creativity and the formation of new ideas. Death, and the accompanying loss of knowledge, liberates that knowledge and invites others to engage in the creative process. This point is made by Resh Lakish, who suggests the dereliction of Torah study can potentially serve as the foundation for future growth in knowledge (*Menahot* 99a).

Likewise, we recall the well-known tradition that loss and eventual reconstruction of knowledge engendered with the death of Moses. Joshua and the nation, distressed at the *halakhot* forgotten in the wake of their leader's death, know that even appealing to God will not restore that which was lost, since the Torah "is not in heaven." But Othniel uses his creative faculties to reconstruct and regain the losses. Not despairing from loss, Othniel views Moses' death as an opportunity for renewal in the realm of Torah (*Temura* 16a).

Similarly, Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner notes how the forgetting of Torah—the breaking of the Tablets—and the arguments that arise from forgetting allow for the creation of new Torah concepts, even allowing for greater proliferation and development.⁴¹ These moments of forgetting, as shown by the death of Moses, occur most prominently after the death of great

³⁹ Rabbenu Bahya, Genesis 1:31

⁴⁰ *Midrash Tehillim*, Psalm 116.

⁴¹ R. Yitzchak Hutner, *Pahad Yitzchak: Hannuka, ma'amar 3*.

sages. Without death, the next generation could not progress and create, or build on the past. Death is necessary for the flourishing of the next generation, to allow humanity to innovate and create.

To Stop For Death?

What to do with the immortality injection? As shown above, Jewish tradition adopts a nuanced perspective to indefinite life extension, ranging from the wholly supportive to a principled opposition. On the one hand, certain texts support the scientific quest for immortality. They contend—based on an understanding of the obligation to heal, death as a byproduct of sin, humanity’s role in improving the world, and the importance of this world—that Judaism welcomes the potential of immortality. On the other hand, other traditions point to the pitfalls of immortality, arguing that everlasting life would be a net negative development for humanity because, ironically, death makes life better. An immortal life leads to an unbearably weary existence, the soul belongs in the next world, and death is essential for the progress of humanity.

While no definitive answer exists, the absence of clarity may be instructive. The option to extend one’s lifespan and questions of end-of-life care are among an individual’s most important and personal decisions. These matters are not in the realm of science fiction, but brutal decisions people are asked to wrestle with—for themselves and their families, for their patients and parishioners. If and when science fiction becomes medical fact, a person who is productive and finds life meaningful would take the magic pill, while one who is suffering, like the inhabitants of Luz or Yosi ben Halafta, may opt to forego the treatment and pass into the next world. Interestingly, such treatment would simply let one continue to live, a rather benign and lackluster conclusion to what will arguably be the most important scientific achievement in human history. It will only be in the span of decades, centuries, and even millennia that such a creation would seem miraculous.

Though a definitive resolution eludes us regarding the immortality injection, Jewish tradition unambiguously supports another form of immortality: “She is a tree of life to those who grasp her, and whoever holds on to her is happy” (Proverbs 3:18).⁴² This verse employs the tree of life symbol to emphasize that immortality, of some sort, is indeed attainable. *Pirkei de-Rabi Eliezer* (12) states:

⁴² A parallel notion is developed in Robert Nozick’s essay “Dying” in which he advocates living as though “some aspect of our life and being were eternal”; *The Examined Life: Philosophical Meditations* (Simon & Schuster, 1990), 26.

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What does “to work and to guard” refer to? It refers to an involvement with words of Torah. “And to guard the path of the tree of life”—there is no tree of life other than Torah, as it says, “She is a tree of life to those who grasp her.”

The biblical tree of life is transformed into a metaphor for Torah, the only path to immortality. As humanity progresses further and further into the Anthropocene, the era of humankind, Torah remains forever the immortal source of life, “our life and the length of our days.”⁴³

⁴³ My thanks to Dr. Aaron Segal and R. Shlomo Zuckier for their assistance and insight in developing the ideas in this article.