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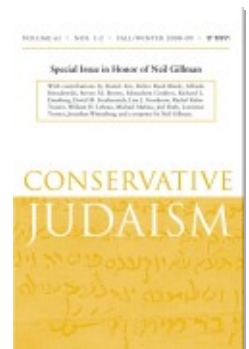
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Life After Death in the Thought of Louis Jacobs^{z”l} and Neil Gillman

JONATHAN WITTENBERG



Both Professor Gillman and the late Rabbi Jacobs would no doubt have some sympathy with Woody Allen’s famous quip, based on William De Morgan’s observation that he didn’t want to attain immortality through his work, he wanted to achieve it by not dying.¹ But each of them would have a rather different idea of what, in the context of Jewish eschatological thought, “not dying” might mean, and in neither case would it have much to do with what De Morgan and Woody Allen presumably intended.

As it happens, I spoke a number of times to both Rabbi Jacobs and Professor Gillman on the subject of the hereafter. On many occasions, I heard Rabbi Jacobs declare his belief in life after death. His children told me that as his own death came nearer, so he affirmed it more strongly. Apparently, he regretted not having spoken about the matter more often with dying congregants, as he felt this would have helped and supported them in their anguish. At the same time, though, he made it clear that what he believed in was a continued existence after death for the soul, not the body. Even then, too much speculation was futile. When I once sought his advice about what to say to people who asked me about the hereafter, he told me to refer them to Maimonides’ statement that to try to explain the nature of the world to come while living in this world was as impossible as to depict the wealth of the configurations of color to a person blind from birth.

At a study day in Rabbi Jacobs’ honor a few years ago, Professor Gillman expressed his disappointment with such views. A guide and authority

for him on every other subject, here alone Rabbi Jacobs let him down. Professor Gillman was referring to Jacobs' rejection of the doctrine of bodily resurrection. A careful reading of Neil Gillman's *The Death of Death*, to which I will refer frequently in this essay, as well as conversations with him, have helped me to understand both why and how deeply he holds to the latter belief. A consideration of Jacobs' and Gillman's different approaches to the hereafter seemed to me therefore an interesting way of re-engaging with this topic, which most of us choose to leave at the periphery of our thinking until the death of a loved one or our own approaching mortality sets us wondering what we actually believe.

Jacobs subjects the history of Jewish views on life after death to careful scrutiny in *Principles of the Jewish Faith*. After quoting Maimonides' thirteenth principle and then examining carefully his statements in his Mishnah commentary, the *Yad*, especially *Hilkhot Teshuvah*, and the *Ma'amar Tehiat Ha-Metim*, as well as the views of other medieval philosophers, he notes the inevitable tension between the concepts of resurrection and the immortality of the soul: "Basically, the two ideas are quite different. The original belief in the resurrection of the dead was an eschatological hope bound up with the rebirth of the nation in the Days of the Messiah. The doctrine of the soul's immortality, on the other hand, owes much to Greek influence and refers particularly to the fate of the individual soul after the death of the body."² He argues that it is evident that Maimonides favored the latter view. Maimonides, of course, provides a role model for Jacobs' own thought, not only on this particular question, but with regard to the whole strategy of synthesising tradition with what he calls at the outset of his first seminal work, *We Have Reason to Believe*, "the best thought of the day" which no honest Jewish apologetics can afford to ignore.³

He notes that Maimonides quotes (in *Hilkhot Teshuvah Ch. 8*) a source much loved by Jacobs himself, Rav's famous saying in the Talmud (B. Berakhot 17a) which he paraphrases as stating "that in the world to come there is no body and no pleasures of the body but the righteous sit with their crowns on their heads and bask in the radiance of the Divine Presence."⁴ This allows him to say with confidence that these two great authorities, the Talmudic sage and the pre-eminent medieval philosopher, pave the way for moderns to reject, or at least to quietly drop, belief in bodily resurrection. "On the whole," he states with approval, "Jewish modernists have

preferred the doctrine of the immortality of the soul to that of the resurrection of the dead.”⁵ Acknowledging that this may be a departure from the traditional concept, he argues that the very difficulties which appear to have troubled Maimonides remain relevant for us today: “How can a body (which by definition must occupy space and time) exist for eternity?”⁶ “The only reason the devout Jew can have for accepting the belief in the resurrection is that tradition demands it. Whereas . . . the religious mind wishes to accept immortality and believe in it chiefly because it cannot see God dooming His creatures who have longed for life in Him to ultimate death.”⁷

As much as Jacobs differs from Gillman with regard to the question of resurrection, the two thinkers agree on the essential matter of the survival of the individual in his or her very individuality. Only in this manner can the honor of God as creator be vindicated; it is unthinkable to them to conceive of a deity who fashions the wondrous work which is the human being only to let it perish forever in the dust.

In *A Jewish Theology*, Rabbi Jacobs, whose thought on so many topics remains consistent throughout the vast corpus and the fifty-year span of his writings, follows a similar pattern of investigation. He examines the biblical and post-biblical origins of the respective ideas of the immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the body, before arriving at similar conclusions. “We ought to be frank enough to admit,” he concludes, “that all the speculations regarding life here on earth after the resurrection simply do not ‘ring a bell’ for us whereas the more spiritual interpretation of a Maimonides does.”⁸

A different, and more personal, note is struck in his short consideration of the issue in *Beyond Reasonable Doubt*, Rabbi Jacobs’ last full presentation of his theological views. Interestingly, the relevant discussion is found in the chapter on secular Judaism, where he raises the issue of the afterlife as one of the reasons why, as one would only expect, he finds such a godless approach to Judaism totally unsatisfactory. Here he refers at length to his teacher Rabbi E. E. Dessler whose combination of *mussar*, Kabbalah and Ḥasidism entranced him at Manchester Yeshivah and at the Gateshead Kollel, that is, until he acquired the academic tools and training which led him to develop a source critical historical outlook. One of Dessler’s key themes was the doctrine of *Nahama dikesufa*, the bread of shame. Jacobs comments that he has often reflected on this idea since. Life on Earth is to

be understood as a probationary period offered to us as an opportunity to earn the merit of bliss in the hereafter. Here Jacobs refers, as he did frequently in his sermons, in which his love of English literature was evident, to the poet John Keats' description of the world as "a vale of soul making." God wishes human beings to be independent and to earn their portion of goodness through their own efforts; this, indeed, is precisely what makes us god-like. Those who do not gain their portion in the world to come through their own endeavors will suffer God's generosity in the hereafter as the undeserved "bread of shame" and it will taste bitter in their mouths.⁹ Jacobs, who was of course a scholar and master of Hasidic teaching, had written previously in *Religion and the Individual* that "The purpose of the soul's descent, the *Zohar* states, is for the desire of the soul for God to be awakened from below, i.e. here on earth, so that when it returns to its Source on high a new harmony is restored in the Sefirotic realm. Without its probationary period on earth the soul is a cistern, into which water is poured from outside. After the soul has acquitted itself well, it ascends on high to become a fountain with water of its own."¹⁰ Here, too, he had referred at length to the teachings of Rabbi Dessler. The key issue is nothing less than the question of the meaning and purpose of life here on earth. Why is such a long and complex period of probation necessary from the point of view of God, if not because God desires human beings to earn their place as free and independent moral beings within the spiritual economy of creation?

In *Beyond Reasonable Doubt*, Jacobs adds the following rider to his discussion, as part of his argument against the secularisation of Judaism: "I find it quite alarming that among so many Jewish thinkers today, the doctrine [of life after death], common to all the great theistic religions, is nowadays either abandoned completely or reinterpreted in terms of the individual living on in his works, or in his children, or in the lives he has influenced. It is hard, to say the least, for a committed theist to believe that God has created the marvellous individual personality only to 'waste it,' in the language of the contemporary thriller."¹¹

Yet at the same time, Jacobs cautions his readers against having too much to say about the geography of the world to come. Following a discussion of the views of Saadia Gaon in *Emunot VeDe'ot*, he observes that "The modern Jew is bound to be repelled by mediaeval dogmatism of this description

and prefers to leave the details of the Hereafter to God.”¹² Throughout his life he maintained that “Religious agnosticism in some aspects of this whole area is not only legitimate but altogether desirable . . .”¹³

To complete this brief synopsis of Rabbi Jacobs’ views about the hereafter on a personal note, I had the honor of being entrusted with helping his family to compose the inscription for his gravestone. Knowing the depth of his feeling in this matter, we concluded the laudation with the words *veyichyeh be’emunato*, alluding both to Rabbi Simlai’s famous discourse in tractate Makkot, in which the number of the commandments is reduced to one single all-embracing principle, and to Rabbi Jacobs’ firm belief in the continuation of life after death.¹⁴

Neil Gillman opens his acclaimed *The Death of Death* with a consideration of the place of eschatology in religious thinking: eschatologies, he explains in the typically lucid and logical style with which he makes complex and apparently abstruse ideas accessible, “are all visions of perfection, of a time when human existence will no longer be flawed. Eschatologies are resolutions; they bring closure to the in-between-ness of our lives.” Hence the consideration of how matters end must not be regarded as a theological “optional extra,” a status to which it is so often relegated, but as an integral part of the process of discovering meaning for our individual lives. It is an existentially and theologically unavoidable issue; hence the importance of devoting an entire book to the subject.

Jewish eschatology, explains Gillman, deals with the three dimensions of our lives as Jews: “We are simultaneously individual human beings, members of the Jewish people, and part of humanity.”¹⁵ This is crucial to understanding why he later affirms belief in the resurrection as the only way of making sense of life in its completeness, since the individual life is not fulfilled in isolation, but in its social and historical context.

In his “Foreword,” Gillman reflects on how the idea of writing the book took him back to his student days and especially to his doctoral dissertation on the thought of the French Christian existentialist Gabriel Marcel: “It was in Marcel’s writings that I first came across the issue of my relationship with my body, with the notion that ‘I am my body,’ with the notion of secondary reflection (the latter, in the work of Marcel’s students, came to be called ‘second naivete’), and with the claim that our philosophy should take seriously our intuitive inclination to hope for some form of individual des-

tiny beyond our death.”¹⁶ This intuitive hope underlies the conception of the book. At the outset he says that the work is more about life than death. At the conclusion he boldly declares, following a full and careful explanation of his personal belief in resurrection: “That is my hope. That is my expectation.”¹⁷ These two short but remarkable sentences challenge the reader to ask what his or her own hopes and expectations might be.

The section of the book most relevant to this essay is the concluding chapter: *What Do I Believe?* Like Rabbi Jacobs, Gillman argues that to see immortality in the memories one leaves behind and in the impact of one’s life on friends and family is insufficient. For others, he says, this might be enough, but not for him. Such a view fails to acknowledge our “concrete individuality”; “It is precisely this individualized existence that is most precious to God and which God will preserve for eternity.”¹⁸

But before we can address the significance of the hereafter we must accept the reality of death. Indeed it is precisely and only through such acceptance that we can properly ask the question: Since I must die, how then does my life have meaning? To this challenge Gillman responds: “[S]ince humans are born with an impulse to lead fulfilled lives, God must provide a setting for that fulfillment to be achieved, if not now, then in an afterlife.”¹⁹ That afterlife must affirm the significance of each individual existence, the purpose of history as a whole and, for Jews, that of Jewish history in particular. It must also vindicate God, who is persistently shown throughout the Jewish narrative, or myth, to care for all these dimensions of life.

Gillman argues against the dualism implicit in regarding body and soul as separable entities. The Bible knows nothing of the Platonic idea of the soul “as a distinct ontological entity which preexists its insertion into the body and will continue to exist after the death of the body.”²⁰ Furthermore, such a notion is counter-intuitive (and intuition has high epistemological status for Gillman); we feel the connection between body and soul. “If I am a psycho/physical entity, then when I die, *all* of me dies, my body together with my inner life.”²¹ It follows, therefore, that if I am to live again after my death, *all* of me must live on, because to see ourselves as body and soul as if they were separable entities is not only contrary to our perception of ourselves, but also (arguably) philosophically nonsensical.

Furthermore, only the resurrection of the body can truly manifest God’s

power. If the soul is an immortal entity in the first place, then what action by God need be involved in its survival? This would simply be an entirely natural event. Yet the triumph over death is God's ultimate vindication. Gillman argues that if God is supposed to be omnipotent, then the biblical record reveals a chronicle of disasters. He would presumably agree with the latter part, at least of Woody Allen's observation that "If it turns out that there is a God, I don't believe that he is evil. The worst that can be said is that he's an underachiever." This may be true, and Gillman argues that it certainly is, with respect to the long Biblical record of God's failures. But it cannot be maintained with regard to the "death of death": "On theological grounds, then, Judaism demands the death of death. If God is truly God, if God's will and power are absolute, then God must triumph over death as well. The death of death marks the final step in the triumph of the monotheistic God."²² In a recent conversation Professor Gillman spoke to me about his understanding of the second paragraph of the *Amidah*, a crucial step in the popularization of the idea of resurrection through its inclusion in Judaism's number one text, the liturgy: if the support of the falling, the healing of the sick and the release of the bound are presented as actions performed by God, then the revival of the dead, referred to repeatedly in the same paragraph, must also be understood not as a natural process but as an act carried out by God.

Furthermore, we live not only in our bodies, but, through this embodied state, in society and within the process of history. God is understood throughout the key biblical and post-biblical sources to be deeply concerned precisely with both society and history. Hence the very contextual nature of our existence and God's concerns with those contexts require that the afterlife be "also an affirmation of history and society."²³

Gillman adds a caution different in tone, though somewhat related, to Jacobs' insistence on "religious agnosticism" in this whole domain. It is a great mistake, he argues, to read depictions of the afterlife as if they were literal descriptions, passages from a quasi-realist novel. Eschatologies are "myths"; and myths, as Gillman describes them in the opening chapter of the book, as well as elsewhere in his writings, are rooted in our intuitions of what is true and form the beams of the structure, or narrative, which enables us to perceive, or articulate, the world as we do.

Ever since the moment when Professor Gillman told Rabbi Jacobs that here alone, in the entire vast field of Jewish thought, he felt let down by

him, I've asked myself what led those two great teachers to such different conclusions. Questions of belief are, of course, always personal, never perhaps more so than with reference to this opaque domain of the hereafter. Yet I think that the differences between them—one believing profoundly in the continued life of the soul while arguing strongly against the tenability of belief in the resurrection, the other eager to affirm precisely that “hope and expectation”—can also be understood in the light of their overall intellectual journeys. Rabbi Jacobs was a deeply traditional man, an *illui* educated primarily at the Manchester Yeshivah and immersed from his teens onwards in the classical Jewish texts from Talmud to Kabbalah, who later entered the world of academic scholarship and there encountered modernism. In the shock of this clash of intellectual civilizations, he stood fast by the truth of the empirical method. Hence his stance as a traditionally believing Jew who, not through wilful choice, but by force of evidence, is obliged to adopt a critical approach to those very doctrines which had underpinned his entire spiritual and intellectual endeavor until that point. Seeking in the domain of eschatology, just as he does elsewhere, to find a synthesis between tradition and that which remains credible to moderns, he remains faithful to the belief in the world to come, precisely while rejecting what he considers after due scrutiny to be those aspects of it untenable in the light of critical thought, that is, the idea of bodily resurrection and the “monstruous” notion that the merciful God could ever reserve eternal punishment for any of his creatures.²⁴

Professor Gillman, on the other hand, is a modernist brought up in a broadly secular context, who returns to tradition inspired by such thinkers as Will Herberg. He then encounters post-modernism. The penultimate chapter of *The Death Of Death* makes abundantly clear the impact of this “climate change” on his thought. In a section subtitled *Re-Enchanting The World*, he quotes Zygmunt Baumann, the famous professor of sociology perhaps best known for his writings about the Holocaust, with obvious appreciation: “Postmodernity can be seen as restoring to the world what modernity, presumptuously, had taken away; as a *re-enchantment* of the world that modernity tried hard to *dis-enchant*. It is the modern artifice that has been dismantled; the modern conceit of meaning-legislating reason that has been exposed.”²⁵ Hence post-modernism sanctions a return to a

pre-critical notion of the world to come, which modernism had dismissed with its—to some—arrogant disregard of all but the eminently rational.

Yet I remember from conversations with Rabbi Jacobs just how suspicious he was of postmodernism. By critiquing the authority of reason, and by sanctioning the “truth” of narratives not on the grounds of empirical verification but because they are significant to you or to me, the postmodern approach risked undermining the attack on fundamentalism in which he had invested so much of his intellectual endeavor and paradoxically restoring the respectability of the uncritical, anti-historical position. Postmodernism thus becomes the strange bedfellow of the very doctrines whose proponents had not only attacked him intellectually but had persecuted him politically in the nastiest manner, ever since the then Chief Rabbi had referred to his published views as sufficient grounds for precluding him from office. Hence, in the domain of eschatology, Rabbi Jacobs must have felt as much let down by Professor Gillman as Gillman felt disappointed by Jacobs.

Yet I am struck once again by a key feature of the common ground between the two great thinkers; both believe strongly in the survival of the individual and both record their disapproval of the banal modern tendency to relegate such “survival” to refer to the memories and works which live on after a person’s death, the “memes and genes” theory of immortality which they both equally despised. Rabbi Jacobs would have laughed at Hilaire Belloc’s pun: “When I am dead I hope it is said: ‘His sins were scarlet, but his books were *read*.’” But neither he nor Gillman would have found the witty wordplay theologically satisfying.

I must admit that I have great difficulty with this idea of the survival of the individual. That is scarcely because I don’t want it to be true, especially after two years during which I have lost my greatest teacher of Torah, two of my aunts, my dear father, and, dare I write it in the same sentence, my beloved dog. (“He’ll be there waiting for you with big wet kisses as all our best friends will be when we finally get to heaven.”)²⁶ The question “Where have they gone?” has been for me the subject of almost constant existential reflection, haunting my recent writing. I listen out carefully for what others who have suffered loss think and feel about this vexed and painful matter of where their loved ones now are. Incidentally, I’ve found that people almost always put that question, “What does Judaism say about life after

death?” when a close relative is about to, or has just, died. In my experience, they don’t generally ask it in relation to their own mortality, but because they want to have some sense of where their beloved parent, partner or child might be, and because they do not want their closeness to him or her to have ended forever. These conversations almost always reveal the fact that the questioner has never before heard reference made to what Judaism might have to teach on this subject.

My difficulty lies with the issue of our survival as individuals. To what extent is my understanding of myself as “me” a construct contingent upon the perception, or creation, of boundaries which aren’t in the end entirely real and which, therefore, in the transcendent context of life beyond this world, dissolve? Yes, of course, “If I am not for myself, who shall be for me?”²⁷ I have the privilege, and the responsibility, of functioning as a morally independent individual, and no one else can be held accountable for my deeds (though, of course, I exist and act within the context of the larger unit of society.) Yes, I rightfully call this book, this house currently in my ownership “mine.” But the possessive adjective signifies not the ultimate reality of things, but rather a legal understanding that it is my right to keep the relevant items for my own use and withhold them from others at my discretion. In the end, however, nothing is truly and totally mine, including “my” very body. It belongs, if the notion of belonging can be applied to it at all at this stage of its existence, to its constituent elements, which are in turn part of the constant dialectic, the ceaseless interchange of molecules which governs the world of matter. No more is my consciousness necessarily mine. I experience it as such; that is, I conceptualize myself as an independent, thinking being and call this feeling of being myself “me.” But there are certainly moments when even in this life I intuit the limitations of that self-definition and intimate the possibility that what I label in this manner might in fact be a fragment of a much greater consciousness which I have thus boundaried and branded, sometimes to the exclusion of greater possibilities. Pondering such moments afterwards brings to mind the Ḥasidic teaching that life’s task consists of turning our *ani* into *ayyin*, that is, precisely of surrendering the notion of our distinct, differentiated selfhood into the vast being of divinity. Is this not perhaps what happens at our death? In such a case, I indeed survive; nothing of me dies. There is life after death. But the “I” which knows itself as a distinct and differentiated identity does not continue as such.

What it must feel like to experience, in one and the same moment, both total completion through absorption into God's being, and, simultaneously, the utter dissolution of the notion around which my consciousness had previously been structured—that is a mystery which belongs to the secrets of death. So, too, does the issue of how God can, and in this I deeply believe, at the same time judge me for everything I have done and all that I have ever been. Or perhaps a different concept of “I,” selfless, unimaginable to us now, awaits us on the other side of the grave.

Rabbi Jacobs and Professor Gillman felt somehow disappointed by each other's refusal to ratify their ideas about the hereafter. Why did it matter to them both? Perhaps the answer is connected to our theological vulnerability: by what right do others challenge or undermine those narratives and ideas about continued existence after death which protect our lives from meaninglessness, when they are well warranted by tradition and cannot possibly be harmful in any way? Shouldn't we rather simply listen with respect and, if we must disagree, do so quietly and for ourselves?

I honor the deeply-held beliefs which I've had the privilege of hearing others express, or more often, overhearing them struggle to articulate to themselves. Some years I was invited as one of a number of faith leaders to address the subject of life after death with a gathering of parents who had all lost children. After the outside speakers, myself included, had said their piece and the formal agenda was completed, a spontaneous conversation developed among the parents: where did they feel their children were now? I will never forget either what they said, or the depth of longing with which they expressed their feelings. One mother spoke of how she believed her child could not have moved any further away from her since his death. If time does not operate in eternity nor space in infinity, where could he have gone? There he was, near to her forever, and there she continued to commune with him. I shall always honor her words.

NOTES

1. I find it difficult to know how I should refer to my two teachers in this essay. Rabbi Jacobs was also a professor and Professor Gillman is, of course, also a rabbi. Rabbi Jacobs would often say, “Call me Louis,” but I could never bring myself to do so. He always was and will be for me “Rabbi Jacobs,” so I shall refer to him as

— Life and Death in the Thought of . . . —

such. Professor Gillman is best known as a theologian and philosopher, so I have referred to him as “Professor.”

2. Louis Jacobs, *Principles Of The Jewish Faith: An Analytical Study* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1964), p. 410.

3. Louis Jacobs, *We Have Reason To Believe, Third Revised Edition* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1965), p. 9.

4. *Principles*, pp. 400–401.

5. *Principles*, p. 413.

6. *Principles*, p. 414.

7. *Principles*, p. 414.

8. Louis Jacobs, *A Jewish Theology* (New York: Behrman House, 1973), p. 319.

9. Louis Jacobs, *Beyond Reasonable Doubt* (London: The Littman Library Of Jewish Civilisation, 1999), pp. 182–3.

10. Louis Jacobs, *Religion and the Individual: A Jewish Perspective* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 100.

11. *Beyond Reasonable Doubt*, p. 183.

12. *A Jewish Theology*, p. 312.

13. *A Jewish Theology*, p. 321.

14. B. Makkot 24a.

15. Neil Gillman, *The Death of Death: Resurrection and Immortality in Jewish Thought* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1997), p. 24.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 11–12.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 273.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 245.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 249.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 266.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 270.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 259.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 262.

24. Louis Jacobs, *A Jewish Theology*, p. 320–1.

25. Neil Gillman, *The Death of Death*, pp. 219–220.

26. Mark Dean, quoted in *Rescuing Sprite: A Dog Lover's Story of Joy and Anguish*, by Mark R. Levin (Pocket Books, 2007), p.126.

27. Mishnah Avot 1:14.

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