olam he-zeh v'olam ha-ba
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The passing of sages in general and the execution of the Ten Martyrs in particular feature prominently in talmudic and midrashic legend. Rabbi Akiva’s death, however, would seem to have left a greater impression in rabbinic literature than the deaths of all of the other Tannaim and Amoraim. The legends about Rabbi Akiva’s death contend with two main dilemmas. First, horror at his cruel end and the manner in which this very old man (120 years old, according to legend) was executed. The dilemma here pertains to the issue of theodicy, in the case of one who lived a long and full life and came to such a terrible end. The second dilemma concerns the meaning of the death of someone who strove so hard to give meaning to his life, and especially to the suffering and misfortune that befell him throughout it. Life is the ground upon which meaning is built, and when it comes to a close, is death meaningless?

IS THIS THE TORAH AND THIS ITS REWARD?!

The talmudic and midrashic legends tell how Rabbi Akiva captured the attention of figures such as Adam and Moses. These legends further enhanced the status of Rabbi Akiva in cultural consciousness—by comparing him to the fathers of the world and the nation and placing him on a par with them. As recounted in the Talmud, the first to be struck by the unreasonableness of Rabbi Akiva’s death was Adam, who, “when he reached the generation of Rabbi Akiva, rejoiced in his Torah and was saddened by his death.”¹ Another well-known legend, which tells of Moses’s discovery of Rabbi Akiva, heightens the dilemma associated with the latter’s death:

Rabbi Yehudah said in the name of Rav: When Moses ascended to heaven, he found God sitting and tying crowns to the letters. He said to Him: “Master of the Universe, who requires this of you?” He said to him: “There is a man who will live in a few generations and Akiva ben Joseph is his name, who will learn mounds and mounds of laws from each cusp. . . .” He [Moses] said to Him: “Master of the Universe, You have shown me the Torah; show me its reward!” He said
to him: “Look behind you.’ He looked behind him and saw them weighing his [Rabbi Akiva’s] flesh in the market. He said to Him: “Master of the Universe, is this the Torah and this its reward?” He said to him: “Silence! That is how I conceived it.” (BT, Menahot 29b)

There is no attempt whatsoever, in this text, to justify the fact of Rabbi Akiva’s brutal murder, merely arbitrary and unquestioning acceptance of God’s decree. The bluntness of God’s answer to Moses, as formulated by the author of this legend, heightens the pointlessness of theodicy and strengthens the sense of injustice at the death of Rabbi Akiva. Consequently, it is not God’s reply—unequivocal, absolute, and so hard for the human mind to accept—that has remained in the minds of readers and scholars, but rather Moses’s resounding cry: “Master of the universe, is this the Torah and this its reward?!”

Although some explain God’s answer to mean that one must not question His ways and deeds or “investigate that which is beyond one’s understanding,” and although the reply was ultimately intended for ordinary readers and students, we cannot overlook the fact that, in the context of the legend itself, it was not given to just any prophet or sage, but to Moses our teacher, greatest of all the prophets past and future. It would not be the way of readers of the Aggadah to be satisfied with a simple a fortiori deduction (“If even Moses received such an answer, who are we to expect anything more?”). As noted, what has remained most impressed upon the minds of these readers is in fact Moses’s anguished cry: “Is this the Torah and this its reward?!”

Indeed this cry has reverberated throughout Jewish history, from the days of the Talmud to the present, and lies at the heart of discussion of injustice in the world, divine providence, reward and punishment, the suffering of the righteous, and the prosperity of the wicked. The cry is echoed in the words of the rabbis concerning the Ten Martyrs, brutally executed by the Romans.

According to the midrash of the Ten Martyrs, the first to be executed was Simeon ben Gamaliel, president [nasi] of the Sanhedrin, who was beheaded. Rabbi Ishmael the High Priest is said to have held Rabbi Simeon’s head in his hands, bitterly crying, “Where is the Torah and where is its reward! How the tongue that explained the Torah in seventy tongues now licks the dust!” Rabbi Ishmael justifies his outburst, explaining that Simeon ben Gamaliel had been greater than him in Torah and wisdom, and his death was thus a great loss to him personally and to the entire generation. Death itself is meaningless. The consequences of Simeon ben Gamaliel’s absence, however, were considerable: for himself, as he was no longer able to engage in in his lifetime
pursuit—explaining the Torah in every tongue—for Rabbi Ishmael and for the entire Jewish people.

In a number of midrashim, the cry is attributed to the angels, remonstrating against God. When Rabbi Ishmael was killed, the executioner removed the skin of his face. When he reached the place where the phylacteries are laid, Rabbi Ishmael uttered a terrible cry that shook the divine throne. “The ministering angels [then] said to the Holy One, blessed be He: ‘That a righteous man such as he, to whom You revealed all of the mysteries of the upper realms and the secrets of the lower realms, should be killed so horribly by this wicked man. Is this the Torah and this its reward?” In attributing shock to the upper realms, to the divine throne, and to the angels—whose entire existence is marked by immutable order—the author seeks to ascribe to the deaths of the Martyrs the power to disrupt the very foundations of the universe. At Rabbi Akiva’s death, the angels too—not only Moses, as in the source cited above—cry out to God: “Is this the Torah and this its reward!?”

The story of Rabbi Ishmael’s death stresses the preferability of observance of the precepts in this world to everlasting life in the world to come. As we will see below, the story of Rabbi Akiva’s death highlights the same principle. There is a certain similarity between the modes of execution: Rabbi Akiva’s flesh is scored with iron combs, and Rabbi Ishmael’s face is skinned. Their behavior is also similar, in the self-restraint they show as they are put to death. Rabbi Akiva fulfills the commandment of reciting the Shema, and Rabbi Ishmael cries out only when the executioner reaches the place where the phylacteries are laid—causing the Roman emperor to ask: “Until now, you neither wept nor cried out, yet now you cry out?” Rabbi Ishmael replied: “I do not cry out for my soul but for the commandment of the phylacteries that has been taken from me.” To their dying breaths, Rabbi Ishmael and Rabbi Akiva dedicated every human effort to doing what is right in this world. Their entire interpretive focus, according to the aggadic texts, is on life, not on what happens to the soul after death.

When Rabbi Hanina ben Teradion is burned alive, wrapped in a Torah scroll, his daughter cries: “Is this the Torah and this its reward?!” A dialogue ensues between them, in which Rabbi Hanina rejects her words—perhaps also to comfort her and to give her strength—asserting that such a cry is misplaced: “If it is for me that you cry, I accept my suffering with love, and would rather atone for my sins and be consumed by flames fanned by man in this world than by flames that are not fanned—the flames of Gehenna.” He considers the possibility, however, that her shock may be due not to his execution, but
to the burning of the Torah scroll, adding: “And if it is for the Torah scroll that you weep, the Torah is fire and cannot be consumed by fire. Its words fly in the air, and the fire merely consumes the parchment.”\textsuperscript{10} According to this approach, the shock at Hanina ben Teradion’s execution by fire and the burning of the Torah scroll was the result of the limited vision of those who, like Hanina’s daughter, witnessed the terrible event, but were unable to detach themselves from the horror and interpret it on a deeper level. Extreme suffering was a privilege, purifying him of his sins—perhaps even granted to him as a reward for his devotion, rather than inflicted as a punishment.

One must also transcend the barbaric act of burning a holy book. The holiness of the Torah is not a function of its physical components. The comparison to fire is apt, as fire cannot consume fire. “Its words fly in the air,” as the Torah, according to Rabbi Hanina, is its content, not ink on parchment. There is thus no reason to cry out in remonstration or in pain. The human oppressor and the visible horror must be transcended, and the event perceived as one of purification, the significance of which bears no relation to destruction and death, but rather to a fire that cannot be consumed and to words that fly in the air.

Rabbi Akiva’s death may also be seen in the context of the eternity of the Torah or the bond to the eternal enjoyed by its students—particularly in light of his exchange with Pappus ben Judah.\textsuperscript{11} Although Rabbi Akiva disapproved of some of Pappus’s teachings,\textsuperscript{12} the following, well-known exchange pertains directly to Torah study at a time when it was prohibited by the authorities and to the punishment incurred by those who violate the interdiction. The exchange takes place on two separate occasions: when Rabbi Akiva teaches Torah in public, in violation of the ban against Torah study, and when the two men find themselves together in a Roman prison:

The Rabbis taught: Once, the wicked government decreed that the Jews should not engage in Torah study. Pappus ben Judah came upon Rabbi Akiva, who was gathering crowds together and publicly engaging in Torah study. He said to him: “Akiva, are you not afraid of the government?” He replied: “I will give you a parable. It is like a fox who was walking along the river bank, and he saw fish moving together from place to place. He said to them: ‘What are you fleeing from?’ They replied: ‘From the nets that men cast over us.’ He said to them: ‘Why don’t you come up to the land, and you and I will dwell together, as my ancestors dwelled with yours?’ They replied: ‘Are you the one they call the cleverest of animals? You are not clever,
but a fool! If we are afraid in our vital element, how much more so in an element in which we would die!’ So too are we. If this is the way things are now that we sit and engage in the Torah, of which it is written ‘for that it is your life and the length of your days,’ how much worse they would be if we were to abstain from it.”

It is told that not long passed before Rabbi Akiva was caught and thrown in prison, and Pappus ben Judah was caught and imprisoned with him. He said to him: “Pappus! Who has brought you here?” He responded: “Fortunate are you, Rabbi Akiva, for having been arrested for Torah study; woe to Pappus who was arrested for idle words” (BT Berakhot 61b).

At their first encounter, Pappus sounds responsible and rational. At a time of such decrees, it would have been prudent to study Torah in secret and certainly not to provoke the authorities by gathering large crowds. To Rabbi Akiva, however, the suspension of public instruction, which lies at the heart of national, cultural life, would have constituted a kind of collective, spiritual-cultural suicide. There was little doubt that they would be caught in the Roman nets, but suspending communal study would have been even worse. Was Pappus convinced by Rabbi Akiva’s explanation? We don’t know, because the talmudic legend cites no reply on his part.

The exchange continues in prison, and this time the final word is given to Pappus, who makes a clear distinction between the cruel regime that imprisons and executes at will and the actions of the condemned. It is the latter that define the significance of the punishment. For Pappus, who was arrested for idle words, the punishment was indeed a punishment. He was seized, like so many others under Roman rule, without having done anything wrong—merely for having asked Rabbi Akiva a question, received an answer, and remained silent. It was enough for the authorities that he did not dispute Rabbi Akiva’s statement, and so they arrested him for his silence. Rabbi Akiva, on the other hand, was arrested for having flagrantly violated a government decree: gathering crowds and publicly teaching Torah. For Rabbi Akiva, the punishment was, in fact, a reward: “This is the Torah and this is its reward!”—in the most literal sense, not as a remonstration against heaven or a cry of pain.

The cry “Is this the Torah” is generally understood as referring specifically to Torah study—to the diligence, knowledge, and scholarship of the Ten Martyrs.

An unusual use of “This is the Torah and this its reward” can be found in the case of Elisha ben Abuyah (“Aher”), who witnessed the martyrs’ deaths and
drew very different conclusions from those drawn by most of his friends and colleagues. The sight of the severed tongue of Rabbi Judah the baker in the mouth of a dog is said to have been one of the things that led Ben Abuyah to abandon his faith and deny its tenets. If “this is the Torah and this its reward,” concluded Elisha, it is pointless to study Torah and observe the precepts, and there is no reward and punishment in the world.\textsuperscript{14}

“Is this the Torah and this its reward?” (or in the affirmative: “This is the Torah and this its reward”) has been used to convey various meanings and has been variously interpreted: as an expression of deep shock; a remonstration against heaven, voiced by human beings or angels; an introduction to a discussion of reward and punishment; an introduction to a discussion of theodicy; a reaffirmation of the rewards enjoyed by the righteous in this world and especially in the world to come; or a rejection of divine providence and retribution.

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, the talmudic text that recounts Moses’s shock at Rabbi Akiva’s “reward” does not address the issue of theodicy at all. There is one source, not a central one, that attests to Rabbi Akiva’s theodicy,\textsuperscript{15} capable of shaping interpretations of Rabbi Akiva’s death—based, rather, on a broad range of relevant texts. It does not appear among the talmudic and midrashic legends that seek to tell the story of Rabbi Akiva, but derives from a later source, dedicated primarily to the issue of theodicy with regard to the deaths of the Ten Martyrs. Thus, even if we were to claim that the author of this legend had found an appropriate answer to Moses’s resounding question, “Is this the Torah and this its reward?” (assuming that it does, indeed, explain the brutal killing itself from a theodicy perspective), the question of meaning would still remain. It is meaning—so central to Rabbi Akiva in his lifetime and at the heart of the earlier midrashim that deal with his philosophy and life story—that is the primary concern of the legends that describe his behavior and words at the time of his execution.

A FINAL LESSON IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF LOVE

The meaning of Rabbi Akiva’s death is in fact discussed in a number of places. Some, like the following text, pertain directly to his image as the sage of love:

When they took Rabbi Akiva to be executed, it was the appointed hour for reciting the \textit{Shema}. As they were scoring his flesh with iron combs, he accepted the yoke of heaven, and his students said to him: “Rabbi, even now?!” He said to them: “All my days I grieved at the words ‘with all your soul’ (Deuteronomy 6:5)—even when your soul
is taken from you. I said: when will I have the opportunity to fulfil this? And now that the opportunity presents itself, will I not fulfil it?” He drew out [the word] “one” [ehad] until his soul departed with “one.” (BT, Berakhot 61a)

The final lesson on the philosophy of love was given by the sage of love at the moment of his execution. His students, who had learned from him, during the years of their studies, that suffering is beloved and must be accepted and even embraced, were unable to come to terms with his death. Those who had been at his side at the time of his son’s death, and even then wondered at his behavior, find it difficult to maintain their composure, but faced with their rabbi’s equanimity, make an effort to control themselves. Had they wanted to cry or shout, they could not have done so in the presence of this man who, even as he was being tortured to death, accepted the yoke of heaven by reciting the Shema—with serenity, composure, and focus.

These circumstances were unlike anything they had experienced or learned with Rabbi Akiva before. Even when a person suffers terrible anguish and great misfortunes befall him, he is still a living, breathing human being, beyond the suffering and the misfortune. The meaning of suffering lies in life itself and is afforded by the living. We can thus understand and accept, albeit with great difficulty, theodicy and the acceptance of suffering, based on the distinction between the afflicted and the affliction and based on the hope that redemption may be attained through suffering and from suffering. As witnesses to the execution of Rabbi Akiva, what they experienced was the absolute, the point of no return—a situation in which one can no longer distinguish between the man and his fate, to cease to exist. All they had learned from their teacher up to this point about theodicy and the meaning of suffering was no longer applicable, because it pertained only to those who live in this world—capable, in their imaginations, in their mind’s eye, of envisioning themselves alive after having been delivered from their misfortunes. Meaning is manifested in moral behavior, in observing the commandments and in living up to one’s obligations in a given situation. As unbearable as it may be, it is still existence as opposed to nonexistence or to the nullification of existence that is the result of death.

They watch him as he is executed, with admiration, profound grief, shock at the violence of the event and the cruelty of the executioners, and anxiety at the imminent separation and their approaching orphanhood. Among all of these raging emotions, however, their greatest fear is that his loss will lack meaning. As faithful students who have internalized his
philosophy of meaning that affords value and significance to every situation and event, they turn to him with a question-cry: “Rabbi, even now?!” Here and now, as you are being executed and are a hairsbreadth from certain death, have you not reached the point at which all meaning is lost? Do you even now hold fast to your principles? Do you even now accept God’s judgment? Until when?

And Rabbi Akiva, clearly, precisely, and simply, explains to his students the meaning of his death: love. Love to the last breath! The Torah is the Torah of love and it commands us to love God—a commandment that, under ordinary circumstances, can never be fully observed. “All my days I grieved at the words ‘with all thy soul.’” As the sage of love, Rabbi Akiva was keenly aware of the fact that one of the most important of the precepts of love—“And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deut 6:5)—cannot be fulfilled in its entirety. Most people will never have the chance to observe the commandment to love God “with all your soul,” even at the time of their death. Throughout his life, he mourned the almost certain incompleteness of his observance of the commandment to love God. “And now that the opportunity presents itself will I not fulfil it?” What could possibly afford more meaning, at that moment in time, his last, the point of no return that is death? “With all your soul’ (Deut 6:5)—even when your soul is taken from you!”

As the legionnaires score his flesh with iron combs to end his life in terrible agony, he accepts the yoke of heaven and teaches those around him—in word and deed—the meaning of his death. Something is missing, however, in this incredible exchange between Rabbi Akiva and his students, something very basic. Rabbi Akiva chooses not to answer their question—“Even now?”—in the simplest, most obvious way: life after death. He could have told them that there is no question of loss of meaning because the body is merely a vessel, and the soul returns to its source. At the most appropriate time imaginable, he does not discuss belief in the world to come, eschewing the relatively easy solution to the problem of meaning in his death. His emphasis is on what one can still do in this world: to complete the commandment to love God. To his mind, meaning must be sought in life itself and not beyond it.

Rabbi Akiva’s avoidance of the subject of life after death at such an obvious juncture becomes even more pronounced upon examining the concepts he employs in his brief words to his students: “He said to them: ‘All my days I grieved at the words “with all your soul [nafshekha]” (Deut 6:5)—even when your soul [nishmatkha] is taken from you. I said: when will I have the
opportunity to fulfil this? And now that the opportunity presents itself will I not fulfil it?"

The meanings associated with the words *nefesh* and *neshamah* (both translated “soul” here) are many and varied. The following is presented as an interpretative suggestion that need not address each and every use or inflection of these two concepts in the Bible and rabbinic literature. The basis for the discussion will be the primary meaning of these words in the first part of the book of Genesis and elsewhere in the Pentateuch. Genesis 2:7 reads: “And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life [*nishmat hayyim*]; and man became a living soul [*nefesh hayyah*].” The word *nefesh* is used in a similar fashion with regard to the prohibition against eating consuming blood: “Only be strong not to eat the blood, for the blood is the life [*nefesh*], and you shall not eat the life with the flesh” (Deut 12:23).

Before addressing the various homiletic interpretations of these words, I would like to note that the term *hisha’arut hanefesh* [life after death; literally “remaining of the soul”] is a borrowed one, which first appears in Jewish sources in the early Middle Ages. Earlier rabbinic sources use the term *hayyei ha’olam haba*, sometimes in the sense of life after death and sometimes in other senses. For the purposes of the present discussion, emphasis will be placed on fulfilment of the commandment to love God “with all your soul [*nafsheka*],” until the moment at which one no longer has a *nefesh* because it has been taken away. The only question that interests Rabbi Akiva is “Will I fulfil it?”—What commandment has reality presented him with that he might fulfil? And what of the soul [*neshamah*] and the world to come [or *hisha’arut hanefesh*]? Rabbi Akiva is wholly absorbed by “with all your soul” [*bekhol nafsheka*]. According to the talmudic and midrashic legends, he devotes neither thought nor speech to the matter and conveys nothing regarding the fate of the soul that is about to be taken from him. His immense effort focuses entirely on that which he can do as long as he has the “breath of life” [*nishmat hayyim*] within him—as long as he is a living soul [*nefesh hayyah*].

This is not the first time that Rabbi Akiva’s students are exposed to this view, which is in fact part of a consistent method revealed on various occasions. The most striking of these concerns Rabbi Akiva’s behavior at the bedside of his teacher, Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, who lay dying in agony. His friends, Rabbi Joshua, Rabbi Tarfon, and Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah, also
present at their teacher’s bedside, rose above the moment, the pain and the suffering, to speak of eternal life and the immortal soul: “and my master is in this world and the next.” Rabbi Akiva, on the other hand, frankly and determinedly returned Rabbi Elazar to reality, with all its difficulties, as the only place in which man can find meaning—preventing him from escaping for even a single moment to the world of eternity and immortality. “Beloved is suffering” here and now because of the moral opportunity it provides for true introspection and for accepting it with love. Even at the time of his own death, he does not want to escape the final terrible moments to reassuring descriptions of the hereafter. He finds his peace in these very moments and in the moral challenge they present—a challenge that only life in this world can offer.

The circumstances intensify the moral dimension of fulfilling the commandment to love God. The Roman legionnaires score his flesh with iron combs, as they torture him to death. There is of course a kind of connection—physical contact—between the executioners and the condemned prisoner. In their every movement, in every piece of flesh they tear from his body, they represent the greatest possible moral depravity—their own and that of the regime that ordered them to do such things on a mission of hatred. (My use of the expression “mission of hatred” here, with regard to the executioners, is meant to create a parallel to the executed sage’s mission of love and makes no claims regarding the actual presence of hatred.) It would have been perfectly understandable had the condemned man cursed his executioners as they tormented him, but that would have transformed the forced physical contact into a kind of dialogue on the same plane of hatred. Rabbi Akiva manages to isolate himself completely from the executioners, whose hold on his body is one-sided. The text gives eloquent expression to the fact that the two sides acted entirely independently: “As they were scoring his flesh with iron combs, he accepted the yoke of heaven.”

Not only does he not curse them; he does not respond to their actions at all—not even to cry out at the terrible pain they are inflicting on him. There is no dialogue whatsoever between the executioners and the prisoner, who utters neither curses nor cries nor moans. High above their low plane of moral depravity, opposite executioners and rulers who have lost their humanity, Rabbi Akiva presents another, separate plane of moral behavior, through which—in observing the commandment of loving God to the fullest at a time of suffering and in the face of death—he teaches his students and future generations the connection between morality and love. This is Rabbi Akiva’s final lesson in the philosophy of love.
SOCRATES AND HIS COMPANIONS COMPARED TO RABBI AKIVA AND HIS STUDENTS

It is interesting to compare the discussion between Rabbi Akiva and his students during his execution and the conversation between Socrates and his companions as the time approached for him to drink the cup of hemlock—particularly with regard to the question of the immortality of the soul. Both accounts stress the equanimity with which the two men accept their deaths, in sharp contrast to the agitation of those around them. Rabbi Akiva, who is subjected to terrible torments, accepts the yoke of heaven with composure and devotion. His students cannot allow themselves to cry out or weep in the face of their rabbi’s composure. Socrates’s companions burst into tears, and he rebukes them. There too it seems as if the circumstances weigh more heavily upon those who will be left behind than upon Socrates himself, who remains calm until the very end. The similarity between the two stories ends, however, at the composure with which the protagonists accept their deaths and the behavior of those around them. The discussion of the meaning of death and the source of Socrates’s comfort could not be more different from that of Rabbi Akiva.

Socrates’s companions come to visit him in prison on the day of his execution by poison. They try to convince him to escape and save his soul or at least to ask his judges for a pardon or a reprieve. A discussion ensues, during the course of which Socrates rejects their proposals. The event and Socrates’s arguments are described at length in Plato’s dialogue *Phaedo*.

The basis of the Socratic-Platonic discussion is the dichotomy between the mortal body and the immortal soul, whereby the body hinders the development of the soul as it sways human actions toward the satisfaction of physical desires. Life is thus a struggle between the desires of the body and the aspirations of the soul to join the forms—something that is possible only after death, once the soul has departed the body. Therefore, every person, and especially philosophers who have devoted their lives to approaching the forms (“ideas”) and have lived the good life in practice and pursuit of knowledge, should welcome death. One may not commit suicide, that is, separate the soul from the body, or precipitate death, but death should not be feared when it comes, as the world of meaning, the world of forms, lies beyond death. Those who have nurtured their souls while still attached to their bodies—and none more than the philosopher—will attain their ultimate goal after death. This idea, expressed in the *Phaedo* and in Plato’s theory of the soul in general, laid
the foundations for the theology of the body and the soul found in important religious currents, particularly in the monotheistic faiths.\textsuperscript{21}

The comparison between Socrates and Rabbi Akiva is important, due to the absence of theological discourse concerning the immortality of the soul and its significance in the description of the latter’s death. Rabbi Akiva identifies the realm of human action from birth to death as the locus of meaning. Although Socrates ascribes great importance to human action and behavior in this life, he finds the locus of meaning in the world beyond death, where the soul can finally unite with the intelligible forms.

The Platonic dialogue also addresses political questions of government and law that have no parallel in the story of Rabbi Akiva’s execution. Socrates, a respectable Athenian citizen, is sentenced to death by a particularly large jury, comprising five hundred and one of his city’s most prominent citizens. He believes they were wrong to accept the accusations against him and to reject his own defense. Nevertheless, he recognizes the legitimacy of the Athenian political and legal systems, including eventual errors in judgement, as in his case. Rabbi Akiva’s execution, on the other hand, is carried out by a foreign regime, illegitimate in his eyes and in the eyes of most of his countrymen,\textsuperscript{22} and his behavior intensifies and highlights the immorality of his executioners.

We are thus left with the comparison to Socrates, who chooses to comfort his companions, telling them that they should not grieve at his death because death is not the end for the essence of man, which is the soul. The conclusion he draws from this is a moral one:

\begin{quote}
[I]f the soul is really immortal, what care should be taken of her, not only in respect of the portion of time which is called life, but of eternity! And the danger of neglecting her from this point of view does indeed appear to be awful. If death had only been the end of all, the wicked would have had a good bargain in dying, for they would have been happily quit not only of their body, but of their own evil together with their souls. But now . . . there is no release or salvation from evil except the attainment of the highest virtue and wisdom. (Plato, \textit{Phaedo} 106–7, trans. Benjamin Jowett)
\end{quote}

In the crux of the discussion, he seeks to prove the immortality of the soul as compared to the body’s ephemerality and finite existence after death. Socrates (according to Plato) presents theological/metaphysical arguments, from which he draws moral conclusions. As noted, Rabbi Akiva could easily have made the very same argument, yet he does not turn to theology, choosing rather to focus entirely on the moral argument. The moral import of Socrates’s
words pertains to the way in which one should approach death but make no claims regarding the continued effort to hold onto life and to continue to act in a moral fashion. The main thrust of his parting discourse is the assertion that death is merely a passage to immortality:

[I]nasmuch as the soul is shown to be immortal . . . let a man be of good cheer about his soul, who hath cast away the pleasures and ornaments of the body . . . and has followed after the pleasures of knowledge in this life; who has adorned the soul in her own proper jewels, which are temperance, and justice, and courage, and nobility, and truth—in these arrayed she is ready to go on her journey to the world below, when her time comes.

Although Plato does not preach abstinence and those who satisfy the needs of the body are not considered sinners, such actions are ultimately meaningless—a consequence of physical existence, for as long as the soul is attached to the body, that is, for as long as one lives. After death, the soul of one who has lived a worthy life—of a philosopher who has nurtured his soul by studying, helping others, and fulfilling his duties to society as a soldier or a law-abiding citizen; of one who has told the truth and pursued justice—will attain its rightful place in the world of forms. Such a person has nothing to fear from death and should be prepared for it. It is these thoughts that Socrates shares with his companions, as his own death approaches.

On the basis of these claims regarding the body, the soul, and the different meaning death holds for each of them, he comforts his companions, telling them that they should not grieve at the burial of his body:

[W]hen I have drunk the poison I shall leave you . . . and then he [Crito] will suffer less at my death, and not be grieved when he sees my body being burned or buried. I would not have him sorrow at my hard lot, or say at the burial, Thus we lay out Socrates, or Thus we follow him to the grave or bury him; for false words are not only evil in themselves, but they infect the soul with evil.

Socrates does not cling to life or delay drinking the poison until the last possible minute—further emphasizing the fact that his death derives its meaning not from life itself, but from the immortality of the soul. From the moment he comes to terms with his death, Socrates no longer values life: what is another hour of life as compared to eternity?

It is in these few minutes that the difference between Socrates and Rabbi Akiva lies. Rabbi Akiva refuses to cease pursuing his moral objective in this
world for even a single instant and thus clings to the most terrible moments of his life as if they were the greatest of treasures. Socrates believes that man enters this world unwillingly and must strive to live in a good and fitting manner, but there is no point in clinging to life when eternity is just around the corner. When man is about to coalesce with ultimate meaning, he can only laugh at himself for trying to give meaning to another few moments of life.

The differences between these two positions can be summed up in the words of Rabbi Jacob Kurshai, teacher of Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi—without attempting, as he does, to resolve the dilemma that arises from the juxtaposition of the two positions or claiming that there is no problem at all: “One hour spent in repentance and good deeds in this world is better than the whole of life in the world to come; and one hour of satisfaction in the world to come is better than the whole of life in this world” (Mishnah, Avot 4, 17). In the previous Mishnah (Avot 4, 16), Rabbi Jacob stresses the importance of action in this world: “This world is like an antechamber before the next world. Prepare yourself in the antechamber, that you might enter the banquet hall.” These words correspond to the Socratic-Platonic view. In this Mishnah (4, 17), Rabbi Jacob maintains the distinction between this world—the world of action, in which one must aspire to perfection through repentance and good deeds—and the next world—the world of reward and spiritual enjoyment. There is no equivalence between “repentance and good deeds,” which are moral objectives, and “satisfaction,” which is spiritual fulfilment because they belong to different worlds. Some have suggested another reading of the Mishnah: “One hour spent in repentance and good deeds in this world is like life in the world to come.”

It is thus up to man to choose: Rabbi Akiva decided in favor of one hour spent in repentance and good deeds in this world, and the proposed reading of the Mishnah concords with his view; while Socrates decided in favor of an hour of satisfaction in the world to come. In his final words, however, Socrates momentarily returns the moral argument to the fore, albeit in a rather ludicrous fashion, as if the author (Plato) did not wish to eclipse his earlier message:

[A]nd the servant went in, and remained for some time, and then returned with the jailer carrying a cup of poison. Socrates said: “You, my good friend, who are experienced in these matters, shall give me directions how I am to proceed.” The man answered: “You have only to walk about until your legs are heavy, and then to lie down, and the poison will act.” At the same time he handed the cup to Socrates, who in the easiest and gentlest manner, without
the least fear or change of color or feature, looking at the man with all his eyes . . . and said: “What do you say about making a libation out of this cup to any god? May I, or not?” The man answered: “We only prepare, Socrates, just so much as we deem enough.” “I understand,” he said: “yet I may and must pray to the gods to prosper my journey from this to that other world—may this, then, which is my prayer, be granted to me.” Then holding the cup to his lips, quite readily and cheerfully he drank off the poison . . . He was beginning to grow cold . . . when he uncovered his face, for he had covered himself up, and said (they were his last words)—he said: “Crito, I owe a cock to Asclepius; will you remember to pay the debt?” (Plato, *Phaedo* 117–18)

Three statements link Socrates’s death and the departure of his soul to the divine. The first—his enquiry (whether serious, humorous, or ironic) about pouring a libation to the gods from his cup of poison. They are immortal, so the poison would not harm them. It would provoke the death of his body but, at the same time, would link his soul to the eternal, that is, to the gods. This is perhaps the serious dimension of Socrates’s question: is it fitting to pour a libation to the gods from the cup of poison that will cause the death of his body and the passage of his soul to the realm of eternity? The representative of the authorities, the jailer responsible for carrying out the sentence, does not allow himself to be dragged into philosophical/theological questions, but responds matter-of-factly that the cup contains just enough poison to kill the condemned. Socrates therefore makes do with a prayer for the felicitous departure of his soul from this world to the realm of the souls. This is his second statement. Both the attempt to pour a libation and the prayer are meant to propitiate the gods and receive their blessing and assistance for a successful passage of the soul to the next world. Socrates’s prayer, therefore, cannot be compared to Rabbi Akiva’s recitation of the Shema, which is neither prayer nor supplication but acceptance of the yoke of heaven and utmost fulfilment of the commandment to love God.25 Socrates petitions the gods for his own sake, while Rabbi Akiva observes God’s commandments out of love, asking for nothing in return.

Socrates uttered his third statement shortly before his soul departed: “I owe a cock to Asclepius; will you remember to pay the debt?”—as if to say, “I am going on a journey to eternity with the good deeds I have accrued for my soul in my lifetime. You who continue to live still have a moral obligation.” The cock in question was a thanksgiving offering to Asclepius, Greek and Roman
god of healing, customarily brought by those who had enjoyed a healthy life. In this context one might say, despite the irreverence in the comparison, that Socrates too gave up his soul with an affirmation of his connection to the divine. Once again, however, Socrates’s prayer is an expression of gratitude to the god for a physical benefit received rather than the disinterested fulfilment of an obligation. All attempts at comparison between the two cases are necessarily superficial. As noted above, there is a fundamental difference between Socrates’s conversation with his companions and the exchange between Rabbi Akiva and his students. For Socrates, the source of meaning is the immortality of the soul—its journey and fate as it leaves the body after death. For Rabbi Akiva, on the other hand, it is the moral challenge in this world, within life itself, that constitutes meaning.

LOVE TO THE LAST BREATH

In his usual fashion, Rabbi Akiva does not focus on the theory of moral behavior, but on its practice. He often acts first and only then explains his action. For example, when one of his students was absent from the study hall for a time, he went to visit him and discovered that he was gravely ill. He cared for him with great devotion, washing and nursing him back to health—thereby saving his life. Only when the student had fully recovered did Rabbi Akiva pass from practice to theory (or to formulating the theory behind the appropriate action), teaching that one who does not visit the sick it is as if he has shed blood. On other occasions as well, he combined action with teaching. So too in his final lesson in the philosophy of love—on the complete fulfilment of the commandment to love God—he incorporates both theory and practice: “He accepted the yoke of heaven . . . He drew out [the word] ‘one’ [ehad] until his soul departed with ‘one.’” He actively fulfils the commandment as he explains its theoretical basis to his students: “All my days I grieved at the words ‘with all your soul [nafshekha]’—even when your soul [nishmatkha] is taken from you. I said: when will I have the opportunity to fulfil this? And now that the opportunity presents itself will I not fulfil it?”

As explained above, the way in which nafshekha is interpreted in relation to nishmatkha affects our understanding of Rabbi Akiva’s words. The two words may, of course, simply be seen as synonyms and no more. Such an approach is certainly legitimate, but would be inconsistent with the many varied meanings afforded by the midrash to such words as nefesh, neshamah, ruah. As we have already seen, both words appear in Genesis 2:7: “And the
Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life \[nishmat hayyim\]; and man became a living soul \[nefesh hayyah\].” According to the plain meaning of the verses in Genesis, as well as their midrashic interpretation,27 the man had a “soul” \[nefesh\] when he was first created—“of the dust of the ground.”

Similarly, the blood of a slaughtered animal is equated with the \[nefesh\], in Deuteronomy 12:23: “for the blood is the life \[nefesh\], and you shall not eat the life with the flesh.” When the “breath of life” \[nishmat hayyim\] was breathed into the man, he became a “living soul” \[nefesh hayyah\]. The \[nefesh\] thus pertains to earthly existence—“from below” in the words of the midrash; the life-giving \[neshamah\] is “from above”—28 When Rabbi Akiva speaks of fulfilling the commandment to love God, \[bekhol nafshekah\] [“with all your soul”], he is referring to the act performed with the physical body, the \[nefesh\]—that is, with one’s blood—and that is, why it pertains to life in this world. The \[neshamah\] enables the act by virtue of the life it gives the body and the \[nefesh\], and Rabbi Akiva fulfils the commandment \[bekhol nafsho\]—with all his \[nefesh\]—until it is utterly exhausted with the departure of the \[neshamah\].

He accepts the yoke of heaven, reads the Shema, and draws out the word \[ehad\] [one], and the completion of the commandment merges with the departure of his soul—thereby actively fulfilling the verse “and you shall love the Lord your God . . . with all your \[nefesh\]—even when your \[neshamah\] is taken from you.” At that very moment, his \[neshamah\]—his “breath of life”—is taken, as he completes the commandment to accept the yoke of heaven and the commandment to love God with his body and his \[nefesh\].

“He drew out \[the word\] ‘one’ \[ehad\] until his soul departed with ‘one.’” With all the strength in his body, with all the force of his \[nefesh\], with immeasurable love of God, he devotes his final breath to “one.” “And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your \[nefesh\], and with all your might”—love to the last breath.

NOTES

1. BT Sanhedrin 38b and parallel sources.
2. Pesikta Zutarta (Lekah Tov) on Ruth, introduction.
3. BT Hagigah 13a; Ben Sira 3:21.
4. Accounts of the Martyrs (not necessarily ten) can be found in the following talmudic sources: BT Bava Batra 10b, Sotah 48b, Berakhot 61b, Avodah Zarah 8b, and Sanhedrin 14b. The deaths of Rabbi Simeon ben Gamaliel and Rabbi Ishmael are also described in
tractate *Semahot*, chapter 5. The story of the Ten Martyrs comes from *Lamentations Rab-bah* 2; it is also mentioned in the *Epistle of Sherira Gaon*. Its prominent place in cultural consciousness, however, derives from the *kinah* [lament] of the Ten Martyrs, recited in many communities on the Ninth of Av and/or on the Day of Atonement.


6. Ibid.

7. *Berakhot* 61b.


9. Compare the words of Rabbi Akiva: “He is severe with the righteous, and calls them to account in this world for their few evil deeds, that he might lavish happiness and abundant reward upon them in the world to come” (*Genesis Rabbah* 33,1). Similarly, Rabbi Akiva’s statement, “Dear is suffering” (*BT* *Sanhedrin* 101a–b); see also below.


11. *Berakhot* 61b; *Yalkut Shimoni*, *Vaethanan*.


13. See also the exchange between R. Jose ben Kisma and R. Hanina ben Teradion in *BT* *Avodah Zarah* 18a.

14. JT *Hagigah* 2,1.


16. For *midrashim* that support the interpretation of *nefesh* and *neshamah* in this vein, see *Genesis Rabbah*, *Bereshit* 12 and 14.

17. *BT* *Sanhedrin* 101a and parallel sources.

18. Both this and the following quote are from *Sanhedrin* 101a.

19. The prisoner’s isolation from his executioners invites the comparison to martyrs in other cultures and to the philosophy of nonviolence.


21. There are many comparisons between the death of Jesus and the death of Socrates. See, for example, Emily Wilson, *The Death of Socrates: Hero, Villain, Chatterbox, Saint* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 141–68.

22. R. Jose ben Kisma’s statement, “Hanina, my brother, do you not know that this nation was appointed by heaven to rule?” (*BT* *Avodah Zarah* 18a), should not be seen as affording political or moral legitimacy to Roman rule, even in the speaker’s opinion. Rome has served as a symbol of anti-Jewish hatred from ancient times up to the modern era. Such symbolic references to Rome abound in Jewish literature throughout the ages.

23. Some ascribe this dictum to Rabbi Akiva, although parallel sources offer no support for this view.

25. There is no contradiction between this assertion and the talmudic account whereby “a heavenly voice said: ‘Fortunate are you, Rabbi Akiva, for you are summoned to the next world”’ (BT *Berakhot* 61b), as this was not in response to a prayer or request by Rabbi Akiva himself.

26. BT *Nedarim* 40a.


28. Ibid.