

What's for Dinner in *Olam Ha-ba*? Why Do We Care in *Olam Ha-zeh*? Medieval Jewish Ideas about Meals in the World to Come in R. Bahya ben Asher's *Shulhan Shel Arba*

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May it be Your will, Lord our God and God of our ancestors that just as I have stood up and dwelled in this sukkah so may I merit next year to dwell in the sukkah of the hide of the Leviathan. (Jewish blessing upon leaving the *sukkah* at the end of the holiday of *Sukkot*)

Any modern discussion of Jewish traditions about rewards in the world to come must confront both the mixed messages the sources themselves present us, and our contemporary skepticism about the plausibility of any supernatural realms for rewards and punishments after death. A case in point is the contradictory rabbinic traditions about meals for the righteous in the World to Come. On the one hand, the righteous are promised a banquet of Leviathan, Bar Yuchnai, and Behemoth in a tent made of Leviathan's skin. But Rav says, "In the World to Come, there is no eating and drinking." Rabbenu Bahya ben Asher, the fourteenth century Spanish Biblical exegete and kabbalist, devotes the fourth and final "Gate" of his short treatise on Jewish eating practices, *Shulhan Shel Arba* ["Table of Four"], to address this apparent contradiction about meals prepared for the righteous in the World to Come.¹ R. Bahya thus not only attempts to resolve the problem of the mixed messages of our sources, but in doing so, I suggest he also hints to us moderns, who are sure only about this world, why speculating about the world to come nevertheless might still be of some value.

For since R. Bahya wrote *Shulhan Shel Arba* as a guide for meals in this world, the question arises: how does talking about, imagining, and knowing about what meals are like in the next world affect our practice and enjoyment of our meals in this world?

Moreover, as Caroline Walker Bynum points out in her discussion of medieval Christian traditions about the resurrection of the dead more or less contemporary with R. Bahya's account of meals in the world to come, we moderns, even beyond our general skepticism about any sort of afterlife, are embarrassed particularly by the "extreme literalism and materialism" of these accounts.² Just as R. Bahya insists the meal of Leviathan, Bar Yuchnai, and Behemoth reserved for the righteous will be an actual meal of kosher fish, fowl, and beef flesh eaten and enjoyed by our physical bodies in a big sukkah made out of Leviathan's skin, so Christian theologians in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries worried about whether our resurrected bodies will wear clothes; if Christ's foreskin will be restored; whether we'll eat and taste, smell nice aromas, or touch other bodies in heaven; or what will happen to cannibalized bodies at the resurrection of the dead.³ Will they rise as part of the people that ate them or separately as the persons they were before they were sliced, diced, and eaten?⁴ Medieval Christian artistic representations of the resurrection of the dead seem particularly pre-occupied with the re-assembling of dismembered body parts in at this time! Bynum suggests that bizarre as such hyper-materialistic accounts of resurrected bodies seem to us today, they are not so different in purpose than contemporary popular talk about Star Trek "teletransportation," future growing of new bodies attached to cryogenically preserved brains, and people with organ transplants and their families feeling that they've somehow absorbed their donor's personality. Namely, they reflect concern for and assumptions about "personal identity and survival."⁵ In medieval terms, these issues are usually framed in terms of body/soul dualism: does our personhood reside in the form and matter of our physical bodies or in our souls that persist after our death? However, as we shall see, R. Bahya and other

medieval Jewish thinkers were quite insistent that our bodies and souls are not really separated in the world to come: *both* our bodies and souls get to experience the rewards of the world to come, since both worked together in this world to earn them. And the proof is in the pudding (so to speak) that actual tasty meaty meals are reserved for the righteous in the world to come. Similarly, our bodies and souls will dine on the intellectual meals of the “splendor of the Shekhinah” (albeit in radically transformed bodies but bodies nonetheless). After the resurrection of the dead we’ll be clothed in a new kind of body without ordinary measure and dimensions, which allow our souls infinite enjoyment of and nourishment from the light of God’s Presence. So what does all this mean for us to talk about these meals now in *olam ha-zeh* – *this* world?

For most certainly, Rabbenu Bahya provided his account of Jewish traditions of meals in the world to come in his *Shulhan Shel Arba* as talking points for meals in this world.⁶ And so he says,

with these words the enlightened will discern when they’re eating, *may they make themselves holy* and their minds burnished fully. With these words engaged, may they be at their table; *raise their table’s renown* so that “all shall say ‘Glory!’” Let their hearts be made pure, to withstand any test. “*By these raise up the table,*” so that “before the Lord” is its label.⁷

Such talk about body- and soul-rewarding meals in the World to Come *while at meals in this world* is intended to cultivate what Jonathan Haidt calls the “emotion of elevation,” or what Leon Kass describes in *The Hungry Soul* as the transformation our physical hunger for food from “*Fressen to Essen*...to sanctified eating.”⁸

DISTINCTION BETWEEN TWO MEALS IN THE WORLD TO COME

In order to resolve the apparent contradiction between the Talmudic traditions that specify the menu of the meal reserved for the righteous in the world to come and the

baraita of Rav that “in the world to come there will be no eating and drinking,” R. Bahya distinguishes between two kinds of meals that will occur in the future to come: (1) the banquet reserved for the Righteous after they die when the Messiah comes and (2) a second banquet after the general Resurrection of the Dead at the end of time. He makes the sequence of these two meals quite clear in his entry on “The Bridegroom Over the Table” in his book *Kad Ha-Kemach*:

And thus we have found that our sages z”l interpreted the future: In the future the Holy One Blessed Be He will make a meal for the righteous. And we ought to believe that *this meal will be an actual physical meal*, for the foods are the pure foods prepared from the time of the six days of creation. And they are: Leviathan from the fishes, and from the birds Bar Yuchnai, and from the beasts ‘Behemoth upon a Thousand Hills’ [Ps 50:12]. And perhaps they will be ‘offsprings’ of the supernal light like the manna in the desert, which are more refined and whose goal is to elevate [those who eat them], because the flow of wisdom and capacity to conceive intelligible things will be greater in them than at any other time. *And after these meals that will be at the end of time, there will be another time made anew, and this is the time of the resurrection of the dead, and in it they will be nourished and enjoy the radiance of the Shekhinah, and they will not revert to the dust*, as our rabbis z”l interpreted, ‘The dead, whom The Holy One Blessed be He will resurrect, will not revert to the dust,’ [b.Sanhedrin 92a] but rather they will exist eternally like the ministering angels, and they will enjoy themselves in the seven *huppot*, as our sages z”l interpreted in Seder Eliahu, “Seven *huppot* will the Holy One Blessed Be He make for the righteous in the future to come [*le-atid la-vo*], as it is said, “and the Lord will create over all of Mt. Zion and over its places of assembly a cloud by day and smoke and the glow of a flaming fire by night, for over all the glory will be a *huppah*.”⁹

This idea is not unique to him. Before him in the twelfth century, R. Abraham ibn Ezra in his commentary on Daniel 12:12 says:

In my opinion, the righteous who died in exile will be resurrected when the Redeemer comes...They will then partake of the Leviathan, Ziz, and the Behemoth and will die a second time, only to be again resurrected in the Age to Come, in which they will neither eat nor drink but luxuriate in the splendor of the Shekhina [God's Presence].¹⁰

R. Bahya in *Shulhan Shel Arba* goes into a little more detail about the difference between the two meals and their sequence, emphasizing the different kinds of bodies the righteous

will have for these two meals, to account for Rav's saying that "there will be no eating or drinking:"

so in the future Israel will merit two statuses in their body and soul. Bodily meals of fine and pure foods which I mentioned, and an intellectual meal for the soul alone of the holy spirit, for so all Israel will ascend to the level of prophecy. And now I will explain to you in what follows about the world of souls, which will come to human beings after their separation from the world, and the matter of the world to come, which is *after* the resurrection and the matter of the joy that the soul has in all these worlds together. Know that the intellectual meal is for the body and soul at the time of the resurrection of the dead, because the routine for the body will be cancelled completely, and another routine – marvelous and new – will replace it, and moral rot [*zohama*'] will cease from the world, and the Accuser will be swallowed up, "there is no adversary [*satan*] and no mischance," "the Lord will make something new on earth," and the souls will be made anew "like the eagle is renewed;"¹¹ all of them shall be new, "the work of the Artist's hand," so much the more so than with vessels of glass. Then the "children of the resurrection of the dead" whose body and their soul have been renewed shall take delight in the intellectual meal in the world to come, which is after the resurrection, in which there is no bodily meal at all, and it is regarding this meal that our rabbis z"l said, "Rav was accustomed to say, 'In the world to come, there is no eating and no drinking, no envy, no hatred, and no rivalry, but rather the righteous will sit with crowns on their heads and enjoy the splendor of the Shekhinah.'"¹²

R. Bahya also interprets the expression "Until Shiloh will come" in Jacob's blessing for Judah in Gen 49:10 to "refer to the *two* redemptions: the first, which is nearer in time, and the last, which is more distant."¹³

FIRST, THE LEVIATHAN BANQUET

According to R. Bahya, these are the characteristics of the food of first banquet – the Leviathan banquet - in the future to come and of the bodies of the righteous who eat it. On the menu for the first^t banquet is the big fish Leviathan, the big bird Bar Yuchnai (or Ziz), and the big cow Behemoth.¹⁴ These foods are special not only because of their enormous size, but also they're kind of a magical "offspring of the light" [*toldot ha-or*] suggesting a heavenly origin. Similarly, the manna too, "the bread from heaven" is also

an “offspring of the light” that has special powers to refine the intellect. Thus the manna prompted an intellectual response when it first fell miraculously from heaven: *Man hu?* [What is it?], hence its name “manna.”¹⁵ It’s what Joel Hecker calls “brain food” in his discussion of similar traditions in the *Zohar*.¹⁶ It is related to the Shekhinah’s light, the light at beginning of creation. Thus the rabbinic traditions that Leviathan et al. were reserved for the banquet of the righteous from the time of the six days of creation are understood to allude to them being an “offspring” of the primordial light of the Shekhinah. Moreover, as “light food,” it provides a temporary glow from the heads of those who eat it, like the rays of light effect from the light Moses was nourished on in his 40 days of fasting on Mt. Sinai, or the “halo effect” on the righteous at the Leviathan banquet when they’re describe as having “crowns on their heads.” Nevertheless, this “light food” is still physical and material, enjoyed by body and soul together. The banquet is kosher. R. Bahya insists that Leviathan is a kosher fish, an appropriate reward for the righteous who kept kosher in this world. That said, my student artist/collaborator Rosemary Liss, who composed illustrations in the style of medieval illuminations for my English translation of *Shulhan Shel Arba*, was inspired by contemporary cinematic representations of “Leviathan” as a kraken, and so imagined Leviathan differently. Moses, the “*shihulah kardona*”, will cater this meal as I mentioned above. Here’s the full reference from *Shulhan Shel Arba*:

And thus they said in a midrash about Moses our Teacher (may he rest in peace): *shihula kardona* – the skinner for preparing a meal, “who was pulled out,” – the explanation of “*shihula*,” is Moses, which is from the Aramaic [*shihaltay*] for the Hebrew, “I drew him out” (Ex: 2:10). And a “skinner” (for preparing a meal) is a type of butcher or cook. So here the goal of the intention of these bodily meals is to be a device to refine the body and matter and to sharpen the mind so that it will attain knowledge of the Creator (May He be blessed) and meditate upon the purely intelligible beings, and then the souls by this looking of

their bodies will become fit for the intellectual banquet from which the ministering angels themselves who are near the Shekhinah eat – for then the soul will perceive the brilliant light which it is impossible to perceive as long as it is stuck in matter.”¹⁷

The righteous diners themselves are composed of material bodies and souls, more or less the same bodies they had in this world, to eat this fleshy but light food. Nevertheless, I suspect R. Bahya’s reference to Moses as a “skinner” and the “I drew him out” etymology of his name hints at power of food at this meal to catalyze the bodily transformation of the righteous to dine “without eating and drinking” at the next, “intellectual meal” after the resurrection of the dead. That is, at this meal, the righteous souls are somehow “skinned” and “drawn out” of their ordinary this-worldly bodies.

INTELLECTUAL MEAL AFTER THE RESURRECTION OF THE DEAD

At the intellectual meal in the World to Come, there is “no eating or drinking,” but R. Bahya qualifies this to mean, no eating or drinking as we ordinarily understand it. For at this meal, the Messiah/descendent of David will raise a cup of blessing. As the much later Hasidic song Shnirele Perele about this banquet puts it: “*meshiekh ben dovid zist oybn on, halt a beckher in der rekhter hant, makht a brockhe afn gantsn land*” [“the Messiah, son of David, is above us. He holds a goblet in his right hand and gives his blessing to the whole earth”]. It’s an enormous overflowing cup [*kos revayah*], with a capacity of 221 logs. According to R. Bahya, this is an allegory for a different kind of consumption – “not eating and drinking” *per se*, but still something requiring both body and soul to enjoy. Otherwise, according R. Bahya, there would be no need to specify “no eating or drinking,” since of course our presumption for embodied souls was that consumption would involve some kind of eating or drinking. But unlike the light food of the earlier meal, those nourished by this “food” – the splendor of the Shekhinah -

experience an *eternal* glow. Unlike the temporary glow, the rays of light shooting out of his head Moses acquired during his forty days of being nourished by the Shekhinah on Mt. Sinai, this halo is like “the light Moses earned in the cleft of the rock.” As R. Bahya says,

“And this is the light that Moses our Rabbi (peace upon him) earned in “the cleft of the rock,” “the reflecting mirror” out of which he was able to prophesy, and thus earned the “radiation from the skin of his face” that was as bright as “the face of the sun.” And in an interpretation they said, “a variety of the upper light is the globe of the sun,” because the light of this level is the level of Moses’ prophecy, and the globe of the sun, which is a variety of this, is the “radiation from the skin of his face.” And this is what is written, “rays [*karnayyim*] given off from every side, and therein His glory is enveloped,” that is, the “radiation from the skin of his face.” This came directly from the hand of the Holy One Blessed be He to Moses, and this radiation is the fruit of what was his in this world, *distinct from the eternal radiance that would be his in the world to come, and that is the level of the upper light*. If so, then the word “*karnayyim*” – “rays” -includes both the fruit and the eternal radiance. And all this was because of the tablets – *luhot* – that he was holding. And so this is hinted at in the word “*LU’a”H*,” which is an acronym of the words in Habakkuk 3:4: *karnayyim mi-yado Lo Ve-sham Hevyon ‘uzo*. And they said in a midrash, “[They saw] the rays of the skin of his face,” [178] *all the majesty that Moses got was but temporary fruit, a gift he earned, but the eternal radiance would be his in the world to come, as it is said, ‘rays [karnayyim] from His hand to him.’*”¹⁸

In other words, the dual form of the word *karnayyim* [“rays”] refers both to the temporary radiance Moses experienced as his reward while alive on Mt. Sinai in *this world*, and the eternal radiance he and the rest of the righteous can experience after the resurrection of the dead in their transformed bodies, as their reward in *the next world*. With both of these radiant rewards comes a prophetic, visionary capacity, like the “real eating” suggested by the experience of the Israelite elders and Moses at Mt. Sinai: “They had a vision of God and they ate and drank” (Ex 24:11).¹⁹ However, this visionary capacity that will occur at the intellectual meal after the resurrection of the dead will be so far superior

to that which even Moses experienced while in this world that it “cannot be pictured.”

We cannot picture it now

because of our being sunken in the world of thick and coarse bodies, which are totally thickness and coarseness, while the world of souls are totally elevation, refinement, and purity. Indeed, the two are opposites; it’s impossible to think of what we are diametrically opposed to. Just as for fish, because they exist in the element of water, and need it to exist and live, it would be impossible for them to turn to the element of fire because it is its opposite, so these two worlds are opposites, and “every man is proved dull, without knowledge” of the quality of the world to come while in this world, and even the wisest of the wise are fools about this.²⁰

And yet paradoxically, R. Bahya attempts to depict it nevertheless:

However, we know in general through what we can infer through reason and from the Torah “which makes wise the simple” that just as the body enjoys and takes delight [*mitaden*] in a pleasant aromatic meal according to the body’s standards of pleasure, so the soul will enjoy and take delight in this upper world. . . . So even though the power of the body is weak and unable to picture in the heart the existence of the upper beings and their delight that is without measure, the power of the upper beings and their perfection is not diminished by lesser beings, composed of matter, who are unable to conceive of them, just as the human wisdom and virtue is not diminished by a fool or beast who cannot imagine or conceive of it.²¹

This is what Jewish tradition refers to as “Gan Eden,” because this meal is where souls “*mitad’nim*” [“take delight”] without limit in the splendor of the Divine Presence. This indeed is the “Real Eating”, the *akhilah vada’it*, R. Bahya discusses at length in the Second Gate of *Shulhan Shel Arba*, though there his examples refer primarily to the kinds of “real eating” of which humans are capable within in the limits of their body/soul bundles in this world.

IN TRANSFORMED BODIES: “THE FULL VESSEL THAT CAN CONTAIN, BUT THE EMPTY ONE CANNOT”

But the bodies we’ll have to “eat” the intellectual meals of “Gan Eden” after the resurrection of the dead will be dramatically transformed. First of all, they will be much, much bigger. This is a reversal of the contraction of Adam and Eve’s bodies (and the “downsizing” of their descendents as well) after the sin in the Garden of Eden. R. Bahya know this because of the rabbinic traditions about the heavenly Jerusalem where the windows are so high that we would have to be supersized for us to be able to use them. But even more importantly, our new bodies will have an unbounded capacity to take in the light.

Here’s how R. Bahya tries to describe the new and improved resurrected body’s capacities in analogies and parables:

However, its way of taking delight there is not measured like bodily things, which have measures and dimensions, but the upper beings have no measure and dimension, because their status is great, beyond conception, and their way of taking delight deeper than any measure.”

Come and see how the way of the Holy One Blessed be He is not the way of flesh and blood. For flesh and blood, an empty vessel can contain something, a full one cannot. But it is not so for the Holy One Blessed be He. *The full vessel can contain, the empty one cannot*, as it is said, “If only they would surely hear.”

The explanation of this is that insofar as bodily things have measure and dimension, when they are empty they can filled, but when one fills it, they cannot contain any more since they are already filled to their capacity, and nothing with a capacity can contain something more than its capacity. But among the upper things, full contains, since it has no measured capacity.²²

I find this imaginative conceptualization of dimensionless bodies that the righteous will get after the resurrection of the dead particularly striking, with no temporal or spatial limits to the shiny goodness of the Divine Presence one takes in.

R. Bahya mention of “upper beings” here alludes back to his discussion of the hierarchy of beings with which he begins his book to set the scene of God’s original differentiation of upper from lower beings at the beginning of time by means of the way they eat:

“This is the table which is before the Lord,” who spreads the heavens like a canopy for a tent, sets earth over water, and feeds the creatures of His home in three divisions: “the bottom, middle, and topmost decks.” In the highest realm are the ministering angels nearest to Him: the *cherubim*, the *seraphim*, the *ofanim*, and the *arielim*. They are attendants in His palace; in legions they feast on the light of His presence, from the flowing light of His own radiance. The middle realm is the “vest of the heavens,” an assembly of fire and water – rains constraining and constrained – by day and night God restrains them. The eyes of their minds see [*tzofim*] their Master’s delight as their food, far sweeter to them than choice honey [*tzufim*]. They hunger for the Cause of their existence; the pillars supporting their realm are suspended by the arm of His wisdom, and quake at His rebuke. But the lowest dwelling, a circle radiating from its midpoint, has measurable dimensions. Our food is not their food. Their food is conceived in their mind, when they see the face of their Maker. Our food is meager bread, water, and tears, gotten by hard work and toil.²⁴

For R. Bahya, this inequitable hierarchy is the cosmic consequence of Adam’s sin in the Garden, when

it was decreed for him that he would earn his bread only by the sweat of his brow, and that man be humbled and brought low. He traded pleasure [*‘oneg*] for plague [*nega’*], got hard work instead of rest. *His wisdom spoiled and his stature was diminished*. It caused him weakness instead of strength; instead of wheat, thorns came forth. *Instead of eternal life, death; instead of light, the shadow of death*. With all this the Lord raised the power of the upper beings, and worsened the power of the lower beings.²⁵

So the new bigger and better bodies with their unlimited capacities promised to the righteous with the resurrection of the dead is clearly meant to elevate them from their human status to an angelic status (and diet), which they lost when Adam sinned and he and Eve were exiled from the Garden of Eden. In the future they will get the angels’

uncomplicated and direct access to the nourishing powers of the Divine Presence. What kind of people with what kind of historical memories and experiences imagines as their future reward bodies without borders, uninterrupted connection to their “real food” source, elevation from their humble status, restoration to their “original” exalted status, and return from their exile from the primordial Garden of Eden?

WHY DO WE CARE NOW?

Any reflection about the world to come, whether medieval or modern, tells us as much about the hopes, fears, desires, and aspirations of those in this world who imagine them (or deny or repress them) than the actual status (if any) of those in the world to come. Moreover, as far as we know, only we in this world receive the emotional and intellectual benefits (or disadvantages) of talking or not talking about the specifics of the world to come. Perhaps the most conventional explanation for why descriptions of the next world are important for those of us in this world, particularly those that emphasize rewards and punishments, is that they offer a emotionally satisfy resolution to the problem of theodicy, or the blatant injustice we often see in this world. It is patently obvious that many wicked people go unpunished in this world, and many good people seem to get more than their fair share of suffering and little material reward for their efforts; the world to come will make this all right, and confirm our faith that justice triumphs, even if we don't see it now. But this only works for those who actually find a next world plausible.

And though R. Bahya certainly assumes rewards and punishments are part of what occurs in the world to come, what he says specifically about it (and what he doesn't) suggests he is interested in more than theodicy. Yes, he insists on recompense

for both body and soul for the righteous in the next world, if not in this. But while he focuses on the specifics of the rewards, namely the delightful meals in the world to come, in *Shulhan Shel Arba* at least, he pays almost no attention to the punishment of the unjust. There are no tours of hell in this book, though his rabbinic sources certainly could have provided them. Rather, R. Bahya stresses how the meals in the world to come are the restoration of the world as God had originally intended it, as he says in his interpretation of the phrase “*b’alma di-vara herutay*” from the Kaddish.²⁶ He also tends to stress the quality of the next world’s “knowability,” as if what he says about it were a sacred secret or revelation that we in this world both tremble before and are attracted to know, a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. He uses some of the typical phrases mystics use to effect a kind of conspiratorial attentiveness in those of his audience who want to view themselves as enlightened, that he’s about to divulge something fraught and significant. It’s like he’s often saying, I’ve got a secret, and now I’m going to tell *you*. Even though words are inadequate to express it, I’m going to do it anyway.

R. Bahya even hints that what he’s revealing about the world to come might come from Near Death Experiences (NDEs). For example, R. Bahya says God’s reply to Moses that a “man may not see me and live,” might actually mean that

while alive they [human beings with material bodies] do not see, but upon their death they do see.” And this is after the separation of the soul from its material form. And it is possible to specify further that “upon their death” means when they are about to die, as in the topic they discussed in Midrash Deuteronomy Rabbah Parashat Ekev.²⁷

And R. Bahya goes on to say,

“How abundant is the good that You have in store for those who fear You.”²⁸ ‘It happened that when R. Abbahu was about to die, he saw the gift of his reward, what the Holy One Blessed be He was going to give him in the time to come, and all the good prepared for the righteous themselves in the time to come. So when

he saw all these consolations which had been prepared, he exclaimed, “All these are for Abbahu!” and immediately he desired to die, and began reciting: “How abundant is the good that You have in store for those who fear You.”²⁹

In other words, the reward for the righteous upon death is as much the “gift” of the insight and enhanced cognitive capacity the moment of their death gives them as it is the content of the vision they see with it. But R. Bahya is in effect sharing the visions of what might have come from near death/deathbed experiences with those living *in this world* now, so one doesn’t necessarily have to die first themselves to receive at least some benefit, some taste of this heightened insight.

R. Bahya also suggests this enhanced cognitive capacity is the same as the insight of mystical ascent that heroic prophetic ancestors like Moses and Enoch experienced. Moses and Enoch were vouchsafed secret revelations about the souls’ rewards after death that are not mentioned explicitly in the Bible, that were concealed from the masses who couldn’t understand them, but which were nevertheless necessary for their salvation:

Torah does not specify explicitly anywhere the matter of the Garden of Eden being destined for the soul as a reward for the mitzvot, but does specify the bodily things destined for Israel when they return most certainly to their land, when they will have “all their rains in their season” [Lev 26:4] and with the abundance of blessing and happiness...because the Torah was given to the masses of *all* of Israel, and the masses would not be able to understand the destined intellectual things.³⁰

Again, the secret knowledge revealed to prophets like Moses and Enoch, such as that “Gan Eden” in the Torah is code for “the world of the souls,” is shared with the enlightened *in this world*, who can now discern it through their intellect. That is what R. Bahya means when he says

it should be clear to the enlightened that the world of souls is the “Garden of Eden” for the soul, but Scripture mixes it in the general list of things destined for the body, and depended on the intellect of the enlightened to discern it from them, that it would not be hidden from him as it would be from the masses.³¹

While one could take this at face value as an assertion of the social class hierarchy of enlightened Jews over “the masses” of Jews, to say to one’s audience, “this is a secret that only the enlightened know but the masses don’t” and then immediately reveal the secret in effect confers onto anyone in R. Bahya’s audience the elevated status of “the enlightened.” Here’s an example of the conspiratorial attentiveness I mentioned above that the rhetoric of mysticism typically evokes, by prefacing its “revelations” with phrases like “I’ve got a secret,” in order to include its audience as sharers in an extra-special elite knowledge.³²

TRANSFORMATIVE ECSTATIC EXPERIENCE OF “SUPER BODIES”

That said, I don’t want to gloss over the importance at least one striking aspect of the *content* of these visionary near death experiences possibly alluded to in R. Bahya’s Fourth Gate of *Shulhan Shel Arba*. Namely, R. Bahya discusses at length how bodies are transformed into what might be called “Super Bodies,” bodies unbounded by the normal physical and temporal boundaries of this world, often bathed and glowing in light. We can find these phenomena cross-culturally in different religions. As modern scholar of comparative religion Jeffrey Kripal puts it,

Human beings have consistently reported moments in which the body functions as a window or star-gate into other dimensions of reality. Indeed in religions we encounter paradoxical descriptions – such as a “spiritual body,” a subtle body,” a “rainbow body,” an “energetic body,” a “diamond body,” a “glorified body, a “resurrected body, and so on. In art, moreover, the body literally *glows*... Many religious traditions, then have understood, and no doubt experienced, the human body in truly fantastic ways that overflow and transcend our present biomedical models, which assume of course, that all the action stops at the skin.³³

These moments of expansive insight are typically described as life-changing by those who report them. Kripal calls these experiences “super sexualities” because they are often

mentioned in accounts of illumination during sexual experiences, but they share features with both Near Death Experiences in general, and with R. Bahya's descriptions of "bodies" at meals in the world to come. Kripal, drawing upon the research of Jenny Wade, gives her list of features of these "sexual spiritual events," of which four in particular are pertinent:

- streams of liquid light shooting out of the top of the head or skull;
- past-life memories or visions, often compared to "watching a movie"
- the stopping of time and a sense of eternity
- the experience of every cell in the body vibrating at an extremely high frequency, *which in turn leads to an out-of-body experience and of being both inside and outside the body.*³⁴

But these also overlap with some of the characteristics typical of Near Death Experiences, i.e., "separation from the body, sometimes accompanied by a 'spectator perspective,'" encounters with "beings of light," and as we alluded to above, an "indescribable" experience of being immersed in light and love in which "cognitive and affective characteristics are fused," "a sense of receiving special messages or hidden truths," and "for some...an instantaneous, timeless, and comprehensive vision of the totality of existence."³⁵ Moreover, they nearly always have a profound personal effect on the way those who have them see and conduct their lives after such experiences: "transforming aftereffects, such as loss of the fear of death, newfound zest for everyday life, and renewed dedication to the values of empathetic love, lifelong-learning, and service to others."³⁶ The association between NDEs and other visionary experiences of transformed, enlightened super bodies that occur for extraordinary individuals or for ordinary individuals experiencing extraordinary events *in this world* should be clear, as well as the likelihood that R. Bahya's description of transformed soul/bodies nourished

on the light of the Shekhinah at meals in the World to Come are projections, at least in part, of such visionary experiences. It certainly is not unheard of for medieval kabbalistic literature to be composed in part from ecstatic or visionary experiences, i.e., through automatic writing.³⁷ It should also not be surprising that R. Bahya's descriptions of transformed bodies and their enhanced capacities in the World to Come are similar to those in found cross-culturally in other accounts of NDEs and the afterlife.

As Gregory Shushan has suggested, mythologies surrounding death and the afterlife are unusually similar across cultural and temporal boundaries in ways that other types of mythologies are not...is because mythologies of the end are "correlates" (which is not to say literal descriptions) of actual human experiences of death,³⁸ whereas mythologies of the beginning can be only speculative.... Everyone everywhere dies, but no human being was present at the Big Bang.³⁹

On the other hand, R. Bahya's particular choice of language to describe the transformed bodies of the righteous as soul-bodies *without boundaries* - "like a full vessel that can contain [more]" - may reflect particular Jewish cultural and historical social experiences of the general human experience of death.⁴⁰ Might not the promise of such rewards express the sublimated social anxieties of a people whose boundaries in their historical memory are constantly being violated, whose present social and political impact in this world seems quite diminished in comparison to the dignity they deserve as faithful members of God's elect? Living under Christian and Muslim rule subject to laws designed to humiliate them and thus "prove" their theological inferiority, Jews in this world imagine bodies whose boundaries are irrelevant, bodies restored in the World to Come to their original enormous size before Adam's sin in the Garden of Eden. This restoration of Jews' stature (i.e., status) is markedly different from contemporary Christian mythic imagination of transformed bodies in the afterlife. Medieval Christian

art and theological speculation about the next world is pre-occupied with the re-assembly of fragmented bodies in their depiction of the resurrection.⁴¹ While both R. Bahya's Jewish and medieval Christian depictions of transformed bodies insist on the "material continuity and personal survival" of this world's embodied souls when they are resurrected in the next world, they imagine the this-worldly "problem" that bodily resurrection "solves" differently. Perhaps the re-assembly of fragmented bodies reflects sublimated Christian social anxieties about the constant religious divisions breaking up the Christian empires, while Jewish resurrection is more concerned with returning Jews to their exalted religious status.

Or maybe Jewish imagination of unlimited bodily capacity to consume meals in the World to Come expresses psychological longing for unblocked, unbounded, and unmediated Relationship with other Persons: Where the line between diner and dinner, lover and beloved dissolves. Where we are personally redeemed from exile and alienation from our Creator. Where our bodies aren't fragmented, but we feel ourselves as fragments from the whole of which we were originally an integral part. The "real eating" describes in the World to Come and as visionary experience is a metaphor for the union or reunion of us creatures with our Creator that crosses even the boundary of death. Indeed R. Bahya concludes all that he has to say in his book *Shulhan Shel Arba* about meals in the World to Come and in this world with a comforting blessing to this effect: "May he encompass us with favor; in the "bundle of life" may He hide us, in the path of life may He guide us, and grant us what is written, "For God is our God forever; He will guide us even beyond death." [Psalm 48:15].⁴²

Speaking words of Torah about the world to come, especially words of Torah about meals while tasting them, have the power to *elevate* us emotionally and spiritually at our tables in this world.⁴³ So R. Bahya says at the end of his book,

With these words the enlightened will discern when they're eating. May they *make themselves holy* and their minds burnished fully. With these words engaged, may they be at their table; *raise* their table's renown so that "all shall say 'Glory!'" [Ps 29:9] Let their hearts be made pure, to withstand any test. "*By these raise up the table,*" [Ex 28:28] so that "*before the Lord*" [Ez 41:22] is its label. This table is greater than the table of kings, "he shall be permitted to join those attending," [Zech 3:7] and *to be lifted* in honor to gaze on [*ye-hazeh*, lit., "have a vision of"] the face of David "among the lilies grazing" [Song of Songs 6:3] to earn "*the three-legged table*" of gold ablazing.⁴⁴ They will earn the physical and intellectual meals, and be counted among the *benei aliyah* [the enlightened "elite"].⁴⁵

Creative imaginative conversations in the sacred language of Torah about the elevating topics of God, our higher soul selves, sacred visionary or near death experiences, and the material and spiritual nourishment we remember from the past and promised to the righteous in the future, while enjoying meals in the company of friends in the present are a kind of perfect storm of experiences that have the cumulative effect of elevating the basic physical acts of eating we need to do to stay alive, through the emotions of elevation they evoke. Self-conscious experiences of thinking aloud about the Torah of meals in this World and the World to Come are fused with the concrete experiences of eating and drinking at the table. Thus R. Bahya scripts ritual performances of textual study at meals to heighten its users' awareness of their experience of imaginative "midrashic" re-interpretations of Jewish traditions.⁴⁶ But if these traditional visions of the world to come and our modern conversations about them can "only" imagine our life after death, and not conclusively prove it, what's the point of engaging in them? Why should we care about an imagined *olam ha-ba* in *olam ha-zeh*?

In her book *The Life of the World to Come*, Carol Zaleski has a wonderful reply to

this objection:

Certainly it is true that such imaginings will at present tell us more about our own assumptions and longings than they do about the heavenly society. And yet we have a right to them. The effort to starve out the will to imagine has not produced the humane fruits it was expected to bring. If anything, the contrary has been the case: totalistic efforts to create utopia on earth and to suppress pie-in-the-sky thinking have ended by creating hell on earth.

The social psychologist Robert Jay Lifton makes a convincing case for the need for symbols of immortality that provide a sense of continuity in the face of death. He finds that when individuals or societies are prevented from cultivating images of death that promised continued life or transcendence, their moral energy is soon sapped, and “psychic numbing” sets in...

The common achievement of symbols of immortality is to offer the individual a wider cosmos within which to dwell, nourished by a rich network of social, natural, and spiritual connections. They overcome isolation, and are therefore both reasonable and adaptive, rather than illusory and regressive.⁴⁷

It is reasonable and adaptive, not to mention morally compelling, for us Jews, for all of us as humans, to exercise our imagination to maintain an expansive view of what the world and we could be, and not be restricted by the boundaries of what our human sense perceptions, reason, and mortality limit us to assume what it is. Not like the empty cup in this world of flesh and blood, that can contain only as much as its physical capacity allows, but rather like the full cup in World to Come, that always has room for more.

¹ All references to R. Bahya ben Asher Hlava's *Shulhan Shel Arba* are from the Hebrew edition in *Kitve Rabenu Bahya*, ed. by Charles Ber Chavel. Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kuk 1969,730 (henceforth cited as “SSA”), and the English translations are from my *Shulhan Shel Arba by Rabbenu Bahya Ben Asher Hlava*, transl. Jonathan Brumberg-Kraus (2010). <<http://acadblogs.wheatoncollege.edu/jbk/>>.

² Caroline Walker Bynum, “Material Continuity, Personal Survival and the Resurrection of the Body: A Scholastic Discussion in Its Medieval and Modern Contexts” in *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York : Cambridge, Mass: Zone Books, 1992) 241.

³ *Ibid.*, 243.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 244.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ As R. Bahya says in the preface of *Shulhan Shel Arba*:

my heart compelled me to write about this in brief in a book, and to include in it some sacred words *so that it could be at your table, by your right hand, for you to read in it all that is required at your meal*. And if at the time you are eating, your faith is reassured by this book of mine, and according to its words, you will be sure attain the level of the pious ones who are perfect in their qualities (SSA, 460).

⁷ “The Fourth Gate,” SSA, 513.

⁸ Jonathan Haidt, “The Positive Emotion of Elevation,” *Prevention & Treatment* 3:1(2000); “Elevation and the Positive Psychology of Morality.” In *Flourishing: Positive Psychology and the Life Well-Lived*, ed. Corey L. M. Keyes and Jonathan Haidt (1st ed.; Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2003); Leon Kass, *The Hungry Soul: Eating and the Perfecting of Our Nature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.

⁹ “Groom Over the Table,” *Kad Ha-Kemach* (in *Kitvei Rabbenu Bahya*, Chavel, 187-8)

¹⁰ Commentary to Daniel 12:2, quoted by Neil Gillman. *Death of Death: Resurrection and Immortality in Jewish Thought*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1997) 170.

¹¹ R. Bahya knows of traditions that associate phoenix-like characteristics to the eagle [Heb., *neshet*], as in his comment to Gen 2:19 in *Be'ur 'al ha-Torah*. Edited by Charles Ber Chavel. Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kuk, 1966-1968, 1966.

¹² “The Fourth Gate,” SSA, 506.

¹³ R. Bahya also takes “Shiloh” to be a reference to Moses as the “caterer” of the first meal that will prepare the bodies of the righteous for the second, intellectual meal after the resurrection of the dead, based on a pun on the Aramaic version of the Biblical etymology for Moses’ name. The etymology which the Torah has Pharaoh’s daughter give for “Moshe because I drew him out [*mashiti-hu*] of the water.” However, the Aramaic for *mashiti-hu*, *shihaltay*, is related to the word *shihulah* (as in *shihula kardona* – the skinner for preparing a meal) which sounds like “Shiloh;” hence Shiloh refers to *Moses*, according to the midrash R. Bahya brings in support of this. See below.

¹⁴ See Jordan Rosenblum’s essay in this volume, [pp.?)

¹⁵ R. Bahya, *Bi'ur*, 2:147.

¹⁶ Joel Hecker, *Mystical Bodies, Mystical Meals: Eating and Embodiment in Medieval Kabbalah* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005) 108.

¹⁷ “Fourth Gate,” SSA, 504.

¹⁸ Ibid., 513.

¹⁹ See Jonathan Brumberg-Kraus, “‘Real Eating’: A Medieval Spanish Jewish View of Gastronomic Authenticity” *Authenticity in the Kitchen: Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery*, 119–31. Totnes: Prospect books, 2006 and “The Ritualization of Scripture in Rabbenu Bahya’s *Shulhan Shel Arba*.” *World Congress of Jewish Studies* 13 (2001): 1–17, where I discuss R. Bahya’s interpretation of Ex 24:11 and “real eating” as a paradigm of prophetic, visionary experience of God.

²⁰ “Fourth Gate,” SSA, 508.

²¹ Ibid.

²² SSA, 4th Gate Ibid.

²⁴ “Preface” SSA, 457.

²⁵ Ibid., 457-8.

²⁶ “Fourth Gate,” SSA, 501.

²⁷ Ibid., 505.

²⁸ Ps 31:20

²⁹ “Fourth Gate,” SSA, 505.

³⁰ Ibid., 509.

³¹ Ibid., 510.

³² I heard this many years ago in a conversation with David Halperin about the rhetoric of esotericism.

³³ Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Comparing Religions: Coming to Terms* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2014) 192.

³⁴ Ibid., 193, referring to Jenny Wade, *Transcendent Sex: When Lovemaking Opens the Veil* (New York: Paraview Pocket Books, 2004), emphasis mine.

³⁵ Carol Zaleski, *The Life of the World to Come: Near-Death Experience and Christian Hope: The Albert Cardinal Meyer Lectures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) 19.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Daniel Chanan Matt, ed., *Zohar: Annotated & Explained*. 1 edition. Woodstock, Vt: SkyLight Paths, 2002, xxiv. Kripal, *Comparing Religions*, 288-9, suggests that some traditional literary texts about the afterlife like Plato's Story of Er or the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* are "based on actual experiences, perhaps passed on orally and fashioned into folklore and eventually into religious doctrines..."

³⁸ Or of "little death" [*le petite mort*, the French euphemism for orgasm], to account for NDE's similarities to religious experiences of "super sexuality."

³⁹ Kripal, *Comparing Religions*, 288.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 293-4: "NDE events display near universal features (like supernatural environs, deceased humans, or beings of light) but also real cultural differences."

⁴¹ Bynum, "Material Continuity," esp. 269-296.

⁴² "Fourth Gate," SSA, 514.

⁴³ By "elevate," I mean it precisely in the sense that Haidt uses it in his discussion of the "emotion of elevation" ("The Positive Emotion of Elevation," 3):

Love and a desire for affiliation appears to be a common human response to witnessing saints and saintly deeds, or even to hearing about them second hand. If disgust is a negative emotion that strengthens ego boundaries and defenses against a morally reprehensible other, then elevation is its opposite — a desire to affiliate with those who are morally admirable.

Intense experiences of the emotion of elevation tend to have "potentially life-altering effects" leading those who feel it to "perform pro-social and affiliative actions" (3,4), i.e., acts of loving-kindness. Significantly, witnessing the care, comfort, and support given to the families of those who are dying is one of Haidt's examples of events that evoke the emotion of elevation and its lasting social consequences.

⁴⁴ An allusion to what is referred to in B. Ta'anit 25a: "The righteous will in time to come eat at a golden table with three legs." See R. Bahya's Preface, where he explains this idea in his discussion of the fourth reason he gives for calling his book *Shulhan Shel Arba*. There's an untranslatable wordplay here with the Hebrew word *ro'e* ["grazing" or "shepherd"] and the Aramaic word *ker'a* ["leg"]: "David among the lilies grazing [*ro'e*'] to earn the table of three legs [*ker'a*]."

⁴⁵ "Fourth Gate," SSA, 513.

⁴⁶ Jonathan Brumberg-Kraus, "The Ritualization of Scripture in Rabbenu Bahya's *Shulhan Shel Arba*." *World Congress of Jewish Studies* 13 (2001): 1-17.

⁴⁷ Zaleski, *Life of the World to Come*, 48.