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SUICIDE IN BIBLICAL, TALMUDIC AND RABBINIC WRITINGS

INTRODUCTION

Every day in the United States, about sixty people kill themselves by poisoning, hanging, drowning, shooting, stabbing, jumping from high places or other means. Although nearly 25,000 deaths from suicide are recorded annually in the United States,¹ the actual figure according to the National Institute of Mental Health is probably closer to 50,000 yearly.²

Worldwide, more than 500,000 suicides are registered yearly, according to the World Health Organization³ and there are approximately eight times as many suicide attempts. The problem of suicide has reached such proportions that the United States Public Health Service created the National Center for Studies of Suicide Prevention in October 1966, headed by Dr. Edwin S. Schneidman. Presently there are 90 regional suicide prevention centers in 26 states in this country whereas in 1965 there were only 15 such centers.

The medical, psychological, psychiatric, legal and social literatures are replete with articles, monographs, symposia and other publications on suicide. Factors such as age, sex, marital status, day of week, month of year, method, religion, race, motivation, living conditions, repetitive attempts, medical and psychiatric histories of patients attempting and committing suicide are amply covered in these writings as well as the many books published on this subject.⁴ A periodical devoted exclusively

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to suicide is the Bulletin of Suicidology published by the United States Public Health Service since 1967.

Several salient features of the problem deserve mention. Suicides are three times as frequent in men than in women although there are more attempts by women than men. Twice as many White Americans commit suicide than do Negro Americans and twice as many single people kill themselves than do married individuals. College students have a suicide rate 50 percent higher than non-college students of comparable age, sex and race. In industrialized countries, physicians, dentists and lawyers have a higher rate of suicide than other professionals. Although the suicide rate has remained relatively constant in the United States over the past decade or so, poisoning by drugs, especially barbiturates, has become much more popular as a method of choice.⁵

The age group with the highest suicide rate is that above 65 years. Suicide ranks third as a cause of death among teenagers.⁶ It has also been estimated that the ratio of suicide attempts to actual successes in adolescents is 100 to 1.

One phase of suicide hardly discussed at all is the religious aspect. This paper attempts to organize and present in a systematic fashion the subject of suicide as found in Jewish sources. The closely related topic of martyrdom will be discussed briefly at the end.

SUICIDE IN THE BIBLE

During the period of the Judges in approximately the 11th or 12th century B.C.E., lived Samson of the tribe of Dan whose story is known to all. Samson's final effort in bringing down the Philistine temple upon himself as well as his enemies is vividly described in the Book of Judges (16:23-31):

And Samson said: "Let me die with the Philistines." And he bent with all his might; and the house fell upon the lords, and upon all the people that were therein. So the dead that he slew at his death were more than they that he slew in his life.

At the end of the First Book of Samuel (31:1-7), we read

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of King Saul's final battle against the Philistines on Mount Gilboa in the 11th century B.C.E. Here, Saul saw his three sons Jonathan, Abinadab and Malchishua and most of his army slain. Not wishing to flee nor to be taken prisoner and exposed to the scorn of the Philistines, King Saul entreated his armor bearer to kill him. The latter refused and so the king fell upon his own sword. The Biblical passage concludes (1 Samuel 31:5):

And when his armor bearer saw that Saul was dead, he likewise fell upon his sword and died with him.

From these events it would appear as if Saul committed suicide. However, later on when David is informed of Saul's death, we read as follows (2 Samuel 1:5-10):

And David said unto the young man that told him: "How knowest thou that Saul and Jonathan his son are dead?" And the young man that told him said: "As I happened by chance upon Mount Gilboa, behold, Saul leaned upon his spear; and lo, the chariots and the horsemen pressed hard upon him. And when he looked behind him, he saw me, and called upon me. And I answered: Here am I. And he said unto me: Stand, I pray thee, beside me, and slay me, for the agony hath taken hold of me because my life is just yet in me. So I stood beside him and slew him, because I was sure that he could not live after that he was fallen . . ."

Biblical commentators differ in their interpretation of this passage. R. David Kimchi explains that Saul did not die immediately when he fell on his sword but was mortally wounded. In his death throes, Saul asked the Amalekite to render the final blow of mercy to hasten his death. Rashi, Ralbag and Metzudat David agree with Kimchi and consider the death of King Saul as a case of euthanasia. Others view the story of the Amalekite as a complete fabrication.

In any event, Saul did attempt suicide. Only the question of his success is debated. As to Saul's armor bearer, no one disputes that he committed suicide.

King David's faithless counsellor, Ahitophel, committed suicide by hanging himself in his native town of Gilo. One of several reasons probably prompted suicide. First, he knew that

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Absalom's attempt to overthrow David was doomed and that he would die a traitor's death. Second, and less likely, is the disgust of Ahitophel at Absalom's conduct in setting aside his counsel, thus wounding Ahitophel's pride and disappointing his ambition.⁷ Finally, David's curse (*Makkot* 11a) may have prompted Ahitophel to hang himself.

And when Ahitophel saw that his counsel was not followed, he saddled his ass and arose, and got himself home unto his city, and set his house in order, and strangled himself; and he died and was buried in the sepulchre of his father.⁸

King Baasha of Israel reigned from 911 to 888 B.C.E. and was succeeded by his son Elah. The latter was addicted to idleness and drunkenness and passed the days drinking in his palace while his warriors were battling the Philistines at Gibbethon.⁹ Zimri, a high ranking officer, took advantage of the situation, assassinated Elah and mounted the throne. His reign, however, lasted only seven days. As soon as the news of King Elah's murder reached the army on the battlefield General Omri was elected king and laid siege to the palace. When Zimri saw that he was unable to hold out against the siege, he set fire to the palace and perished in the flames. It is written in I Kings 16:18:

And it came to pass, when Zimri saw that the city was taken that he went unto the castle of the king's house, and he burnt the king's house over him with fire, and he died.

Some Biblical commentators, notably Radak and Metzudat David, to whom the thought of suicide was abhorrent, interpret that Omri burned the house over Zimri. Most commentators, however, interpret the Biblical passage literally.

SUICIDE IN THE APOCRYPHA

In the Second Book of Maccabees two acts of suicide are recorded. The first occurred when King Demetrius I of Syria (162 to 150 B.C.E.) escaped from his imprisonment in Rome and returned home as an invader.¹⁰ Attempting to put down a rebellion

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of his Judaen subjects, King Demetrius sent Nicanor, one of the warriors who escaped with him from Rome, to Judea, to treat the insurgents with the utmost harshness. Nicanor, in order to induce surrender from the Judeans, ordered that the most respected man in Jerusalem, Ragesh (or Razis) be seized. When the arresting soldiers were forcing open the courtyard door to Ragesh's house ". . . he fell upon his sword preferring to die nobly rather than to fall into the wretches' hands . . ." (2 Book of Maccabees 14:41-42). The ghastly tale of his lack of success in the first suicide attempt, his subsequent attempt by throwing himself down from a wall and his final success by self-disembowelment is vividly described (*ibid* 14:43-46).

The second act of suicide is that of Ptolemy, an advocate of the Judaens at the Syrian Court, who was called a traitor before King Antiochus Eupator. Unable to maintain the dignity of his office, Ptolemy poisoned himself (2 Book of Maccabees 10:12).

OTHER SUICIDES AND NEAR SUICIDES IN ANCIENT JEWISH WRITINGS

All the suicides mentioned in the Bible and Apocrypha are psychologically understandable. Each knew what lay ahead if he remained alive, namely a prolonged, torturous martyrdom and/or disgrace to the God of Israel. All were prominent people. Except, perhaps, for King Saul, none could be accused of having experienced temporary insanity to excuse his act of self-destruction. Perhaps Ragesh and Ptolemy were influenced by the Greek philosophy of their times in which suicide was highly acceptable.

There are several individuals mentioned in the Bible, Apocrypha and other ancient Jewish writings who considered suicide and perhaps wished to attempt it, but did not.

Job, during his quest for an explanation of his wretchedness, speaks of suicide (Job 7:15):

And my soul chooseth strangling, and death rather than these my bones.

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He did not attempt suicide perhaps out of either love or fear of God as he himself states (Job 13:15):

Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him.

Possibly Job did not mean to even consider suicide but was remarking that he would prefer death to life. This question remains unresolved.

One of the most famous “near suicides” is Flavius Josephus who failed to commit suicide at Jotapata in the year 69 C.E. when all other zealots there did so in a mass suicide pact. Flavius Vespasian, successor to Nero as Emperor of Rome, had come to conquer Judea. Strong resistance was offered at the fortress of Jotapata. After a 40 day siege, the fortress fell. Many chose suicide by flinging themselves over the walls or falling on their weapons. Josephus, however, sought concealment in a huge cistern in which he found 40 of his own soldiers. They all swore to die by their own hand in a mass suicide pact. When his turn came Josephus reneged and surrendered to the Romans.¹¹ In Josephus’ *Antiquities of the Jews*, there are numerous examples cited of suicide including the mass suicide at Masada.

SUICIDE IN THE TALMUD

The Talmud is replete with stories concerning suicide and martyrdom as well as discussions relating to the laws of burial and mourning for the deceased.

Avodah Zarah 18a describes Rabbi Hanina ben Teradion’s death by burning at the hands of the Romans. He was wrapped in the Scroll of the Law, bundles of branches were placed around him and these were set ablaze. The Romans also brought tufts of wool which they had soaked in water, placing them over his heart to prevent a quick death. When his disciples pleaded with him to open his mouth so that the fire consume him more quickly, he replied that one is not to accelerate one’s own death. The executioner asked him: “Rabbi, if I raise the flame and remove the tufts of wet wool from your heart, will I enter the life to come?” Yes was the reply. The executioner did as he pro-

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posed and the Rabbi died speedily. The executioner then jumped into the fire and was burned to death. A voice from heaven exclaimed that Rabbi Hanina ben Teradion and his executioner had been assigned to the world to come.

Another case of suicide is related in *Baba Batra* 3b. Herod was the slave of the Hasmonean house of the Maccabees and had set his eyes on a certain maiden of that house. One day he heard a voice from heaven saying that every slave that rebels now will succeed. So he killed the entire household but spared the maiden. When she saw that he wanted to marry her, she ran up to the roof and cried out: "whoever comes and says that he is from the Hasmonean house is a slave since I alone am left of it and I am throwing myself down from this roof." Herod loved her so that he preserved her body in honey for seven years.

The suicide of a Roman officer who saved the life of Rabbi Gamliel is portrayed in Tractate *Taanit* (fol. 29a). When Turnus Rufus the wicked destroyed the Jewish Temple, Rabbi Gamliel was condemned to death. A high officer came to the house of study to search for him but Rabbi Gamliel hid. The officer found him and asked him secretly: "If I save you, will you bring me into the world to come?" The answer was affirmative. The officer made Rabbi Gamliel swear to it and then he (the officer) mounted the roof and threw himself down and died. The Romans annulled the decree against Rabbi Gamliel according to their tradition that the death of one of their leaders (i.e. the officer's suicide) is a punishment for an evil decree. Thereupon a voice from heaven was heard saying that this high officer was destined to enter the world to come.

Two nearly identical stories are told in Tractates *Chullin* (fol. 94a) and *Derech Eretz Rabbah* (Chapter 9, fol. 57b). Because of an incident that once occurred, it was decreed that guests may not give any of the food that is set before them to the host's son or to his servant or deputy unless they have received the host's permission to do so. The incident was that in a time of scarcity a man invited three guests to his house and only had 3 eggs which he set before them. When the host's (hungry) child entered and stood before them, one of the guests took his portion and gave it to him; the second guest did the same and

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so did the third. When the father came in and saw his son with one egg in his mouth and holding two in his hands he picked him up to his full height and flung him to the ground so that he died. When the mother saw her child dead, she went up to the roof, threw herself down and died. On seeing this, the father also went up to the roof, threw himself down and died. Rabbi Eliazar ben Jacob said: "Because of this, 3 souls perished."

A related incident that terminated in suicide is told in Tractate *Chullin* (fol. 94a). A man had sent his friend a barrel of wine and there was oil floating at the mouth of the barrel leading the recipient to believe that the whole barrel contained oil. He invited some guests to partake of it. When he came and found that it was only wine, he went and hanged himself out of shame because he had nothing else prepared to set before his guests. As a result, it was decreed that a man should not send to his neighbor a barrel of wine with oil floating on top of it.

Another Talmudic episode of suicide is found in the commentary of Rashi on *Avodah Zarah* 18b. Rabbi Meir is said to have fled to Babylon. One of the reasons given is "because of the incident of (his wife) Beruria." The incident concerns the fact that Rabbi Meir's wife once taunted him regarding the Rabbinic adage that women are temperamentally light headed. He replied that one day she would testify to its truth. Subsequently she was enticed by one of her husband's disciples proving she was too weak to resist. She then committed suicide by strangulation.

A mass suicide is described in Tractate *Gittin* (fol. 57b) where 400 boys and girls are said to have been carried off for immoral purposes. They guessed what they were wanted for and said to themselves that if we drown in the sea we shall attain the life in the future world as portrayed in Psalms 68:23. The girls leaped into the sea first and the boys followed.

In *Gittin* 57b is related the story from the Second Book of Maccabees of the woman and her seven martyred sons. The sons were killed one by one by Emperor Antiochus Epiphanes for refusing to serve an idol. As the last son was being led away to be killed, his mother said to him: "My son, go and say to your father Abraham: Thou didst bind one (son to the altar, i.e. Isaac), but I have bound seven altars." Then she went up on a

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roof and threw herself down and was killed. A voice thereupon came forth from heaven saying, "A joyful mother of children." (Psalms 113:9).

Another incident is related in Tractate *Berakhot* (fol. 23a). A certain student once left his phylacteries on the side of the road in a hole before entering a privy. A harlot passed by and took them. She came to the house of learning and said: "See what so and so gave me for hire." When the student heard this, he went to the top of a roof and threw himself down and killed himself.

The rules and regulations governing suicide are discussed in at least two Tractates of the Talmud. In *Baba Kamma* 61a is found the following: "No Halakhah may be quoted in the name of one who surrenders himself to meet death for the words of the Torah." Further in the same Tractate (91b) we find: ". . . who is the Tana that maintains that a man may not injure himself? It could hardly be said that he was the Tana of the teaching: 'And surely your own blood of your souls will I require' (Genesis 9:5) which Rabbi Eleazer interpreted to mean that I will require your blood if shed by the hands of yourselves (i.e. suicide), for murder is perhaps different . . ." Rashi interprets this scriptural verse to mean that even though one strangles oneself so that no blood flows, still I will require it.

The major Talmudic discussion of rules governing suicide is found in Chapter 2 of Tractate *Semachot*. Here we are told that we do not occupy ourselves at all with the funeral rites of someone who committed suicide wilfully. Rabbi Ishmael said: we exclaim over him "Alas for a lost (life). Alas for a lost (life)." Rabbi Akiba said to him: "Leave him unmourned; speak neither well nor ill of him." Further "we do not rend garments for him, nor bare the shoulder (as signs of mourning), or deliver a memorial address over him. We do, however, stand in a row for him (at the cemetery after the funeral to offer condolences) and recite the mourner's benediction for him because this is respectful for the living (relatives). The general rule is that we occupy ourselves with anything that is intended as a matter of honor for the living . . ."

The Talmud (*Semachot*, Chapter 2, Rule 2) defines an in-

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tentional suicide. It is not he who climbed to the top of a tree and fell down and died, nor he who ascended to the top of a roof and fell down and died as these may have been accidents. Rather, a wilful suicide is one who calls out: "Look, I am going to the top of the roof or to the top of the tree, and I will throw myself down that I may die." When people see him go up to the top of the tree or roof and fall down and die, then he is considered to have committed suicide wilfully. A person found strangled or hanging from a tree or lying dead on a sword is presumed not to have committed suicide intentionally and none of the funeral rites are withheld from him.

The Talmud (*ibid.*, Rules 4 and 5) next relates two childhood suicides and considers neither an intentional suicide. One case concerns the son of Gornos of Lydda who ran away from school, and the other case is that of a child in Bnei B'rak who broke a bottle on the Sabbath. In each case, the father threatened to punish the child and out of fear each child destroyed himself in a pit. Rabbi Tarfon in the former case, and Rabbi Akiba in the latter case ruled that these are not wilful suicides and therefore none of the funeral rites should be withheld.

SUICIDE IN THE MIDRASH

In the Midrash Rabbah, Ecclesiastes (Chapter 10, 7; fol. 26b) the story is told of Rabbi Akiba walking (barefoot) to Rome when met by a eunuch officer of the Emperor riding on a horse. The officer asked him whether he was the famous Rabbi of the Jews and he answered yes. In order to embarrass Rabbi Akiba, the eunuch said three things: "he who rides on a horse is a king, he who rides on a donkey is a free man and he whose feet have shoes on is a human being; he who has none of these is worse than a dead person." Rabbi Akiba replied saying three things: "one's beard is one's majestic countenance, happiness of heart is one's wife and the inheritance of God is to have children; woe is the man who is lacking all three. Not only that but Scriptures states, "I have seen servants upon horses and princes walking as servants upon the earth" (Eccles. 10:7). When the eunuch officer heard these words, he knocked his head

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against a wall until he died.

Another case of intentional suicide is related in Midrash Rab-bah on Genesis (65:22; fol. 130b). The case is that of Jakum of Tzeroroth, nephew of Rabbi Jose ben Jo'ezer of Tzeredah. Jakum taunted Rabbi Joseph Meshitha and, as self punishment, subjected himself to the four modes of execution inflicted by the courts: stoning, burning, decapitation and strangulation. He took a post, planted it into the earth, raised a wall of stones around it and tied a cord to it. He made a fire in front of it and fixed a sword in the middle of the post. He hanged himself on the post, the cord was burned through and he was strangled. The sword caught him while the wall of stones fell upon him and he was burned.

SUICIDE IN THE CODES OF JEWISH LAW

In his *Mishneh Torah* (Laws of Mourning, Chapter 1, Section 11), Maimonides states:

For one who has committed suicide intentionally we do not occupy ourselves at all (with the funeral rites), and we do not mourn for him nor eulogize him. However, we do stand in a row for him and we recite the mourner's benediction and we do all that is intended as a matter of honor for the living.

Maimonides then defines an intentional suicide exactly as de-fined in Tractate *Semakhot*.

The commentators on Maimonides' code, Rabbi David ben Zimra (Radvaz 1479 to 1598), Rabbi Joseph Karo (*Keseph Mishneh* 1488 to 1575) and Rabbi Abraham di Boton (*Lechem Mishneh* 1560 to 1609) all point out that Maimonides considers mourning an honor for the dead and therefore prohibited.

CODE OF JACOB BEN ASHER (TUR):

Rabbi Jacob ben Asher (Section Yoreh Deah No. 345) codi-fies the section of the Talmud from Tractate *Semakhot* (vide supra) nearly verbatim. He states that we do not rend garments, bare the shoulder or eulogize the wilful suicide victim. However,

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we do stand in a row to offer condolences to the family at the cemetery and we utter the mourner's benediction for these are intended as a matter of honor for the living relatives. Rabbi Jacob ben Asher then continues by saying that the prohibition of rending the garments refers only to distant relatives but the immediate relatives who have to mourn the deceased should rend their garments as a sign of mourning. This is diametrically opposed to Maimonides. The Shulkhan Arukh follows Maimonides.

Rabbi Jacob ben Asher (*Tur*) defines a wilful suicide as it had been defined in Tractate *Semakhot*. However, a child who committed suicide even wilfully is not considered to have attained his full measure of intelligence. Similarly, he continues, anyone who commits suicide in unusual circumstances such as King Saul is not considered a wilful suicide and he is entitled to all funeral rites. According to Rabbi Joseph Karo (*Bet Josef*) and Rabbi Joel Sirkash (*Bet Chadash*) in their commentaries on Jacob ben Asher, the latter statement in the *Tur* is based upon Rabbi Moses ben Nachman's (Nachmanides 1092 to 1167) work entitled *Sefer Ha'adam*.

CODE OF JOSEPH KARO (SHULKHAN ARUKH):

Karo's Code is based primarily upon the earlier Codes of Isaac Alfasi, Maimonides and Asher ben Yechiel (father of Jacob ben Asher). Karo seems to combine the Talmudic (Tractate *Semakhot* vide supra) and Maimonidean regulations regarding Suicide. He states (Section *Yoreh Deah* No. 345) that we do not occupy ourselves at all for anyone who has committed suicide wilfully. We do not mourn for him (contrary to Jacob ben Asher but in agreement with Maimonides) nor eulogize him nor rend garments for him nor bare the shoulder. However, all that is in honor of the living, such as standing in a row to offer condolences to the relatives of the deceased, is performed.

Several commentators on Karo including Rabbi Shabbetai Hakohen (Sifsei Kohen 1621 to 1662), Rabbi Zechariah Mendel of Cracow (Be'er Hetev, 17th century) and Rabbi Abraham Zvi Eisenstadt (Pitchei Teshuva 1813 to 1868) point out that Jacob ben Asher's Code differs from Karo in that the former

