

Em LaMiqra on Collective Consciousness

Hakham Elia Benamozegh's commentary on the Torah (*Em LaMiqra*), specifically on *Perashat Vayishlah*, offers a thoughtful interpretation of a crucial phrase found in verse 29, "ויאסף אל עמיו". This phrase, translated as "And he was gathered unto his people", is often used in the Torah in the context of death. Hakham Benamozegh's analysis of this delves deeply into the metaphysical dimensions of life and death, exploring the journey of the soul and its implications beyond the physical realm.

His analysis of this phrase challenges the notion of death as a mere physical end. He posits that this phrase symbolises a deeper, spiritual return or integration of the soul to its original, collective source. This perspective aligns with the mystical view of the soul as an entity transcending physical existence, maintaining a continuous connection with the Divine or a higher spiritual realm. Such a concept reframes the idea of death from a terminal event to a transitional stage in the soul's eternal journey.

In his interpretation, Hakham Benamozegh suggests that the soul's journey is not linear but cyclical. This cyclical process encompasses the soul's pre-existence, earthly life, and post-mortem existence, resonating with various religious and philosophical systems that view life as part of a larger, ongoing cycle of existence. This interpretation offers a more comforting and holistic view of death, framing it as a return to a familiar, collective spiritual origin rather than an abrupt end.

He further delves into the meaning of the term 'nation' ('עם'), exploring its deeper implications. He interprets it as indicative of a collective or communal connection, extending beyond physical or political definitions to a more profound shared spiritual or metaphysical identity. This redefinition of a nation as a group connected not just by physical or social factors but by deeper, spiritual commonalities, broadens our understanding of communal identity.

He argues that the contrast to being "gathered unto his people" is found in the phrase "ונכרת מעמיו" ("cut off from his people"), representing a spiritual severance or disconnection of the soul from its source or community. This concept suggests a loss that goes beyond physical death, hinting at a form of existential estrangement or alienation from one's spiritual roots. This contrast underlines the importance of spiritual connectedness and the consequences of its loss.

Hakham Benamozegh's recognition of similarities in other religious and philosophical traditions, such as the reference he makes to the Christian scholar Le Clerc, indicates a universality of these spiritual concepts. This acknowledgment by Hakham Benamozegh suggests a shared human concern with the nature of the soul and its ultimate destiny.

He provides a metaphor of the human soul as a tree, with its branches reaching towards the heavens while being rooted in the earthly realm, beautifully encapsulating the dual nature of human existence. This metaphor, evocative of Platonic thought, portrays the soul's journey as a balance between the tangible, earthly experiences and its intrinsic connection to a higher, spiritual origin. This imagery resonates with a common philosophical theme about the human condition, reflecting our continuous quest for understanding and connecting with something greater than ourselves.

Soul or Consciousness?

Consciousness, in the realm of neuroscience, is often understood as the state of being aware of and able to think about one's existence and environment. For those familiar with the field, this may align with Hakham

Benamozegh's portrayal of the soul as an entity that transcends the physical realm and maintains an ongoing connection with a higher spiritual or collective consciousness. The idea that the soul, or consciousness, continues its journey beyond physical death may parallel theories in neuroscience that explore the persistence of consciousness beyond the brain's operational capacity.

Neuroscientists have long been exploring the concept that consciousness is not confined strictly to the brain but is part of a larger, interconnected system. This resonates with Hakham Benamozegh's idea of the soul's connection to a collective source, a 'spiritual root' or 'quarry,' which could be seen as a metaphor for a shared, universal consciousness. In this context, death is not the end of individual awareness but a transition into a different state of consciousness, one that is unified with the collective.

Contrasting this idea of connection is the concept of being "cut off" from one's people (כרת), which Hakham Benamozegh interprets as a metaphor for disengagement from this collective consciousness. This interpretation underscores the consequential influence our actions have on communal bonds, and the profound impact of their loss or disruption.

Contrasting Commentaries: Ibn Ezra and Radaq

In contrast, Ibn Ezra offers two interpretations, both of which differ significantly from Hakham Benamozegh's approach. His first interpretation aligns somewhat with Hakham Benamozegh's view, suggesting the soul's return to its source after death. However, Ibn Ezra's explanation is more dualistic, focusing on the soul's distinct operation within the body and its return to the source upon physical death, without delving into the cyclical or collective dimensions emphasised by Hakham Benamozegh. His second interpretation treats the phrase as a linguistic idiom, emphasising the continuity of following one's ancestors' path, a concept more literal and less metaphysically oriented than Hakham Benamozegh's interpretation.

Radaq's approach is more literal and familial compared to Hakham Benamozegh's. He interprets the phrase as denoting the joining of one's family members who have preceded in death, focusing on the familial aspect of the phrase. This interpretation is straightforward and does not explore the broader spiritual or metaphysical implications that are central to Hakham Benamozegh's analysis. Radaq's interpretation is more concerned with the tangible aspects of family lineage and less with the soul's journey or its connection to a broader spiritual community.

Hakham Benamozegh's commentary not only enriches our understanding of these *pesuqim* but also encourages a more reflective and contemplative view of life, death, and the connection that each of us can potentially have with the collective body of Yisrael.