

BY WAY OF AN INTRODUCTION

A FRIEND ASKED ME WHY I WANTED TO WRITE THIS BOOK and I said, “Well, they say death is a foreign country. At my age, it’s time to start thinking about the travel arrangements.”

“Good idea,” he said. “If you don’t like them, you can always go somewhere else.”

Touché!

We joke about death for the same reasons that we joke about other frightening things. *Because* they are frightening. Because laughter is a defense against fear. Because it can be a victory over fear, a way of acknowledging fear’s existence while demonstrating that it hasn’t gotten the better of us.

But we also joke about death because, from a certain angle, it *is* funny. Nothing could be more preposterous. One minute you’re a breathing, sentient being and the next you’re a lump of senseless matter. It’s the ultimate disappearing act: now I see you, now I don’t. Even little babies laugh at that.

Except that they don’t, not really. What babies laugh at is: now I see you, now I don’t, *now I see you again*. A great

deal of humankind's thinking about death has taken its cue from that.

And the potential humor in the *poof! it's gone* of a life is only there in a life already lived. A joke about the death of an elderly person that makes us laugh would be cruel if told about a young one.

As a boy, my fear of death was no joke. I remember exactly how it started. I was eleven or twelve, at home from school with a fever. By my bed was a copy of *Reader's Digest*. In it was an article about leprosy. This was, it turned out, a real disease that caused disfigurement and could kill you, not just a biblical affliction in the book of Leviticus that my class had studied in the Jewish school I attended. It sometimes started with white spots on the skin.

The next day I noticed a small white spot on the underside of my arm. I had leprosy. I would die.

I don't remember how long my leprosy lasted. In the end, the spot grew no larger, no new ones appeared, and it was clear that nothing was wrong with me.

But that was just the beginning. In the years to come, I contracted one fatal disease after another: polio, brain cancer, leukemia, multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy. One summer I had rabies after being nipped on a knuckle by a dog. Rabies, if you weren't immunized at once, was fatal. The incubation period was up to sixty days. For sixty days, I waited for the signs of it.

In retrospect, this, too, can seem funny. I've regaled friends with accounts of it. At the time, though, I lived with intermittent terror.

Intermittent jubilation as well: the jubilation of the sixty-first day. I would live! Life never seemed so bounteous, so luminously full of promise, as it did then.

The oddest part of it was that I never shared my fears with anyone. Had I told my parents, they might have looked at my nipped finger and either taken me to a doctor or told me to stop worrying. But that would have spoiled the game I was playing with death.

And it *was* a game, although it took me many years to understand that. I couldn't have said at the time what imagined threat or crime made me think I was living on death row; whatever it was, though, I sat in my cell expecting the knock to come. I could only escape death by outwitting it, which I did by tricking it into thinking it needn't trouble itself because I was already fatally stricken. I was playing dead like a mouse in the claws of a cat and doing it so well that I was fooled by my own ruse.

This went on for a while. It was my secret. Nothing about me gave it away. I was a top student in my New York public high school. I won track medals and literary prizes. I did the things that boys my age did and had the fun that boys my age had. No one could have guessed that I lay in bed at night praying for another year of the life I desperately craved.

Eventually, I outgrew it. Or rather, I traded my boyhood hypochondria for a more stable, long-term arrangement. I no longer had this or that fatal condition. The fatal condition was now simply being me. I was doomed to die young—if not this year, then the next or the year after that. At fifteen, I didn't think I would reach twenty. This, too, was apparently good enough for death, because it continued to leave me alone. Perhaps by then it had lost all interest in me.

I should have realized it had never had any in the first place. The summer I was nineteen, a friend and I bought a used car and drove it to Mexico City. Although I had only gotten my driver's license a week before setting out, this

HILLEL HALKIN

seemed no disqualification. And in fact, it was my friend, not I, who was driving when we had the accident.

We were on a mountainous stretch of a narrow, winding road quaintly called the Pan-American Highway. On one side was a sheer drop to a ravine far below. A light rain was falling. As we started to skid, my friend had one hand on the wheel and was singing with his head halfway out the window. I was spreading mustard on a sandwich. The last thing I remember thinking before we plunged off the ravine side of the road into the single tree growing beside it was, “Damn, I wanted to eat this sandwich!” The tree stopped us with a jolt. The car was more banged up than we were.

If death had been looking for a chance to finish me off, it was more incompetent than I had imagined.

Yet even this did not quite convince me. The conclusion I drew was a different one. Death still had me in its sights. I just had, it now turned out, an ally that was protecting me, a private angel or daemon. As long as I kept faith with it, it would keep faith with me.

In one form or another, this belief stayed with me. Only in recent years have I lost it—perhaps because, betrayed by me too often, my daemon has departed, perhaps because I’ve ceased needing its protection. Several years ago I turned seventy, which is as much as any of us was ever promised. “The days of our years are threescore years and ten” is the King James version of the verse in Psalms that continues, “and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labor and sorrow, for it is soon cut off and we fly away.”

That strikes me as about right. For most of us, the years up to seventy, give or take a few, are ones we retain our strength in. We’re not the same at sixty as we were at fifty,

but with a bit of luck, our decline isn't painfully obvious. It only becomes that a decade or so later. By then, we're all on death row.

And so when I was asked by the editor of the Library of Jewish Ideas to choose a topic from a list that was sent me—Judaism and This, Judaism and That—the one that caught my fancy was Judaism and Death. Death had been on my mind for a long time. If I didn't write about it now, when would I?

It occurred to me that I had never thought much about death and Judaism together, not even when, as a boy, I was most scared of the one and most observant of the other. Like all religions, Judaism has developed a complex system of customs, rituals, and beliefs to make death more bearable and understandable. But the thought of his own death to a young boy is *unbearable*, and nothing Judaism might have told me—how I might be mourned, or whether anything would be left of me, or what might be its fate if it were—could have consoled me in the least. Death was a door slamming on a life I wouldn't have; how could Judaism have anything to say about an unlived life? Nor would it have helped to know that it could and that the two contending schools of early rabbinic Judaism, the House of Shammai and the House of Hillel, had disagreed, the first saying it was better not to be born than to be born, the second saying the opposite.

Today, I'm still not ready for death, but I would not feel cheated if it came. It's behaved with more than reasonable restraint. If I haven't used the years as well as I might have despite all the promises made by the boy who begged to live that he wouldn't waste a second of any reprieve given him, that's a common failing. *Eyn adam yotsey min ha-olam*

HILLEL HALKIN

v'hatsi ta'avato b'yado the rabbis said: no one leaves this world with even half his desires fulfilled. We never reach the fifty-percent mark.

When I fear dying now, I fear losing a life that *has* been lived. I fear dying with the knowledge that I failed to accomplish or experience all I was capable of or meant to. I fear an end to the habits and joys I've grown used to. "Truly, the light is sweet and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun," says Ecclesiastes, a book more obsessed by death than any other in the Bible. Truly, it is.

I fear the grief my death will cause others. I fear being parted from those I've loved with a love no boy can imagine. I fear dying without knowing exactly what it was that I lived for.

I muse about the possibility of an afterlife. The idea is infantile, I know: *now I see you again!* But how can a life that has existed cease to exist without a trace? How can the universe have no memory of it?

I chose to write this book because it gave me an opportunity to explore what Jews have thought about such things. I didn't start from scratch. I knew my way around Jewish texts, and you can't have lived in Israel for over forty years as I have without often encountering death in its Jewish forms: Jewish jokes. Jewish prayers. Jewish funerals, Jewish mourning, Jewish memorial rites. One doesn't have to be (and I'm not) a religiously observant Jew to be familiar with them.

There is a vast body of Jewish writing about death. Much of it is halakhic—based in rabbinic law instructing Jews how to behave when someone in their family or community dies. Some is philosophical and homiletic: it advises us how to think about death and how to cope with it

intellectually and emotionally. Still another part is visionary, pseudo-visionary, or fabulistic; in it we are told about a next world by authors who either believe they have been given a glimpse of it, pretend to have been given a glimpse of it, or report what has been allegedly glimpsed by others. And finally, there is a growing amount of contemporary literature dealing with all three of these categories, some of it scholarly and some of it consisting of personal reflections.

I've read only a very small amount of all this. As might be expected of beliefs spanning thousands of years and influenced by many different cultures, Jewish attitudes toward death have varied greatly over time. Customs relating to death have changed and changed again. Conceptions of what, if anything, awaits us after we die have evolved and contradicted one another. Jews writing about death have criticized other Jews for what they have held or not held to be true about it. Jews have died with different fears, hopes, and expectations, have been buried and mourned in different ways, and have been considered to survive or not to survive in different forms, all in keeping with the traditions of their time and place.

I've tried to review the most prominent of these traditions and some of the major texts that convey them and to think of my own death in terms of them. In doing so, I've written as the person I am: a man of a certain age and background with certain opinions and biases who lives in a certain place. To write as someone else would have been pointless. Still, perhaps you'll find yourself in these pages, too. After all, we're in this together.