



Between This World and the Next: Rabbinic Visions of Purgatory

Dr. Rachel Rosenthal
rarenthal@jtsa.edu

Dr. Rachel Rosenthal teaches Talmud at Yeshivat Maharat and is adjunct assistant professor of Talmud at the Jewish Theological Seminary. Previously, she served as a Research Fellow and a David Hartman Center Fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America. She received her PhD in Rabbinic Literature from JTS, where her dissertation focused on how rabbinic analysis of the case of the stubborn and rebellious son provides models for moral education and development. Rachel has also served on the faculty of the Maimonides Scholars Program, Nishma: A Summer of Torah Study, Central Synagogue, and Drisha, where she was a graduate of the Drisha Scholars Circle. She received a BA in Religious Studies from the University of Pennsylvania.

Model 1: The Unknowing Conduits

Jeremiah 19:1-9	ירמיהו יט:א-ט
<p>1. Thus said the LORD: Go buy a jug of potter's ware. And [take] some of the elders of the people and the priests, 2. and go out to the Valley of Ben-hinnom—at the entrance of the Harsith Gate—and proclaim there the words which I will speak to you. 3. Say: "Hear the word of the LORD, O kings of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem! Thus said the LORD of Hosts, the God of Israel: I am going to bring such disaster upon this place that the ears of all who hear about it will tingle.</p> <p>4. For they and their fathers and the kings of Judah have forsaken Me, and have made this place alien [to Me]; they have sacrificed in it to other gods whom they have not experienced, and they have filled this place with the blood of the innocent.</p> <p>5. They have built shrines to Baal, to put their children to the fire as burnt offerings to Baal—which I never commanded, never decreed, and which never came to My mind.</p> <p>6. Assuredly, a time is coming—declares the LORD—when this place shall no longer be called Topheth or Valley of Ben-hinnom, but Valley of Slaughter.</p> <p>7. "And I will frustrate the plans of Judah and Jerusalem in this place. I will cause them to fall by the sword before their enemies, by the hand of those who seek their lives; and I will give their carcasses as food to the birds of the sky and the beasts of the earth.</p> <p>8. And I will make this city an object of horror and hissing; everyone who passes by it will be appalled and will hiss over all its wounds.</p> <p>9. And I will cause them to eat the flesh of their sons and the flesh of their daughters, and they shall devour one another's flesh—because of the desperate straits to which they will be reduced by their enemies, who seek their life."</p>	<p>כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה הִלְךָ וְקִנִּיתָ בְּקִבְּקַי יֹאצֵר תָּרַשׁ וּמִזְקֵנֵי הָעָם וּמִזְקֵנֵי הַכֹּהֲנִים: וַיֵּצֵאתָ אֶל-גֵּיא בֶן-הִנּוֹם אֲשֶׁר פֶּתַח שַׁעַר (הַחֲרוֹטוֹת) [הַחֲרוֹסִית] וְקִרְאתָ שָׁם אֶת-הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר-אֲדַבֵּר אֵלֶיךָ: וְאָמַרְתָּ שְׁמֹעוּ דְבַר-יְהוָה מַלְכֵי יְהוּדָה וְיֹשְׁבֵי יְרוּשָׁלַם כֹּה-אָמַר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הִנְנִי מֵבִיא רָעָה עַל-הַמְּקוֹם הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר כָּל-שֹׁמְעָה תִצְלָנָה אֲזִנּוּ: יַעַן אֲשֶׁר עֲזַבְנִי וַיִּנְכְּרוּ אֶת- הַמְּקוֹם הַזֶּה וַיִּקְטְרוּ-בּוֹ לְאֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יָדְעוּם הֵמָּה וְאֲבוֹתֵיהֶם וּמַלְכֵי יְהוּדָה וּמַלְאוּ אֶת-הַמְּקוֹם הַזֶּה דָּם נְקִיָּם: לָכֵן הִנֵּה-יָמִים בָּאִים נֹאֵם-יְהוָה וְלֹא-יִקְרָא לַמְּקוֹם הַזֶּה עוֹד הַתְּפֹת וְגֵיא בֶן-הִנּוֹם כִּי אִם-גֵּיא הַהֲרֻגָה: וּבְקִרְתִּי אֶת-עֵצֶת יְהוּדָה וִירוּשָׁלַם בַּמְּקוֹם הַזֶּה וְהַפְּלִתִים בְּחָרֶב לִפְנֵי אִיבֵיהֶם וּבִיד מִבְּקֹשֵׁי נַפְשָׁם וְנִתְּתִי אֶת-נְבִלָתָם לְמֵאֲכָל לְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּלְבֵהֱמַת הָאָרֶץ: וּשְׁמִתִּי אֶת-הָעִיר הַזֹּאת לְשֹׁמֵה וְלִשְׂרָקָה כָּל עֹבֵר עָלֶיהָ יִשֹׁם וַיִּשְׂרַק עַל-כָּל-מַלְתָּהּ: וְהָאָכְלִיתִים אֶת-בֶּשֶׂר בְּנֵיהֶם וְאֶת בֶּשֶׂר בְּנֹתֵיהֶם וְאִישׁ בֶּשֶׂר-רֵעֵהוּ יֹאכְלוּ בַּמְצוֹר וּבַמְצוֹק אֲשֶׁר יֵצִיקוּ לָהֶם אִיבֵיהֶם וּמִבְּקֹשֵׁי נַפְשָׁם:</p>

Bereshit Rabbah 9:9	בראשית רבה ט:ט
<p>Rabbi Ze'ira said: "behold it was very good" (Genesis 1:31) this is the Garden of Eden. "AND behold it was very good" this is Gehinom. And is Gehinom very good? Impossible! An allegory: a king had an orchard and put within it workers, and built a treasure-house at its entrance, and said: 'whoever works him/herself appropriately with the work of the orchard can come into the treasure-house, and whoever did not, can not. So too, whoever accustoms him/herself with mitzvot and good deeds, behold this is the Garden of Eden; and whoever does not, behold this is Gehinom.</p>	<p>אמר רבי זעירא, הנה טוב מאד, זו גן עדן. והנה טוב מאד, זו גיהנום. וכי גיהנום טוב מאד, אתמהא. משל למלך שהיה לו פרדס והכניס לתוכו פועלים, ובנה אוצר על פתחו, אמר כל מי שהוא מתכשר במלאכת הפרדס יכנס לאוצרו, וכל מי שאינו מתכשר במלאכת הפרדס אל יכנס לאוצרו. כך כל מי שהוא מסגל במצוות ומעשים טובים הרי גן עדן, וכל מי שאינו מסגל במצוות ומעשים טובים הרי גיהנום.</p>

Babylonian Talmud Bava Metzia 59a	תלמוד בבלי מסכת בבא מציאה נט.
<p>Anyone who descends to Gehenna ascends, except for three who descend and do not ascend, and these are they: One who engages in intercourse with a married woman; and one who humiliates another in public; and one who calls another a derogatory name....</p>	<p>כל היורדין לגיהנום עולים, חוץ משלשה שיורדין ואין עולין. ואלו הן: הבא על אשת איש, והמלבין פני חבירו ברבים, והמכנה שם רע לחבירו....</p>

Babylonian Talmud Rosh Hashanah 16b-17a	תלמוד בבלי מסכת ראש השנה טז:ז.
<p>It is taught: Beit Shammai say: There will be three groups of people on the great Day of Judgment at the end of days: One of wholly righteous people, one of wholly wicked people, and one of middling people. Wholly righteous people will immediately be written and sealed for eternal life. Wholly wicked people will immediately be written and sealed for Gehenna, as it is stated: "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall wake, some to eternal life and some to shame and everlasting contempt" (Daniel 12:2). Middling people will descend to Gehenna to be cleansed and to achieve atonement for their sins, and they will cry out in their pain and eventually ascend from there, as it is stated: "And I will bring the third part through the fire, and will refine them as silver is</p>	<p>תניא, בית שמאי אומרים: שלש כתות הן ליום הדין: אחת של צדיקים גמורין, ואחת של רשעים גמורין, ואחת של בינוניים. צדיקים גמורין – נכתבין ונחתמין לאלתר לחיי עולם, רשעים גמורין – נכתבין ונחתמין לאלתר לגיהנום, שנאמר: "ורבים מישיגי אדמת עפר יקיצו אלה לחיי עולם ואלה לחרפות לדראון עולם", בינוניים – יורדין לגיהנום, ומצפצפין ועולין, שנאמר: "והבאתי את השלישית באש וצרפתים</p>

<p>refined, and will try them as gold is tried; they shall call on My name, and I will answer them” (Zechariah 13:9). This is referring to the members of the third group, who require refinement and cleansing. And about them, Hannah said: “The Lord kills, and gives life; he brings down to the grave, and brings up” (I Samuel 2:6).</p>	<p>כְּצֹרֶף אֶת הַכֶּסֶף וּבַחֲנֻתִים כְּבַחֲוֹן אֶת הַזָּהָב הוּא יִקְרָא בְּשִׁמִּי וְאֲנִי אֶעֱנֶה אוֹתוֹ׃ וְעַלֵּיהֶם אֲמַרְהָ חֲנָה: ״ה' מְמִית וּמְחִיָּה מוֹרִיד שְׂאוֹל וַיַּעַל״.</p>
<p>Beit Hillel say: He Who is “and abundant in kindness” (Exodus 34:6) tilts the scales in favor of kindness, so that middling people should not have to pass through Gehenna. And about them, David said: “I love the Lord, Who hears my voice and my supplications” (Psalms 116:1). And about them, David said the entire passage: “I was brought low [<i>daloti</i>] and He saved me” (Psalms 116:6). Although they are poor [<i>dalim</i>] in mitzvot, God saves them.</p>	<p>בֵּית הַלֵּל אוֹמְרִים: ״וְרַב חֶסֶד״ — מִטָּה כָּל־פִּי חֶסֶד. וְעַלֵּיהֶם אָמַר דָּוִד: ״אֶהְבֵּתִי כִּי יִשְׁמַע ה' אֶת קוֹלִי״, וְעַלֵּיהֶם אָמַר דָּוִד כֹּל הַפְּרָשָׁה כּוּלָּה — ״דַּלּוֹתִי וְלִי הוֹשִׁיעַ״.</p>
<p>The rebellious Jews who have sinned with their bodies and also the rebellious people of the nations of the world who have sinned with their bodies descend to Gehenna and are judged there for twelve months. After twelve months, their bodies are consumed, their souls are burned, and a wind scatters them under the soles of the feet of the righteous, as it is stated: “And you shall tread down the wicked; for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet” (Malachi 3:21).</p>	<p>פוֹשְׁעֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּגוֹפָן, וּפוֹשְׁעֵי אוֹמוֹת הָעוֹלָם בְּגוֹפָן — יוֹרְדִין לְגִיהֵנָם וְנִידוּנֵין בֵּה שְׁנַיִם עֶשֶׂר חֳדָשׁ. לְאַחַר שְׁנַיִם עֶשֶׂר חֳדָשׁ — גּוֹפָן כְּלָה, וְנִשְׁמַתָּן נִשְׂרָפֶת, וְרוּחַ מְפַזְרֶתָן תַּחַת כַּפּוֹת רַגְלֵי צַדִּיקִים, שְׁנֹאֲמַר: ״וְעֵסוֹתֶם רְשָׁעִים כִּי יִהְיוּ אֶפֶר תַּחַת כַּפּוֹת רַגְלֵיכֶם״.</p>
<p>But the heretics; and the informers; and the apostates [<i>apikorsim</i>]; and those who denied the Torah; and those who denied the resurrection of the dead; and those who separated from the ways of the Jewish community and refused to share the suffering; and those who cast their fear over the land of the living; and those who sinned and caused the masses to sin, for example, Jeroboam, son of Nebat, and his company; all of these people descend to Gehenna and are judged there for generations and generations, as it is stated: “And they shall go forth, and look upon the carcasses of the men that have rebelled against Me; for their worm shall not die; neither shall their fire be quenched; and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh” (Isaiah 66:24).</p>	<p>אֲבָל הַמֵּיַיִן וְהַמְסוֹרוֹת וְהָאִפִּיקוֹרְסִים שֶׁכִּפְרוּ בַּתּוֹרָה, וְשֶׁכִּפְרוּ בַּתְּחִיַּת הַמֵּתִים, וְשֶׁפִּירְשוּ מִדַּרְכֵי צְבוּר, וְשֶׁנִּתְּנוּ חִיתִיתֶם בְּאַרְץ חַיִּים, וְשֶׁחֲטְאוּ וְהִחְטִיאוּ אֶת הַרְבִּים, כְּגוֹן יִרְבְּעָם בֶּן נֶבֶט וְחִבְרִיּוֹ — יוֹרְדִין לְגִיהֵנָם וְנִידוּנֵין בֵּה לְדוֹרֵי דוֹרוֹת, שְׁנֹאֲמַר: ״וַיֵּצְאוּ וַיֵּרְאוּ בְּפִגְרֵי הָאֲנָשִׁים הַפּוֹשְׁעִים בִּי וְגוֹ״״.</p>
<p>Gehenna will terminate, but they still will not terminate, as it is stated: “And their form shall wear</p>	<p>גִּיהֵנָם כְּלָה וְהֵן אֵינָן כְּלִין, שְׁנֹאֲמַר: ״וְצוֹרֶם לְבַלּוֹת שְׂאוֹל</p>

<p>away the netherworld, so that there be no dwelling for Him” (Psalms 49:15); that is to say, Gehenna itself will be worn away before their punishment has come to an end. And why are they punished so severely? Because they stretched out their hands against God’s dwelling, the Temple, and everything else that is sanctified, as it is stated: “So that there be no dwelling [zevul] for Him.” Dwelling [zevul] is referring here only to the Temple, as it is stated: “I have built You a house for dwelling [zevul] in” (I Kings 8:13). And about them Hannah said: “The adversaries of the Lord shall be broken in pieces” (I Samuel 2:10).</p>	<p>מִזְבוּל לֹא. וְכָל כֶּף לִמָּה — מִפְּנֵי שִׁפְשֻׁטוֹ יְדֵיהֶם בְּזָבוּל, שֶׁנֶּאֱמָר: “מִזְבוּל לֹא”, וְאִין “זָבוּל” אֵלָא בֵּית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמָר: “בְּנֵה בְּנִיתִי בֵּית זָבוּל לָךְ”, וְעַלֵּיהֶם אָמְרָה חֲנָה: “הִי יַחַתוּ מְרִיבָיו”.</p>
--	---

<p>Babylonian Talmud Chagiga 15a</p>	<p>תלמוד בבלי מסכת חגיגה טו עמוד א</p>
<p>Aher asked Rabbi Meir a question, after he had gone astray. He said to him: What is the meaning of that which is written: “God has made even the one as well as the other” (Ecclesiastes 7:14)? Rabbi Meir said to him: Everything that the Holy One, Blessed be He, created, He created a similar creation corresponding to it. He created mountains, He created hills; He created seas, He created rivers.</p>	<p>שָׁאֵל אַחַר אֶת רַבִּי מֵאִיר לְאַחַר שֶׁיָּצָא לְתַרְבוּת רָעָה, אָמַר לֵיהִ: מֵאִי דְכִתְיָבִי: “גַּם אֶת זֶה לְעוֹמֵת זֶה עָשָׂה הָאֱלֹהִים?” אָמַר לוֹ: כֹּל מָה שֶׁבָּרָא הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא, בָּרָא כְּנֻגְדּוֹ. בָּרָא הָרִים — בָּרָא גְבוּעוֹת, בָּרָא יָמִים — בָּרָא נְהָרוֹת.</p>
<p>Aher said to him: Rabbi Akiva, your teacher, did not say so, but explained the verse as follows: Everything has its opposite: He created the righteous, He created the wicked; He created the Garden of Eden, He created Gehenna. Each and every person has two portions, one in the Garden of Eden and one in Gehenna. If he merits it, by becoming righteous, he takes his portion and the portion of his wicked colleague in the Garden of Eden; if he is found culpable by becoming wicked, he takes his portion and the portion of his colleague in Gehenna.</p>	<p>אָמַר לוֹ: רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא רַבֵּךְ לֹא אָמַר כֵּן, אֵלָּא: בָּרָא צְדִיקִים בָּרָא רָשָׁעִים, בָּרָא גֶן עֵדֶן בָּרָא גֵיהֶנָם. כֹּל אֶחָד וְאֶחָד יֵשׁ לוֹ שְׁנֵי חֲלָקִים, אֶחָד בְּגֶן עֵדֶן וְאֶחָד בְּגֵיהֶנָם. זֶכֶה צְדִיק — נֹטֵל חֲלָקוֹ וְחֲלָק חֲבֵרוֹ בְּגֶן עֵדֶן, נֹתֵם רָשָׁע — נֹטֵל חֲלָקוֹ וְחֲלָק חֲבֵרוֹ בְּגֵיהֶנָם.</p>
<p>Rav Mesharshiyya said: What is the verse from which it is derived? With regard to the righteous, it is stated: “Therefore in their land they shall possess double” (Isaiah 61:7); whereas with regard to the wicked, it is stated: “And destroy them with double destruction” (Jeremiah 17:18); therefore, each receives a double portion.</p>	<p>אָמַר רַב מִשְׁרָשִׁיָּא: מֵאִי קָרְאָה — גְּבִי צְדִיקִים כְּתִיב: “לִכְן בְּאַרְצָם מִשְׁנֵה יְרֻשׁוֹ”, גְּבִי רָשָׁעִים כְּתִיב: “וּמִשְׁנֵה שִׁבְרוֹן שִׁבְרָם”.</p>

Rashi on Sanhedrin 44b	רש"י סנהדרין דף מד עמוד ב
<p>There was a story about an evil Jewish tax collector who died. On the same day, a great man died in the city. All of the people in the city came to busy themselves with his burial, and the relatives of the tax collector also took their dead out after him. They put his body down and fled. One of [the great man's] students was there who sat with the body of his teacher. After a while, the great people of the city came to bury the scholar and they mixed up his body with the body of the tax collector. The student was dismayed and cried out to no avail, and the tax collector was put in the grave of the scholar. The student was very upset [and said], "What was his great sin, to be buried in this embarrassing way?! And what was the merit of this evil man, to be buried with such great honor such as this?!" His teacher came to him in a dream and said to him, "Don't worry, my honor will be restored in Gan Eden, which great honor. And this man will be sent to Gehenom and the emissary of the entrance to Geheom will turn to him [to take over.] However, one time I heard the scholars being disgraced and I did not object and therefore I was punished. And for him, one time he was invited the city ruler's meal and the city's ruler didn't come, and he divided [the food] among the poor, so he was rewarded." His student said to, "Until when will this man be given a harsh judgement?" He said to him, "Until Shimon ben Shetach dies and enters in his place." [His student] said to him, "Why?" [His teacher] said to him, "Because there were Jewish sorceresses in Ashekelon and he hasn't exercised judgement against them." The next say, the student told these things to Shimon ben Shetach. And what did he do? He gathered 80 young and strong men, and on that day it was raining. He gave each of them a large container in their hand and stuffed a garment inside of each one. He said to them, be careful for there are 80 of them. At the time when you enter, each man</p>	<p>דבעיא מכסא - מעשה במוכס אחד ישראל רשע אחד שמת, ובו ביום מת אדם גדול בעיר ובאו כל בני העיר ונתעסקו במטתו, וקרובי אותו מוכס הוציאו גם את מטת המוכס אחריו וקפצו עליהם אויבים והניחו המטות וברחו, והיה שם תלמיד אחד שישב לו עם מטת רבו, לאחר זמן חזרו גדולי העיר לקבור את החכם ונתחלפה להם מטתו בשל מוכס, והיה אותו תלמיד צועק ולא הועיל, וקרובי המוכס קברו את החכם, ונצטער בה אותו תלמיד מאד, מה חטא גרם ליקבר זה בבזיון ומה זכה אותו רשע ליקבר בכבוד גדול כזה נראה לו רבו בחלום ואמר לו: אל תצטער, בא ואראך בכבודי בגן עדן בכבוד גדול ובא ואראך אותו האיש בגיהנם וציר של פתח גיהנם סובב באזניו, אבל פעם אחת שמעתי בגנות תלמידי חכמים ולא מחיתי ולכן נענשתי, וזה פעם אחת הכין סעודה לשר העיר ולא בא שר העיר - וחילקה לעניים, וזה היה שכרו, אמר אותו תלמיד: עד מתי יהא אותו האיש נדון בדין קשה אמר לו: עד שימותשמעון בן שטח ויכנס תחתיו, אמר לו: למה אמר לו: מפני נשים מכשפניות ישראליות שיש באשקלון ואינו עושה בהן דין, למחר סיפר אותו תלמיד דברים לשמעון בן שטח, מה עשה - כינס שמונים בחורים בעלי קומה, והיה אותו היום יום גשמים, ונתן כד גדולה ביד כל אחד ואחד וקיפל טלית בתוכם ואמר להן הזהרו בהן שהן שמונים, ובשעה שתכנסו יגביה איש אחת מהן מן הארץ ושוב אין מכשפות שולטות בכם, ואם לאו לא נוכל להם, הלך לו שמעון בן שטח לטרקלין שלהם והניח הבחורים מבחוץ, אמרו לו: מי אתה אמר להן: מכשף אני ולנסותכם בכשפים באתי, אמרו לו: ומה כשפים בידך אמר להן: יכולני להביא לכם</p>

lifted one of them from the ground so that they could not any magic. Shimon ben Shetach entered their cave and put the young men outside. They said to him, "Who are you?" He said, "I am a witch, like you, and I have come to exchange secrets." They said to him, "What is your witchcraft?" He said to him, "I can make 80 young men appear in dry clothing, even though it is raining." They said him, "Let us see." He went outside and whispered to them, "Take your clothing from the containers and put them on and come in." Each of them came in and lifted [the witches] up and they took them out and hung all of them. [The witches'] relatives were angry about this and two of them went and testified falsely against Shimon ben Shetach's son so he would be liable for the death penalty. He was sentenced to death. When they took him out to stone him, he said, "If I have this sin upon me, do not let my death be a remedy for me [to cleanse me of my sin.] And if this is not the case, my death will be restitution for all of my sins and may [the guilt] be upon the necks of the witnesses. When [the witnesses] heard this, they went back and explained that their words were because of hatred of the women. However, he was still not declared innocent.

שמונים בחורים עטופי טליתות נגובות ואף על פי שהוא יום גשמים, אמרו לו: הנראה יצא לחוץ ורמז להם, הוציאו הטליתות מן הכדים ונתעטפו בהן ונכנסו, ואחז כל אחד את אחת מהן והגביה ויכלו להם והוציאו ותלאום כולם, ונתקנאו קרוביהם בדבר, ובאו שנים מהם וכוונו דבריהם והעידו על בנו של שמעון בן שטח חיוב מיתה ונגמר דינו, וכשהיה יוצא ליסקל אמר: אם יש בי עון זה לא תהא מיתתי כפרה לי, ואם אינו כן תהא מיתתי כפרה על כל עונותי וקולר תלוי בצואר עדים, ושמעו אלו וחזרו בהם ונתנו טעם לדבריהם מחמת שנאת הנשים - ואף על פי כן לא נפטר.