DEATH WISH IN THE BIBLE

INTRODUCTION

The wish for death or suicide impulse is not often found in the Bible, nor later in classical Jewish thought. Even in the face of extreme mental and physical anguish, the traditional Jewish response has been, "I wait for Your salvation, O Lord." Hezekiah suffers, yet wants to live (II Kings 20). The Psalmist’s attitude as expressed so eloquently by the phrase, "Cast your burden on the Lord and He will sustain you," (Psalms 55:23) succinctly sums up what appears to be representative of the mainstream of Jewish thought. However, four examples of suicide are recorded in the Bible. They are Samson (Judges 16:30), Saul, Saul’s arms bearer (I Samuel 31:4–5), and Ahitofel (II Samuel 17:23). The first three can easily be viewed as examples of Kiddush Hashem and, therefore, do not fall into the category of actual suicide. The suicide of Ahitofel is different; it is impulsive, an action taken when his treacherous plans fail. It stood to reason that he would be viewed as a traitor and killed, and he preferred not to face death at the hands of others.¹

There is another type of death wish with which we deal in this paper, the debilitating contemplation of death characteristic of a depressed state of mind. We refer to a brooding, self-pitying attitude where the desire for death is unrealistic, and the expression of that desire often hypocritical.

Four biblical figures have this type of death wish. They are Jonah, Elijah, Jeremiah and Job. Jonah says to God, “Please take my life for I would rather die than live” (Jonah 4:3). Elijah “...went a day’s journey into the wilderness and came to a broom brush, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. ‘Enough,’ he cried, ‘Now, O Lord, take my life for I am no better than my fathers’” (I Kings 19:4). Jeremiah curses the day that he was born and wishes that “his mother might be his grave” (Jeremiah 20:14). Job cries out, “O that I might have my petition and God would grant
my hope—that it would please God to crush me, to loose His hand and cut me off” (Job 6:8).

In this article, we will briefly attempt to compare the death wishes of these biblical personalities. We will examine each man’s motivation, his personal status in the community, his sincerity and, finally, God’s reaction to each man’s death wish. We will seek answers to the following questions:

1. What is the immediate cause of the depression which leads to this attitude?
2. To what extent does the request for death represent true feelings and mask others?
3. How does the individual’s personal standing in society affect the situation?
4. What is the correspondence between God’s reaction and the individual circumstances?

I

The book of Jonah is read on Yom Kippur because of its remarkable illustration of the power of repentance. Jonah is sent by God to Nineveh to warn its inhabitants of His anger. He does not wish to go and the text does not say why. However, one may conjecture that his refusal was partly because he knew that he would be effective, the people of Nineveh would indeed repent, and he would then look like a fool. He, therefore, tries to run away from his responsibilities and is swallowed by a large fish.

That he is swallowed by a fish, a creature of the sea, whose habitat is far away from human beings, is noteworthy. It is symbolic of Jonah’s feeling of alienation from his fellow man and of the isolation from the real world that the depressed person generally seeks. Jonah finally realizes that he cannot run from his destiny and, after being freed from the belly of the fish, goes to Nineveh. The people there repent and the city is saved.

In the last chapter, we find the prophet miserable and very angry. He is angry that the repentance was effective and that his power as a prophet was not illustrated in a more dramatic fashion, that is, by Nineveh’s destruction. It is in this context that he expresses his desire to die (Jonah 4:3).

The ostensible motive for his suicidal wish is ideological, namely, his disappointment at the saving of sinners. However, God does not take his professed desire for death seriously and asks: “Are you really that angry?” God then provides a gourd to shield Jonah from
the sun. When Jonah notices the gourd, he becomes exceedingly joyful—hardly an emotion characteristic of a man truly desirous of death. Then God takes the gourd away and Jonah sinks into a deep depression. Again he asks to die. At this point God confronts Jonah with his wish to live, and asks him, “Are you really so angry about the gourd?” By this question, God shows him that his anger is really due to his discomfort. In other words, God is saying, “Admit it, Jonah, it’s not ideology that concerns you, but rather having things your way, whether your way means being comfortable in the heat or saving face in public.”

God’s reaction to Jonah’s ostensible death wish is, thus, a pedagogic one. Very much the psychiatrist, He shows Jonah his true motivation. Strangely, the book ends abruptly and does not tell us Jonah’s reaction to the newfound insight. However, we may suppose it to have been cleansing and cathartic.

It is significant that on Yom Kippur afternoon, the liturgical reading of The Book of Jonah ends with the following verses from Micah (7:18):

Who is a God like you
Forgiving iniquity
And remitting transgression,
Who has not maintained His wrath forever
Against the remnant of His own people
Because He loves graciousness!
He will take us back in love
He will cover up our iniquities.

If we put these words into the mouth of Jonah at the end of the book, they become a most appropriate response from the prophet who, roused from his depression, again assumes his responsibilities, both to God and to His people.4

II

No other prophet has left so indelible a mark on the heart and folklore of the Jewish people as Elijah the Prophet. He is the guest at every Passover seder and is destined to announce the coming of the Messiah. Yet there is another side to this prophet. We recall the events which lead up to the state of mind that Scripture is describing when it tells us

he (Elijah) himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness. He came to a broom bush and sat down under it and prayed that he might die. “Enough,” he
cried. "Now, O Lord, take my life, for I am no better than my fathers." (I Kings 19:4)

Elijah lived during the reign of Ahab, King of Israel, around 850 B.C.E. Ahab's wife, the wicked Jezebel, was the daughter of the King of Tyre. She viciously murdered most of the true prophets of God and introduced the worship of Baal into Israel. The confused masses decided to play it safe and worship both the true God and Baal. In an attempt to wean the people away from the worship of Baal, Elijah challenges the hundreds of false prophets to a showdown, a contest in which they will sacrifice to Baal and he to the God of Israel. Whoever is answered, by fire consuming their sacrifice, will be the winner. Elijah beseeches God to answer him. Indeed, he insists that God answer for isn't God somewhat to blame for the people's transgressions? "Answer me, O Lord, answer me, that this people may know that You, O Lord, are God, for You have turned their hearts backward" (I Kings 18:37). In other words, "You turned their hearts away by allowing the false prophets to prophesy." God answers him and the water-soaked offerings are dramatically consumed by Divine fire. Then Elijah personally slays all of the false prophets. There is no evidence in the Bible that Elijah was commanded to stage this dramatic scene. From the text it seems that he does it on his own initiative, confident that God will see him through, as indeed, He does. In terms of a prophetic spectacular, one could hardly ask for more. In the light of this, his subsequent behavior is strange and in a sense unwarranted.

After Elijah kills the false prophets, Jezebel puts a price upon his head and he runs away (I Kings 19:2). At this first threat to his life, he is frightened. His actions are typical of someone in a disoriented, depressed state. First he runs away. Next, he leaves his trusted servant; depressed people can't stand company. Then he asks to die (19:4). He says he wants to die because he is no better than his fathers. Obviously, in the light of the drama which he so recently staged, he cannot be taken seriously. The truth of the matter is that he wants to die because things are not going his way. He cannot bring himself to say, "I want to die because I am afraid." He then falls asleep, a common form of escapism (cf. Jonah 1:5). The angel attempts to shake him from this depression by whetting his appetite for food and drink. He eats and drinks, but falls asleep again. The angel returns and this time the food therapy succeeds. The depression is slightly mitigated. He picks himself up and goes further into the desert (symbolic of further isolation?) to Sinai. God appears to him there and says "Why are you here?" (I Kings 19:9). This means,
“What are you doing away from your people at this crucial time?” Elijah replies (19:10),

I am moved by zeal for the Lord, the God of Hosts, for the Israelites have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars and put Your prophets to the sword. I alone am left and they are out to take my life.

God is not at all happy with this whining, holier-than-thou answer. Now, after the showdown with the false prophets, is not the time to pass judgment on the people. And as far as Jezebel wanting to kill him is concerned, as a leader and prophet of the people, he has to be prepared for that. What did he expect? There then follows a scene reminiscent of the giving of the Torah. Elijah is commanded to stand by the side of the mountain, and we read,

And lo, the Lord passed by. There was a great and mighty wind splitting mountains and shattering rocks by the power of the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind—an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake—fire; but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire—a soft murmuring sound (I Kings 19:11).

God recognizes full well that the real reason for Elijah's depression is the letdown experienced by him after his dramatic encounter. This anti-climactic feeling coupled with the fear of death is the real reason for his wanting to die. But like Jonah, Elijah couches it in ideological terms as when he says, “I am the only one left. . . .” In the scene we have quoted above, God is telling him that He reveals Himself when the voice is still and quiet and not with blazing drama and the screaming voice of fanaticism. God is trying to give him insight into the true nature of his depression. One would think that Elijah would have understood. But, when he is again confronted with the question “What are you doing here?” that is, “Do you see things more clearly now?” his response is exactly the same (19:13, 14).

At this point God gives up and one verse later we read “Go back the way you came . . . and annoint Elisha the son of Shafat . . . to succeed you as a prophet.” God is telling him “You think you are the only one left. Well, you are wrong, no one is indispensable.”

III

The third person we consider is the most pathetic of prophets, who lived and preached during the destruction of the first Temple. At the very beginning, at his investiture, Jeremiah is warned that the go-
ing will be rough and that he will be a hated man. God, however, promises to protect him (Jeremiah 1:18–19).

I make you this day a fortified city and an iron pillar and bronze walls against the whole land. . . . They will attack you but they shall not overcome you for I am with you.

And indeed he is hated. The nation is already under constant siege, the land beset by drought and the people, too far gone to repent, are in no mood to hear his castigation and dire predictions (Chapter 11). Attacks upon his life follow. No one could describe his situation better than he does when he says,

Woe is me, my mother, that you ever bore me—a man of conflict and strife with all the land. I have not lent, and I have not borrowed, yet everyone curses me (15:10).

In chapter 11, God tells Jeremiah that the people of his home town, Anatoth, want to kill him. The prophet proceeds to seek and secure assurance from God that he will be protected (11:21). But somehow that assurance is not enough and in chapter 12 he accuses God of being to blame for an unjust world (12:1–2).

. . . Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why are the workers of treachery at ease? You have planted them and they have taken root . . .

It is clear from the context that it is not only the abstract idea of world justice which is bothering Jeremiah. His personal sense of fear in large part lies behind this noble sentiment and in fact God does not address himself to what he is saying. Instead, God’s words answer what he is really feeling, the underlying fear.

If you race with the foot-runners and they exhaust you,
How then can you compete with horses?
If you are secure only in a tranquil land
How will you fare in the jungle of the Jordan?
For even your kinsmen and your father’s house
Even they are treacherous toward you
They cry after you as a mob (Jeremiah 12:5).

In other words, God is telling him that the worst is yet to come, and that it is not the time for maudlin musings. Even though he was forewarned that his mission would not be a bed of roses, he cannot resign himself to the situation. “Why must my pain be endless, my wound incurable, resistant to healing. You have been to me like a
spring that fails, like waters that cannot be relied on” (15:18). It seems to me that at this point God really loses his patience with His prophet. Such depression as expressed above has no place in the life of a leader, and therefore the reaction of the Lord is unsympathetic. Indeed, right after this we read:

Assuredly, thus said the Lord:
If you turn back, I shall take you back
And if you stand before Me
If you produce what is noble
Out of the worthless
You will be my spokesman . . .
Against these people I will make
You as a fortified wall of bronze
They will attack you,
But they shall not overcome you
For I am with you to deliver and save you (Jeremiah 15:19).

God is telling Jeremiah that as far as He is concerned, this attitude, though perhaps acceptable and justifiable in a private citizen, is untenable in a prophet. In fact, as far as God is concerned, Jeremiah ceases to act in his official capacity. That is why God says “If you turn back [in other words, change your ways] I shall take you back. If you produce what is noble out of the worthless [the unconstructive complaints and depression] you will [again] be my spokesman.” The very words used at his original investiture are used again, “I will make you as a fortified wall of bronze.” We are back to square one. God is giving him another chance but on His terms.

IV

Besides their common wish for death, the lives of Jonah, Elijah and Jeremiah share another aspect. They were all prophets fulfilling a public function. If one keeps this in mind, the unsympathetic, almost harsh reaction of God to each of them is certainly understandable. God is simply saying to them (openly in the case of Elijah, obliquely in the case of Jeremiah and Jonah) that if they can’t manage the psychological pressures and, yes, sometimes physical dangers, put upon them by the public position they hold, then they have no business being in that position. The situation is radically different in the case of Job. Although we may infer that Job was an esteemed member of his community (Job 29), he was primarily a private citizen engaged in his personal affairs. Because of this, both his supposed wish for death and God’s reaction must be viewed in a different light. Unlike the others whose initial desire for death is mo-
tivated by mental anguish, Job is pushed to the edge of despair by extreme physical suffering. In the beginning, he does not actually ask for death, but wistfully contemplates how much better it would have been had he never been born or had he died immediately.

Why did I not die in the womb
Or perish as I came forth from it?
Why were there knees to receive me
And why breasts for me to suck? (Job 3:11)

It is interesting that the actual desire for death occurs only after his bitter disappointment with his friend Elifaz who, instead of comforting him, assumes a patronizing tone and pompously informs him that only the sinner really suffers (Job 4:7).

Job knows that he has not sinned and the implication that he did is too much for him to bear. He says,

Oh that I might have my petition
and God would grant my hope
that it would please God to crush me
to loose His hand and cut me off (Job 6:8–9).

Thus, physical pain and suffering alone are not enough to drive Job to despair. This idea that Job’s desire for death is prompted by his feelings of disappointment and alienation from his friends is substantiated by the fact that his impassioned plea for death is followed by a scathing denunciation of those whom he previously took to be his friends.

My brothers betray me like a desert stream
like freshets that pass away . . .
You see my disaster and are seized with fear (Job 6:15, 21).

It is extremely interesting that once Job articulates in no uncertain terms this desire for death, his ambivalence towards dying comes into play. What we see here is the cathartic effect of speech, the basis of modern day psychoanalysis. When Job says “. . . when you seek me, I shall be no more” (7:21), Job is childishly threatening God. Paraphrased, he says, “If you don’t give me some relief, I’m going to die and then you will look for me and want to help me, but I won’t be around.” Such a statement would indicate an intense desire for life, not death.

As the book progresses, Job’s preoccupation with his physical suffering and with his disappointment in his friends lessens. Something new takes over, his desire for a confrontation with God and,
for what he is confident will follow, his personal vindication (Job 13:18). As this new preoccupation takes hold, the desire for death weakens. There are still echoes (17:13–14), but they ring less and less true. What comes across instead is an intense desire to achieve his goal.

Oh that I knew where to find him
    that I could come to His dwelling!
I would lay my case before Him
    and my mouth would not lack for arguments.
I would learn what He would answer me
    and understand what He would say to me
    ... and I would be acquitted by my Judge for all time (Job 23:3–7).

The quest for some sort of reason for his ostensibly meaningless suffering becomes Job's raison d'être. He can no longer afford to die.

God's initial response is deafening silence. Had Job been less confident of his innocence he might have taken this silence to be a negative response. When God finally responds, He does not give a direct explanation for Job's suffering as one might expect. Instead, He overwhelms Job with descriptions and questions that are designed to make him realize that the universe does not revolve around him and that there is much that he does not understand. At first, such a response may strike the reader as unfeeling or even cruel. However, it is insulting to think that suffering such as Job's can be explained away by simple answers (as the "friends" would have it). God's response raises the entire problem of suffering to a higher plane and thus dignifies the human condition. Though there is no direct response, it is clear that God dismisses the idea that Job has sinned, and thus Job is vindicated as he was so sure he would be.

In God's response there are elements of teaching and even sarcasm (Job 38). But the overall tone is one of affirmation of God's presence in a very personal sense, and while this presence gives no single concrete answer to the problem of Job's suffering, it has the effect of overwhelming comfort. Thus Job says,

I have heard of You by hearsay
    but now my own eyes have seen You
Therefore I melt (surrender) and am comforted
    despite my desolation (Job 42:5–6).

**CONCLUSION**

It is clear that Job stands apart from the other personalities discussed. Whereas mental anguish, in some form or another, was the
immediate motivation for the death wish of Jonah, Elijah and Jeremiah, for Job the cause was physical. In examining the sincerity of the individual's desire for death we have discovered that in all four cases the reasons given by the individual are not to be taken at face value. They are for the most part cover-ups for other feelings: fear, shame, disappointment, etc. It has already been pointed out that only Job is acting as a private citizen; the others, as prophets, are public figures. It is therefore not surprising that God's reaction to Job differs radically from His reaction to the others. God's reaction to Jonah is pedagogic. When pedagogy fails in the case of Elijah, he is dismissed. We have seen that when Jeremiah complains, God's response is unkind and sarcastic. Yet in God's reaction to Job we find a different dimension. This time there is no anger, no impatience. It would seem that the only demand God makes on Job is that he recognize his finitude and realize that he is, after all, only a human being and has limitations. Perhaps, however, this is the greatest demand God can make upon man.

By calling upon man to recognize that he is but an insignificant speck in the universe and at the same time expecting him to transcend human weaknesses (pain, fear, disappointment, embarrassment), God is defining what it means to be a human being. With this in mind we may view God's reaction to Jonah, Elijah and Jeremiah, on the one hand, and to Job on the other, as being quite consistent, as two sides of the same coin. It is even possible that the ability to transcend one's frailties is a natural consequence of having the proper perspective on the human condition. I, for one, came away from this study with the feeling that if one truly understood and appreciated one's position in the cosmos tolerance (Jonah), humility (Elijah), courage (Jeremiah), and endurance (Job) would follow as corollaries.

NOTES

1. It is beyond the scope of this paper to give a complete survey of suicide in Jewish thought. For a brief summary, the interested reader may consult Vol. XV of the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, p. 489.
2. See *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer*, Chapter 10, where the midrash sees Jonah as being concerned that his prophecy of Nineveh's destruction would not be fulfilled because of their repentance and he would then be universally considered a false prophet.
3. *Ibid*. This may be what the midrash is saying when it contrasts heaven and earth with the sea, a place not associated with God's glory.
4. For this observation, we are indebted to Dr. Yochanan Muffs.
5. See *Tana Debe Eliyahu Zuta*, Ch. 8. This, in fact is what the midrash appears to be saying.
6. It is not our intention in this paper to analyze in what sense God's response is indeed an answer to Job.
7. For a similar usage of the word *maos* see Psalms 58:8.