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Epochs – How Time Unfolds

By Rabbi Dr. Hillel ben David (Greg Killian)

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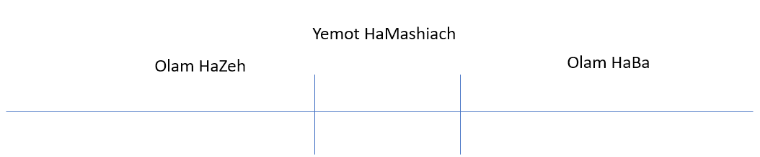
I’d like to examine a fascinating concept which is contained in the final pasuk of Psalms chapter 18.

***Tehillim (Psalms) 18:51*** *He magnifies the victories of His king, and does kindness with His anointed, to David and his seed, forever.*

The ArtScroll on Tehillim[[1]](#footnote-1) tells us something very interesting about this pasuk.

**He magnifies the victories of His king** - In *Samuel* the word is written מגדיל and is pronounced מגדול. Midrash Shocher Tov explains: Rabbi Yudan says, 'The redemption of this nation will not come about all at once. Rather it will appear little by little. Therefore, it is described in Psalms as מגדל He makes great (constant present tense) meaning that it gradually becomes greater and greater. This is like the dawn which breaks slowly, for if the sun were to rise all at once its fiery light would blind all. So, too, will be the redemption: If it would come all at once the people of Israel who for so long have been accustomed only to oppression could not endure the experience and it would overwhelm them. In *Samuel* the word מגדול is used because it also means ‘*a tower’*. Messiah will be a tower of strength for Israel as it says, *A tower* [מגדל] *of might is the Name of HaShem; with it the righteous will run and be elevated*.[[2]](#footnote-2)

It is well known that there are two major epochs: This world (Olam HaZeh) which is the place where we work, repair,[[3]](#footnote-3) and build, and the next world (Olam HaBa) where we enjoy the reward of what we have built. What is not so well understood is that there is a time period between these two epochs called the Yemot HaMashiach, the messianic age.



The messianic age will be like Olam HaZeh except that there will be no more wars and we will have only a certain kind of work.

**Olam HaZeh – This World**

The (non-holiday) weekdays are symbolic of Olam HaZeh, the world in its present state, a place where through doing the mitzvot and consistently choosing good over evil, we are to make all our spiritual preparations for Shabbat. Olam HaZeh is the place of work, of serving HaShem. The Maharal explains that only in Olam HaZeh (This World), in its present state, where one has free will to choose between good and evil, can one earn merit for good choices or be punished for making bad choices.

In various places, the Torah compares a person to a tree:

***Devarim (Deuteronomy) 20:19*** *A person is like the tree of a field...*

***Yeshayahu (Isaiah) 65:22*** *For as the days of a tree shall be the days of my people.*

***Yirmiyahu (Jeremiah) 17:8*** *He will be like a tree planted near water...*

All men enter the world with their tree planted on the middle line between good and evil. Their branches hang on both sides and they will bear fruit on both sides. HaShem will bring mitzvot and sins in order that they should test them. Most (99.99%) all people will remain firmly planted and will never move their tree off that middle line.

In Bereshit (Genesis) 3:9, Adam and Chava had just eaten some fruit from the forbidden tree and, sensing HaShem’s presence in the Garden of Eden, they hid among the trees. While they were hiding, HaShem asked Adam a one-word question. In Hebrew that word is ayeka? In English it means, “Where are you”? This question continues to reverberate through time to confront every man: Where are you?

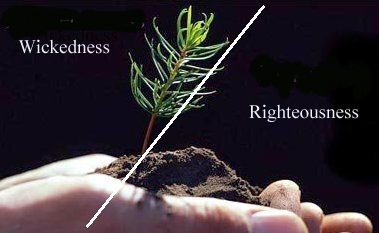
Maimonides writes in his laws of repentance[[4]](#footnote-4) that every person should consider himself or herself as perfectly balanced between good and bad and the world as perfectly balanced between good and evil. The next action you do, however trivial, can tilt you and the whole world toward the side of good and life or to the side of evil and death.

Each man has the power of choice, and is able to choose either side, knowingly and willingly, as well as to possess whichever one he wishes. Man was therefore created with both a good inclination (yetzer tov) and an evil inclination (yetzer hara). He has the power to incline himself in which ever direction he desires.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Therefore, the Olam HaZeh was made neutral, left for man to determine how it would be used. One world, two possibilities, and man is the one to determine whether or not he walks that path, or stumbles it in. But, try it he must, for that is what he was created to do.

Those who are righteous, the tzaddikim, in this world have made a conscious, decision to plant their tree on the side of righteousness.

Those who are wicked, the reshaim, in this world have made a decision to plant their tree on the side of wickedness.



Yet, most people never make a decision to move their tree one way or the other, and thus they remain in the middle, balanced between good and evil, they are still firmly straddling the line, a very bad position to be in. They fail to do what they were created to do. They fail to make use of Olam HaZeh, this world.

***Revelation 3:16*** *So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.*

Rosh HaShanah is a day tailor made by HaShem, for planting one’s tree on the side of righteousness. This is the essential work of this day. We were born to choose life. We were born to become a tzaddikim!

***Devarim (Deuteronomy) 30:19*** *I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing:* ***therefore choose life****, that both thou and thy seed may live: 20 That thou mayest love the HaShem thy G-d, and that thou mayest obey his voice, and that thou mayest cleave unto him: for he is thy life, and the length of thy days: that thou mayest dwell in the land which the HaShem sware unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them.*

The type of choices that are able to accomplish an attachment to HaShem, are those choices taken for the express purpose of attaching to life, and to good, instead of what is temporary, and therefore to the evil.

These kinds of choices are made in the context of confronting moral dilemmas when we are torn in two directions, and we do not have a powerful inner program instilled by heredity or environment pointing us in the right direction. We desire one thing, but we know that the right decision is in the other direction, not because of our inner program but because HaShem told us in the Torah that that is the way to go. It is in these sorts of situations that present us with the opportunity of attaching ourselves to righteousness, to life.

Some people look at the mitzvot, prayers, and rituals and deduce that Jews try to "earn our way into Heaven" by performing the mitzvot. This is a gross mischaracterization of our religion. It is important to remember that unlike some religions, Judaism is not focused on the question of how to get into heaven. Judaism is focused on life and how to live it. Non-Jews frequently ask me, "do you really think you're going to go to Hell if you don't do such-and-such?" It always catches me a bit off balance, because the question of where I am going after death simply doesn't enter into the equation when I think about the mitzvot. We perform the mitzvot because it is our privilege and our sacred obligation to do so. We perform them out of a sense of love and duty, not out of a desire to get something in return. In fact, one of the first bits of ethical advice in Pirkei Avot is: "Be not like servants who serve their master for the sake of receiving a reward; instead, be like servants who serve their master not for the sake of receiving a reward, and let the awe of Heaven [meaning G-d, not the afterlife] be upon you".

Chazal, our Sages, teach that just before the coming of the Mashiach, and the beginning of Techiyat HaMetim, there will be proof that the Torah path of the Jew is completely false and that the Goyim, Gentiles, were right. If the Jew has not learned emunah, faithfulness and faithful obedience, if he has not learned how to be loyal to that knowledge (daat), then he will be shown to be nothing. If, on the other hand, the Jew has emunah and is loyal to the pathway built on knowledge (daat), then the “proof” that he was completely wrong will become Techiyat HaMetim, the world of emunah where he will find that this last ordeal has been overcome and he will be completely vindicated. That is what Olam HaZeh is for, to move our tree to the side of righteousness and to choose life.

The transition between Olam HaZeh and the Messianic Era is called Chevlai Mashiach[[6]](#footnote-6) and is characterized by chaos. We are currently in this transition period, which explains the apparent chaos in the world right now. Rabbi Pinchas Winston taught that, according to the mystical understanding, the underlying purpose of the chaos is “to polarize the world, to force people to make a decision whether they are more spiritual or more physical, whether they have moved their tree and have chosen life. What is their priority?”

HaShem wants us to focus on bringing HaShem into this world and to bring Olam Haba into Olam Hazeh. He wants us to build the בית המקדש - the edifice that connected this world with the next.

**Yemot HaMashiach**[[7]](#footnote-7) **– The Messianic Age**

If Olam HaZeh is the time for building and doing work, and Olam HaBa is the time for reward, then why do we need the Yemot HaMashiach? Why do we need an intermediate time? There are several answers to this question. One answer is that the voltage of Olam HaBa is too high for us to move from Olam HaZeh to Olam HaBa. We would be fried. Another answer is that it would be grossly unfair, to the righteous, to give them trials and responsibilities which prevent them from doing the mitzvot and Torah study that they really desire. If the pressures of earning a living, raising a family, and dealing with the trial of Olam HaZeh, prevent us from achieving what we desired and what we were truly capable, that would be unfair. HaShem, so to speak, prevented us from achieving our heart’s desire.

Yemot HaMashiach is a time free of financial pressures, family matters, and general trials. It is a time when we can achieve our Heart’s desire. It is a time when we can become a super nova of righteous living free from war, sickness, and financial worries.

The Era of Mashiach (Yemot HaMashiach). The seventh millennium. This is the era when Techiyat HaMetim[[8]](#footnote-8) will occur. Acharit HaYamim[[9]](#footnote-9) and Yemot HaMashiach are synonymous, referring to the Messianic Age.

During the Messianic Age people would live in peace and harmony with each other, all fear and anxiety will vanish, and virtue will reign supreme. The Messianic Age will be a direct extension of the present world of time and place. It would ensure the complete fulfillment of the hopes and aspira­tions of people everywhere.

There is an idea that all spiritual realities have at least one tangible counterpart in the physical world so that we can experience them. The Messianic age is יום שכולו שבת - the day that is in its totality shabbat, a Yom Tob, a festival shabbat. A Yom Tob is the synthesis of Olam Hazeh and Olam Haba. A Yom Tob is the culmination, the end-point, of all of our labors. It is a taste of the next world.[[10]](#footnote-10) Shabbat is likened to one-sixtieth of the Olam HaBa, a time when we shall be able to fully appreciate HaShem’s gift of life to us. On Shabbat, by abstaining from certain “creative activities”, we are compelled to sit back and look at all that HaShem does to keep us going, and if we don’t do that, then we deny both the opportunity of Shabbat and HaShem’s good. Hence, the Sages are telling us that, as much as Shabbat is like the Olam HaBa (and it is), still, the experience is so minimal that it is as if it is not there at all? In other words, even if Shabbat is the most wonderful experience, still, the Olam HaBa will become infinitely better.

It would be too difficult to relate to these abstract, spiritual things, if we could never have any direct experience of it. So, sleep is a sixtieth of the death experience; a dream is a sixtieth of prophecy. Shabbat is a sixtieth of the experience of the next world. We have these experiences in order that we should understand those things that HaShem has promised.

A fundamental difference between Yom Tob[[11]](#footnote-11) observance, and the weekly Shabbat observance, is the allowance of food preparation on Yom Tob. Unlike on Shabbat, when all cooking is forbidden, the Torah permits us to cook, bake, and prepare food on Yom Tob proper, in order to eat the prepared food on that day of Yom Tob. Therefore, just as you can cook on Yom Tob – IF YOU LIT THE FIRE TO COOK BEFORE YOM TOB, so also will you be given the time and resources to finish any Torah study and mitzvot which you started before Yemot HaMashiach. But, you must start (you must light the fire) in Olam HaZeh. There will be no new studies, no new mitzvot in those days, only a time of finishing what you have already begun.

The Talmud, in Shabbat 151b, teaches that the verse ‘and those years will arrive of which you will say 'I have no desire in them?’ (Ecclesiastes 12:1), refers to Yemot HaMashiach (the Messianic Age), when it will no longer be possible to earn credit towards Olam Haba (the World to Come) for performing mitzvot not previously started, or deserve punishment for performing sins.

When the Messiah comes and the world will be perfected and filled with truth to the point that all will see evil for what it truly is and no one will have ‘desire’ to do bad, there will no longer be free will as we know it, thus eliminating the possibility of reward and punishment in Olam HaBa for any choices we make at that time.

The Maharal adds that this is only true for those who make consistent bad choices and transgress the Torah in this world before the Messiah arrives. For them it will be too late to do teshuva and change once the ‘good times’ of the Messiah come, since they would only be changing because the truth has been revealed and the times are good, and not as the result of their own free-willed desire to change for the better.

However, those tzaddikim[[12]](#footnote-12) who consistently choose good over evil in this world where there is no clarity, and the benefits of choosing to do mitzvot over sins are not readily apparent, they will continue to grow and gain reward for the good choices they make even after the Messiah comes, because they have shown that their choices are coming from a genuine desire to do good and not just for the sake of enjoying the ‘good times’ of the Messianic Age.

With this, explains the Maharal, we can understand the deeper meaning behind the procedure of eruv tavshilin.[[13]](#footnote-13) The Halachah[[14]](#footnote-14) is that one must prepare for shabbat on the weekday before shabbat starts. The (non-holiday) weekdays are symbolic of Olam HaZeh, the world in its present state, a place where through doing the mitzvot and consistently choosing good over evil we are to make all our spiritual ‘preparations’ for the weekly shabbat, which represents Olam HaBa, the World to Come in which we will be rewarded. As the Talmud teaches us in Avodah Zarah 3a, ‘Whoever prepares food before Shabbat, will have what to eat on Shabbat’. If we prepare ourselves properly during the ‘weekdays’ of this world, we will have ‘food’ to eat and enjoy on Shabbat and the Hereafter.

Belief in the eventual resurrection of the dead is a fundamental belief of Judaism. It was a belief that distinguished the Pharisees[[15]](#footnote-15) from the Sadducees. The Sadducees rejected the concept, because it is not explicitly mentioned in the Torah. The Pharisees found the concept implied in certain verses.

Belief in resurrection of the dead is one of Rambam's 13 Principles of Faith. The second blessing of the Shemone Esrei prayer, which is recited three times daily, contains several references to resurrection.

The resurrection of the dead will occur in the messianic age. When the messiah comes to initiate the perfect world of peace and prosperity, the righteous dead will be brought back to life and given the opportunity to experience the perfected world that their righteousness helped to create. The wicked dead will not be resurrected.

There are some mystical schools of thought that believe resurrection is not a one-time event, but is an ongoing process. The souls of the righteous are reborn in to continue the ongoing process of tikkun olam, mending of the world.

**Olam HaBa – The World to Come**

The term Olam HaBa[[16]](#footnote-16) in contrast to Olam HaZeh refers to the hereafter, which begins with the termination of man's earthly life. Olam HaBa refers to the last stage of existence after what would be 7000 AM.[[17]](#footnote-17) Shabbat represent Olam HaBa, the time after the seventh millennium. The Olam HaBa is actually the end of time, the beginning of eternity when the righteous will bask in the radiance of divine light, and the wicked will be consigned to the darkness of eternal oblivion. Olam HaBa is the final order of things beginning with the general resurrection and the last judgment. According to the Palestinian *amora* R. Johanan, the golden age of the future pictured by the prophets concerned only the days of the Messiah. As for the world to come, it is said of it, "Eye hath not seen".[[18]](#footnote-18)

Olam HaBa is the world of reward. That which we built in Olam HaZeh is enjoyed in Olam HaBa. The Torah never tells us about the rewards of Olam HaBa. Why? After all, it would be a powerful motivator for us to maximize our righteous behavior in Olam HaZeh.

The reason that we are never told about the reward, in the Torah, is because we would then be *required* to serve for the reward. This is not HaShem’s desire. HaShem wants us to serve Him because we love him, and for no other reason. Never the less, the oral law is replete with references to the reward in order to provide us encouragement to Love HaShem because of His goodness to us.

A cardinal eschatological doctrine of rabbinic Judaism connected with the world to come was that of the restoration to life of the dead. It is listed as a dogma at the beginning of the tenth chapter of Sanhedrin. "Whoever says that the revivification of the dead is not proved from the Torah", so it is remarked there, "has no portion in the world to come".

What Olam HaBa is like is shrouded in mystery. Chazal teach that we will sit in HaShem’s light and enjoy the pleasure of his radiance. As to what this is like, we are only given a taste, as it says: “Shabbat is one sixtieth of the Olam HaBa”. Shabbat is described as “meeyn olam haba” - a small degree of the experience of the next world. If we celebrate shabbat correctly we can achieve the barest taste of what it will be like in Olam HaBa.

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1. Ibid. 5, pg. 236. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mishlei (Proverbs) 18:1 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Tikkun Olam – repair the world. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuva 3:4 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Derech Hashem, 1:3:1 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The birth pangs of the Messiah. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Lit. ‘day of Messiah’.. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Techiyat HaMetim is the Resurrection of the Dead. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Acharit HaYamim = ‘End of Days’. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Shabbat is described as “meeyn olam haba” - a small degree of the experience of the next world. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Yom Tob – lit. ‘a good day’, a Jewish holiday. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. tzaddikim = ‘righteous people’, people who have moved their tree and chosen life. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. An eruv tavshilin (Hebrew: עירוב תבשילין, "mixing of [cooked] dishes") refers to the act in which one prepares a cooked food prior to a Jewish holiday that will be followed by the Shabbat. This shows that our cooking on Yom Tob was started before the Yom Tob, therefore we are allowed to complete the process on Yom Tob. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. (Jewish law) [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The intellectual ancestors of Rabbinical Judaism. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Olam HaBa (Heb. עוֹלָם הַבָּא), literally, ‘the coming world’. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Gemara in Sanhedrin 97b, "for 6,000 years the world exists and 1,000 destroyed." [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Yeshayahu (Isaiah) 64:3 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)