

PARADIGMS OF PARTING: STORIES FROM THE RABBINIC TRADITION

א"ר אמי למה נסמכה מיתת מרים לפרשת פרה אדומה לומר לך מה פרה אדומה מכפרת אף מיתתן של צדיקים מכפרת א"ר אלעזר למה נסמכה מיתת אהרן לבגדי כהונה מה בגדי כהונה מכפרין אף מיתתן של צדיקים מכפרת

Rabbi Ami said: Why was the Torah portion that describes the death of Miriam juxtaposed to the portion dealing with the red heifer? To tell you: Just as the red heifer atones for sin, so too, the death of the righteous atones for sin. Rabbi Elazar said: Why was the Torah portion that describes the death of Aaron juxtaposed to the portion discussing the priestly garments? This teaches that just as the priestly garments atone for sin, so too, the death of the righteous atones for sin.

ת"ר מת פתאום זו היא מיתה חטופה חלה יום אחד ומת זו היא מיתה דחופה

§ The Sages taught the following baraita: If one dies suddenly without having been sick, this is death through snatching. If he became sick for a day and died, this is an expedited death.

שני ימים ומת זו היא מיתה דחוייה ג' גערה ארבעה נזיפה חמשה זו היא מיתה כל אדם

If he was sick for two days and died, this is a quickened death. If he was sick for three days and died, this is a death of rebuke. If he died after being sick for four days, this is a death of reprimand. If one died after a sickness lasting five days, this is the ordinary death of all people.

מת בחמשים שנה זו היא מיתת כרת חמשים ושתים שנה זו היא מיתתו של שמואל הרמתי ששים זו היא מיתה בידי שמים

The Gemara discusses the significance of death at different ages: If one dies when he is fifty years old, this is death through karet, the divine punishment of excision, meted out for the most serious transgressions. If he dies when he is fifty-two years old, this is the death of Samuel from Ramah. If he dies at the age of sixty, this is death at the hand of Heaven

שבעים שיבה שמונים גבורות דכתיב (תהלים צ, י) ימי שנותינו בהם שבעים שנה ואם בגבורות שמונים שנה

One who dies at the age of seventy has reached old age. One who dies at the age of eighty dies in strength, as it is written: "The days of our years are seventy, or if by reason of strength, eighty years" (Psalms 90:10).

רב יוסף כי הוה בר שיתין עבד להו יומא טבא לרבנן אמר נפקי לי מכרת א"ל אביי נהי דנפק ליה מר מכרת דשני מכרת דיומי מי נפיק מר א"ל נקוט לך מיהא פלגא בידך

The Gemara relates that when Rav Yosef turned sixty he made a holiday for the Sages. Explaining the cause for his celebration, he said: I have passed the age of karet. Abaye said to him: Master, even though you have passed the karet of years, have you, Master, escaped the karet of days? As previously mentioned, sudden death is also considered to be a form of karet. He said to him: Grasp at least half in your hand, for I have at least escaped one type of karet.

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רב הונא נח נפשיה פתאום הוו קא דייגי רבנן תנא להו זוגא דמהדייב לא שנו אלא שלא הגיע לגבורות אבל הגיע לגבורות זו היא מיתת נשיקה

It was related that Rav Huna died suddenly, and the Sages were concerned that this was a bad sign. The Sage Zuga from Hadayeiv taught them the following: They taught these principles only when the deceased had not reached the age of strength, i.e., eighty. But if he had reached the age of strength and then died suddenly, this is death by way of a divine kiss.

אמר רבא חיי בני ומזוני לא בזכותא תליא מילתא אלא במזלא תליא מילתא דהא רבה ורב חסדא תרווייהו רבנן צדיקי הוו מר מצלי ואתי מיטרא ומר מצלי ואתי מיטרא

Rava said: Length of life, children, and sustenance do not depend on one's merit, but rather they depend upon fate. As, Rabba and Rav Hisda were both pious Sages; one Sage would pray during a drought and rain would fall, and the other Sage would pray and rain would fall.

רב חסדא חיה תשעין ותרתינן שנין רבה חיה ארבעין בי רב חסדא שיתין הלולי בי רבה שיתין תיכלי

And nevertheless, their lives were very different. Rav Hisda lived for ninety-two years, whereas Rabba lived for only forty years. The house of Rav Hisda celebrated sixty wedding feasts, whereas the house of Rabba experienced sixty calamities. In other words, many fortuitous events took place in the house of Rav Hisda and the opposite occurred in the house of Rabba.

בי רב חסדא סמידא לכלבי ולא מתבעי בי רבה נהמא דשערי לאינשי ולא משתכח

In the house of Rav Hisda there was bread from the finest flour [semida] even for the dogs, and it was not asked after, as there was so much food. In the house of Rabba, on the other hand, there was coarse barley bread even for people, and it was not found in sufficient quantities. This shows that the length of life, children, and sustenance all depend not upon one's merit, but upon fate.

רב שעורים אחוה דרבא הוה יתיב קמיה דרבא חזייה דהוה קא מנמנמ א"ל לימא ליה מר דלא לצערן א"ל מר לאו שושביניה הוה א"ל כיון דאימסר מזלא לא אשגח בי א"ל ליתחזי לי מר איתחזי ליה א"ל הוה ליה למר צערא א"ל כי ריבדא דכוסילתא

The Gemara continues its discussion of the deaths of the righteous. Rav Seorim, Rava's brother, sat before Rava, and he saw that Rava was dozing, i.e., about to die. Rava said to his brother: Master, tell him, the Angel of Death, not to torment me. Knowing that Rava was not afraid of the Angel of Death, Rav Seorim said to him: Master, are you not a friend of the Angel of Death? Rava said to him: Since my fate has been handed over to him, and it has been decreed that I shall die, the Angel of Death no longer pays heed to me. Rav Seorim said to Rava: Master, appear to me in a dream after your death. And Rava appeared to him. Rav Seorim said to Rava: Master, did you have pain in death? He said to him: Like the prick of the knife when letting blood

רבא הוה יתיב קמיה דר"נ חזייה דקא מנמנמ א"ל לימא ליה מר דלא לצערן א"ל מר לאו אדם חשוב הוה א"ל מאן חשיב מאן ספין מאן רקיע

It was similarly related that Rava sat before Rav Nahman, and he saw that Rav Nahman was dozing, i.e., slipping into death. Rav Nahman said to Rava: Master, tell the Angel of Death not to torment me. Rava said to him: Master, are you not an important person who is respected in Heaven? Rav Nahman said to him: In the supernal world who is important? Who is honorable? Who is complete?

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א"ל ליתחזי לי מר אתחזי ליה א"ל ה"ל למר צערא א"ל כמישחל בניתא מחלבא ואי אמר לי הקב"ה זיל בההוא עלמא כד הוית לא בעינא דנפיש בעיתותיה

Rava said to Rav Nahman: Master, appear to me in a dream after your death. And he appeared to him. Rava said to him: Master, did you have pain in death? Rav Nahman said to him: Like the removal of hair from milk, which is a most gentle process. But nevertheless, were the Holy One, Blessed be He, to say to me: Go back to that world, the physical world, as you were, I would not want to go, for the fear of the Angel of Death is great. And I would not want to go through such a terrifying experience a second time.

רבי אלעזר הוה קאכיל תרומה איתחזי ליה א"ל תרומה קא אכילנא ולא קודש איקרי חלפא ליה שעתא

The Gemara relates that Rabbi Elazar was once eating teruma, when the Angel of Death appeared to him. He said to the Angel of Death: I am eating teruma; is it not called sacred? It would be inappropriate for me to die now and thereby defile this sacred teruma. The Angel of Death accepted his argument and left him. The moment passed, and he lived for some time afterward.

רב ששת איתחזי ליה בשוקא אמר ליה בשוקא כבהמה איתא לגבי ביתא

It was similarly related that the Angel of Death once appeared to Rav Sheshet in the marketplace. Rav Sheshet said to the Angel of Death: Shall I die in the market like an animal? Come to my house and kill me there like a human being.

רב אשי איתחזי ליה בשוקא א"ל איתרח לי תלתין יומין ואהדרי לתלמודאי דאמריתו אשרי מי שבא לכאן ותלמודו בידו ביום תלתין אתא אמר ליה מאי כולי האי קא דחקא רגליה דבר נתן ואין מלכות נוגעת בחבירתה אפילו כמלא נימא

So too, the Angel of Death appeared to Rav Ashi in the marketplace. Rav Ashi said to the Angel of Death: Give me thirty days so that I may review my studies, for you say above: Fortunate is he who comes here to Heaven with his learning in his hand. On the thirtieth day the Angel of Death came to take him. Rav Ashi said to the Angel of Death: What is all of this? Why are you in such a hurry to take me? Why can you not postpone my death? He said to him: The foot of Rav Huna bar Natan is pushing you, as he is ready to succeed you as the leader of the generation, and one sovereignty does not overlap with its counterpart, even by one hairbreadth. Therefore, you cannot live any longer.

רב חסדא לא הוה יכיל ליה דלא הוה שתיק פומיה מגירסא סליק יתיב בארזא דבי רב פקע ארזא ושתיק ויכיל ליה

The Angel of Death was unable to take Rav Hisha because his mouth was never silent from study. So the Angel of Death went and sat on the cedar column that supported the roof of the study hall of the Sages. The cedar cracked and Rav Hisha was silent for a moment, as he was startled by the sound. At that point the Angel of Death was able to take him.

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ר' חייא לא הוה מצי למיקרבא ליה יומא חד אידמי ליה כעניא אתא טריף אבבא א"ל אפיק לי ריפתא אפיקו ליה א"ל ולא קא מרחם מר אעניא אההוא גברא אמאי לא קא מרחם מר גלי ליה אחוי ליה שוטא דנורא אמצי ליה נפשיה:

The Angel of Death could not come near Rabbi Ḥiyya, owing to his righteousness. One day the Angel of Death appeared to him as a poor person. He came and knocked on the door. He said to Rabbi Ḥiyya: Bring out bread for me, and he took out bread for him. The Angel of Death then said to Rabbi Ḥiyya: Master, do you not have mercy on a poor person? Why, then, do you not have mercy upon that man, i.e., upon me, and give me what I want? The Angel of Death then revealed his identity to him, and showed him a fiery rod in order to confirm that he was the Angel of Death. At this point Rav Ḥiyya surrendered himself to him. (B. Talmud Mo'ed Katan 28 A-B)

ברכות ה' ב:י"ד

רבי אלעזר חלש על לגביה רבי יוחנן חזא דהוה קא גני בבית אפל גלייה לדרעיה ונפל נהורא חזייה דהוה קא בכי רבי אלעזר אמר ליה אמאי קא בכית אי משום תורה דלא אפשרת שנינו אחד המרבה ואחד הממעיט ובלבד שיכוין לבו לשמים ואי משום מזוני לא כל אדם זוכה לשתי שלחנות ואי משום בני דין גרמא דעשירא ביר אמר ליה להאי שופרא דבלי בעפרא קא בכינא אמר ליה על דא ודאי קא בכית ובכו תרוייהו אדהכי והכי אמר ליה חביבין עליך יסורין אמר ליה לא הן ולא שכון אמר ליה הב לי ירך יהב ליה ידיה ואוקמיה

The Gemara relates that Rabbi Elazar, another of Rabbi Yohanan's students, fell ill. Rabbi Yohanan entered to visit him, and saw that he was lying in a dark room. Rabbi Yohanan exposed his arm, and light radiated from his flesh, filling the house. He saw that Rabbi Elazar was crying, and said to him: Why are you crying? Thinking that his crying was over the suffering that he endured throughout his life, Rabbi Yohanan attempted to comfort him: If you are weeping because you did not study as much Torah as you would have liked, we learned: One who brings a substantial sacrifice and one who brings a meager sacrifice have equal merit, as long as he directs his heart toward Heaven. If you are weeping because you lack sustenance and are unable to earn a livelihood, as Rabbi Elazar was, indeed, quite poor, not every person merits to eat off of two tables, one of wealth and one of Torah, so you need not bemoan the fact that you are not wealthy. If you are crying over children who have died, this is the bone of my tenth son, and suffering of that kind afflicts great people, and they are afflictions of love.

Rabbi Elazar said to Rabbi Yohanan: I am not crying over my misfortune, but rather, over this beauty of yours that will decompose in the earth, as Rabbi Yohanan's beauty caused him to consider human mortality. Rabbi Yohanan said to him: Over this, it is certainly appropriate to weep. Both cried over the fleeting nature of beauty in the world and death that eventually overcomes all. Meanwhile, Rabbi Yohanan said to him: Is your suffering dear to you? Rabbi Elazar said to him: I welcome neither this suffering nor its reward. Upon hearing this, Rabbi Yohanan said to him: Give me your hand. Rabbi Elazar gave him his hand, and Rabbi Yohanan stood him up and restored him to health. [Berakhot 5b]